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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

**TERRITORIAL DISCIPLINE: UNSETTLING HISTORIES OF THE LAND-GRANT
COLLEGE SYSTEM**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

FEMINIST STUDIES

with an emphasis in CRITICAL RACE AND ETHNIC STUDIES

by

Arlo Fosburg

August 2026

The dissertation of Arlo Fosburg is approved:

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for Mark, who should be here.

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A project like this is impossible alone, and there are so many conversations, organizing meetings, picket lines, protests, personal crises, institutional failures, and moments of coincidence that have made this work possible. I'm grateful to Julia Cameron and the Artist's Way for re-igniting my creativity and allowing me to relate to this work as a creative project. In many ways, writing this dissertation has been a process of re-enchantment; as much as it is a critique of the university, making this work has surfaced so many otherwises and alternatives, so many worlds blossoming in the cracks.

Abstract

Territorial Discipline: Unsettling Histories of the Land-Grant College System
Arlo Fosburg

What does it mean to take the dispossession of Indigenous land as central to the history of American higher education? This dissertation examines the history and context of the 1862 Morrill Land-Grant Act to pose a theorization of the land-grant college system as a critical site of settler-colonial dispossession. Looking at the problem and process of the material basis of disciplinary formation and institution building, this inquiry is organized along three lines of flight. First, how does the land-grant university produce institutional history that crops out its dispossessive conditions of possibility? I examine the university archives of Pennsylvania State University and Michigan State University alongside genres of commemoration and memorialization to position the production of forgetting as a key feature of the settler-colonial university. Secondly, how have Indigenous modes of agriculture been delegitimized and displaced through the disciplinary formation of scientific agriculture? I pose a history of the disciplinary formation of scientific agriculture that emphasizes the university's capacity to coopt and absorb working-class and farmer-led reform efforts. Finally, how can the Morrill Act be usefully read as defense legislation masquerading as educational legislation? I read the charge of the Morrill Act to teach "military tactics" as an instance of the conscription of poor white farmers into the labor of settlement, luring them with the promise of upward class mobility. At stake here are the ways that the promise of science was imbricated with a "technocratic abolitionist imaginary" aiming to replace enslaved labor with scientific and technological innovation and naturalize the settler colonial project. These questions touch on the forms that post emancipation racial capitalism took—namely, efforts to locate a technical

solution to a larger cluster of political and ethical problems. This dissertation offers an interdisciplinary frame through which to engage the material, social, and epistemological impacts of colonial forgetting. Methodologically, it combines theoretical work in the politics of knowledge with primary archival research in university, agriculture, and policy history. I work inside the space between commonsense narratives of the university and materialist analysis of the university as a location of and technology toward capital accumulation and settler colonial expansion.

Introduction

*Do not let your head deny
your hands
any memory of what passes through them
not your eyes
nor your heart
everything can be used
except what is wasteful
(you will need
to remember this when you are accused of
destruction.)
Even when they are dangerous examine the heart of those
machines you hate
before you discard them
and never mourn the lack of their power
lest you be condemned
to relive them.
If you do not learn to hate
you will never be lonely
enough
to love easily
nor will you always be brave
although it does not grow easier¹*

In May of 2020 I watched the Third Precinct in Minneapolis burn down on a grainy livestream from a backyard in the Tomales Bay, the latest of a string of precarious housing situations. Tears poured down my face watching the flames engulf the building, and I allowed myself a moment of optimism: *we could see abolition in our lifetimes*. Over the next few years I would feel in turns enormously tender and repulsed by this flicker of hope. The optimism was buttressed, cautiously, by the spread of the riots over the subsequent weeks. I cried again when the Minneapolis City Council voted to abolish the police. Six months prior to this writing, ICE agents killed Renée Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis in cold blood

¹ Excerpted from Audre Lorde, “For Each of You,” in *The Collected Poems Of Audre Lorde*, ed. Audre Lorde (New York, New York, 1997).

and on camera, in the midst of a brutal and ruthless campaign of mass deportation aided by the Minneapolis Police Department, which has not been abolished.

Although the ideological and capital interests that prevented the abolition of the Minneapolis Police Department are vast and immensely powerful, the stated reason for the City Council's reverse in position was a bureaucratic technicality: the charter of the city of Minneapolis contained a provision for the police department, meaning that the abolition of the police department would have required the dissolution of the city. That the city council would fail to enact abolition is hardly a surprise to movement veterans and scholars of abolition. I do not raise this anecdote to claim that abolition is an unreachable horizon—far from it—but rather to point out how a move to abolish the police unravels the thread that holds together a whole infrastructure of institutions, and how civic institutions in a settler colony perform policing functions. Parallel to the inextricability of the Minneapolis Police Department from the existence of the city of Minneapolis, this research begins by asking what forms of violence have been baked into and forgotten by land-grant universities. This question opens a floodgate of further questions: how can campus construction be understood as racialized demographic management (in other words, as policing)? Through what mechanisms and narrative justifications does the theft of land become foundational to the “public good” of higher education? How do the processes of disciplinary formation naturalize settler ways of knowing? In the nineteenth century United States, the frontier was policed, to be sure, but it was also disciplined.

The disciplinary processes that undergird the land-grant system and its role in territorial expansion are operational on distinct scales, including: the ascendancy of a Lockean theory of property by the federal government, the displacement of nonwhite and noncapitalist land claims, the consolidation of land-based practices into the field of scientific

agriculture, the suturing of democracy to dispossession, and the production of citizenship through education. Sustained inquiry into these valences of the history and politics of knowledge production has been foreclosed, marginalized, and penalized by mechanisms that bundle and reproduce the silences of institutional history. In this work, I seek to make visible some of these occluded mechanisms in the hope that unsettling normative histories of the land-grant system will make room for the proliferation of modes of inquiry and objects of study that have been displaced by the epistemic impositions of the settler-colonial university. This work is by no means an exhaustive account of land-grant history or of American property formation—in attending to certain silences I have doubtless produced others. I see this project as a modest contribution to a body of scholarship that theorizes the university as a terrain of struggle, as a civic instantiation of policing infrastructure, and as a speculative technology of dispossession and accumulation that produces an imaginary in which settler colonial violence is naturalized. In other words, a theorization of the university that sees it as a necessary object of an abolitionist politic.

This research and writing has been conducted against a backdrop of a series of graduate labor actions as my colleagues and I have organized to be paid a living wage. I have spent nearly as much time walking a picket line as I have in university archives, and though I'm certain that this project could have been more well-developed and polished had I not been on strike three times in the course of my doctoral program, I count myself lucky to have formed a theorization of the university through the crucible of a very alive struggle over the material conditions in which I work. I can think of no more effective way to dispel the romance myth of education than to be nose-to-nose with a line of militarized riot police, after the chancellor gave an order to arrest striking graduate workers. There is no clearer view into the militarized capacities of the university than to watch twelve different police departments

relentlessly assault your students for hours in the middle of the night as they demanded an end to the University of California's financial support of Israel's genocide.

I owe what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney refer to as "bad debt" to my comrades, my students, all the spaces where moments of livability were carved out. On bad debt, Moten and Harney write

[D]ebt is social and credit is asocial. Debt is mutual. Credit runs only one way. But debt runs in every direction, scatters, escapes, seeks refuge. The debtor seeks refuge among other debtors, acquires debt from them, offers debt to them. The place of refuge is the place to which you can only owe more and more because there is no creditor, no payment possible. This refuge, this place of bad debt, is what we call the fugitive public.²

The fugitive public can be understood as the places where colonialism fails. Fails to eliminate Indigenous people; fails to materialize its imaginary; fails to discipline thought. My time in the underbellies of university histories has shown me, over and over again, that these failures are always present and that hard as it might try to convince you otherwise, the university is insecure in its hegemony. As a speculative enterprise, the university places great stake in putting forward an image of its future success as always already assured, and its material resources depend in no small part on how authoritatively it can guarantee its own reproduction.

In the fall of 2019, during the first quarter of my doctoral program, graduate workers at the University of California, Santa Cruz took an unauthorized and out-of-contract labor action by withholding our submission of final grades. The strike began on an email chain, and I shudder to think of the rage that must have been directed at whichever underpaid administrative assistant forgot to disable the reply all function on the chancellor's

² Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 61.

campus-wide emails.³ The strike was a spontaneous eruption of an enormous amount of spadework,⁴ and twenty-four hours after frustrations with an untenable cost of living boiled over in the email thread, graduate workers voted overwhelmingly at a general assembly to withhold submission of final grades for the fall quarter. There is much that has been and will be written about the subsequent ten weeks and the insights they offered into the pain points of the university and the development of infrastructures of graduate labor organizing, and I simply want to point out that when it was originally conceived at the general assembly, withholding grades was seen as a middle-ground escalation: should the university fail to meet our demand for a cost of living adjustment, workers could then decide to escalate the pressure by withholding their teaching and research labor in addition to their grades. This seemed a reasonable sequence of escalation to most everyone involved.

No one expected the intensity or the swiftness of the university's repressive response, but the bigger surprise was the almost total lack of reaction from the administration some weeks later when workers voted to withhold their teaching labor. In retrospect it seems obvious: as workers, we are valuable in our capacity to confer credentials, and our teaching labor is, in many ways, incidental to this value. We had stumbled onto a key vulnerability of our employer: if a certain portion of grades were withheld, the university would fail to meet its required credentialing benchmarks as established by the regional accreditation board, and would be subjected to an audit, many funding streams frozen or held in limbo. If the administration were to bypass striking workers and say, assign As to all students with missing grades, that would figure badly in an accreditation audit. We had stumbled onto the

³ For histories and archival materials from the 2019-2020 Wildcat Strike see: www.payusmoreucsc.com

⁴ Civil Rights organizer Ella Baker described spadework as the slow work of relationship building that undergirds liberation movements and facilitates their reproduction and longevity. Spadework is bottom-up and attentive to the reproduction of the movement. For more on spadework and Ella Baker's organizing philosophy see: Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 2003.

distillation of our value as workers, and thus the lynchpin in our leverage: the grade. Who can say what might have happened if the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic had not broken our strike, which was beginning to spread to other campuses. In this small moment of refusal, the refusal to press “submit,” we learned how to meaningfully interrupt the university’s mechanisms of self-reproduction.

This project seeks to proliferate moments and sites of the kinds of refusals that can make visible, at least for a moment, the precarity of hegemony. If, as I show, narrative reproduction is a key grammar of the consolidation of institutional power, and if these narratives accumulate through archives, histories, and attachments, then what forms of narrative and strategies of repetition might be unsettling to power? Lara Sheehi writes that “settler colonialism necessitates a persistent repetition-compulsion consisting of harmful practices that displace indigenous life, intrude on physical and psychic sovereignty, and physically maim or create debility.”⁵ Anti-colonial work and organizing, then, necessitates its own logic of repetition to perform and sustain itself against settler colonialism’s claims to the future. I have attempted to organize this research with a consistent attention to colonial failures and dissonances, to strike a (perhaps impossible) balance between theorizing settler colonial violence as a system, and not reinstalling its violences through an over-ascription of internal coherence. To put it simply, I hope that this project makes room to examine the heart of those machines you hate.

In the spring and summer of 2012, nearly all of the 106 land-grant institutions in the United States engaged in commemorative celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the passage of the Morrill Land-Grant Act, the legislation signed by Lincoln in 1862 and authored by Vermont senator Justin Morrill that marked the first systematized federal

⁵ Lara Sheehi, “Intent to Harm: Settler Colonial Outposts in Psychoanalysis,” *Middle East Critique* 33, no. 3 (2024): 419–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2024.2348373>, 419.

investment in higher education. In its announcement of the anniversary, Cornell University notes that the land-grant act has been known as the “greatest piece of legislation to come out of the United States Congress.”⁶ Trafficking in the nostalgic narration that structures much of university history, former president of the University of New Hampshire Mark Huddleston remarked in a 2012 piece for the New England Board of Higher Education that “it is no exaggeration to say that Justin Morrill helped build a great nation.”⁷ Huddleston goes on to frame the contemporary land-grant university as in crisis: in need of rescue to return to its former glory and democratic ideals due to austerity and federal disinvestment in public education. This nostalgia for a bygone era of higher education features heavily in the historical narratives produced by the land-grant institutions. It wasn’t just the land-grant colleges themselves that celebrated the 150th anniversary. The White House also marked the anniversary with a press release, the last paragraph of which reads:

Generations of Americans have led richer, more productive lives as beneficiaries of the land-grant university system. As we commemorate this historic anniversary, let us reaffirm our support for these institutions of higher learning that help America fulfill its great promise as a Nation.⁸

Examining these anniversary celebrations reveals a continuity of logic. The story, as it is re/produced in institutional histories, goes something like this: pre-Morrill Act, higher education in the US was an inheritance of European forms of the university, forms which did not reflect the stated democratic ideals of the nation. The land-grant system revolutionized American higher education by expanding enrollment to poor white farmers and developing a

⁶ Daniel Mansoor, “Cornell’s First Sesquicentennial Event: The Morrill Land Grant Act Turns 150 | Cornell Chronicle,” *Cornell Chronicle*, June 28, 2012, <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2012/06/morrill-land-grant-act-turns-150>.

⁷ Mark Huddleston, “Morrill at 150: What Would Justin Do?,” *New England Board of Higher Education Journal*, July 12, 2012, <https://www.nebhe.org/post/morrill-at-150-what-would-justin-do>.

⁸ Barack Obama, “Message - 150th Anniversary of the Morrill Act,” The White House, July 2, 2012, <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/morrill-act-150-anniversary-president-message.pdf>.

distinctly American curricular structure that would, in theory, resist the former elitism of universities and restructure higher education as practical and utilitarian for farmers. In this story, the Land-Grant Act, alongside the Homestead Act and the Railroad Act, is framed as continuous with the democratic and populist values that guided the framers of the constitution. In this story, public education is an unqualified good and indexes social progressivism. In this story, there is rarely mention of who was excluded from participation in American democracy. In this story, the form of the federal investment in higher education (namely, land) is cropped out. In this story, the violences of settler colonial invasion, if they are gestured toward at all, are understood as aberrational within the development of liberal democracy.

The Morrill Act “granted” 30,000 acres of public land—a legal classification that I will examine in greater depth in subsequent chapters—per senator and representative to each state not in active rebellion against the federal government. The grants were broken up into small parcels of several acres, and were to be sold or leased in order to generate the start-up capital necessary to found a university organized around scientific agriculture and the mechanic arts. It is a common misconception that the parcels of land that were “granted” were the future sites of campuses. In actuality, the grants were made in the form of “land scrip,” which allowed states to claim surveyed parcels of land in the public domain. The profits from the sale of these parcels were to be invested in stocks of the United States, the states themselves, or “some other safe stocks,” and those investments would “constitute a perpetual fund, the capital of which shall remain forever undiminished.” Stocks in this period referred to ownership of a portion of a company or corporate interest, rather than the contemporary structure of entitlement to dividends. The interest generated from these perpetual investment funds would be used for “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 states may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”⁹

The perpetuity of this fund is critical—the mechanism of the Morrill Act facilitated a transfer from land capital to investment capital, or, more specifically, to interest-productive capital. The mechanisms of this transfer and its ideological underpinnings are a central focus of this dissertation, in contrast to hegemonic and official histories of the land-grant system that emphasize its democratic populist character. Glen Coulthard defines a settler colonial relationship as “interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power” that have been “structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority.”¹⁰ Coulthard critically intervenes in classical Marxist thought that positions primitive accumulation as temporally bounded, arguing that dispossession is constantly renewed. Following Coulthard, I argue that the establishment of land-grant universities as sites of the accumulation of interest-productive capital relied on both territorial domination and discursive production operating in concert: the on-the-ground realities of settler invasion and theft of Indigenous land were filtered through a discursive prism that authorized, naturalized, and legalized that theft, and the

⁹ Act of July 2, 1862 (Morrill Act), Which Established Land Grant Colleges, Public Law 37-108, Congress of the United States of America, General Records of the United States Government Record Group 11 (1862).

¹⁰ Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 6-7.

perpetuity of the endowment powerfully illustrates the consistent renewal of mechanisms of dispossession.

None of the announcements, think pieces, or press releases concerned with the 150th anniversary of the Land-Grant Act mention how, exactly, the federal government came to be in possession of so much public land, and how Indigenous title to those lands was extinguished. A small handful of commemorative materials include a land acknowledgement. In the past fifteen years, land acknowledgements have become a more normalized practice in (some) university contexts, and while it is undoubtedly important to name the Indigenous communities who have a relationship to the sites of particular campuses, it is noteworthy that not a single land acknowledgement at a land-grant university makes mention of the parcels of land outside of the campus that constituted its start-up capital and current endowment. This nominal recognition of indigeneity functions to further obscure the logics and mechanisms of dispossessive accumulation that structure the land-grant system. The concept of dispossession has gained purchase in settler colonial and Indigenous studies,¹¹ and Robert Nichols offers an insightful definition, writing that dispossession “combines two processes typically thought distinct: it transforms nonproprietary relations into proprietary ones while, at the same time, systematically transferring control and title of this (newly formed) property.”¹² In Nichols’ formulation, dispossession is a recursive process because it produces what it presupposes. He writes “in a standard formulation one would assume that ‘property’ is logically, chronologically, and normatively prior to ‘theft.’ However, in this (colonial) context, theft is

¹¹ see: Joanne Barker, “Territory as Analytic: The Dispossession of Lenapehoking and the Subprime Crisis,” *Social Text* 36, no. 2 (135) (2018): 19–39; Glen Coulthard, “From Wards of the State to Subjects of Recognition?: Marx, Indigenous Peoples, and the Politics of Dispossession in Denendeh,” in *Theorizing Native Studies*, ed. Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (2014); J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity*, Narrating Native Histories (Duke University Press, 2008); Maile Arvin, *Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai’i and Oceania* (Duke University Press, 2019).

¹² Robert Nichols, *Theft Is Property! Dispossession & Critical Theory*, Radical Americas (Duke University Press, 2020), 8.

the mechanism and means by which property is generated. [...] Recursive dispossession is effectively a form of property-generating theft.”¹³ In the commonsense story of the land-grant system, the formation of public (i.e. state) property is temporally prior to the formation of private property. Nichols’ concept of recursive dispossession opens up a mode of inquiry into the foundational thefts that were the necessary precondition for the formation of public property.

In the institutionally-produced story, the self-evident good of the university skips over the rather thorny question of the material processes behind the formation of “public land” and the subsequent formation of private property. In terms of institutional reproduction, it is advantageous for the university to render its dispossession conditions of possibility unthinkable. An ambitious research project undertaken in 2018 by Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone for *High Country News* revealed that “to extinguish Indigenous title to land siphoned through the Morrill Act, the United States paid less than \$400,000. But in truth it often paid nothing at all. Not a single dollar was paid for more than a quarter of the parcels that supplied the grants—land confiscated through outright seizure or by treaties that were never ratified by the federal government.”¹⁴ Lee and Ahtone surface what they refer to as the “open secrets” of the land-grants: that not only were the land transfers often facilitated by violence-backed seizures, but also that the parcels of land granted are held in perpetuity, meaning that at least twelve states continue to generate revenue via unsold parcels and associated mineral rights. Though the land-grant system is typically narrated as a transformative moment in higher education, the Morrill Act might be more accurately understood as a project of dispossession that authorized itself through the promotion of the “public good” of higher education.

¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴ Robert Lee, Tristan Ahtone, “Land-Grab Universities,” *High Country News*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52-4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities/>.

The story of the Land-Grant Act as a move toward democratizing higher education did not begin with the 2012 anniversary celebrations, but has been a structuring rhetorical feature employed by advocates of both scientific agriculture and public higher education since long before the first land-grant institution opened its doors to students. In 1956, then-president of the University of New Hampshire Edward Danforth Eddy Jr. published *Colleges for our Land and Times*, which was at the time the only comprehensive history of the land-grant college and university system. The opening framing of the book situates the land-grant institutions as an enactment of a particular form of American freedom that Eddy contrasts with “inhibiting concepts,” his term for the European inheritances that constrained the fledgling nation. Eddy, consistent with the dominant story, clearly articulates the relationship between American freedom and ongoing settler colonialism, but holds the violences of colonialism as incidental to the righteousness of the project, rather than as fundamental to its existence. While critical scholarship on settler colonialism has long held its defining feature as violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land, for Eddy, these violences are aberrational or erased, footnotes in history. He recognizes that “the conquering of this frontier became the stimulus to a gradual revolution out of which emerged the new form of American independence,”¹⁵ but glosses over what that conquering entailed. For the architects of this new form of American independence, institution building was both a crucial vehicle for the economic stability of the US, and a mechanism for the production of certain kinds of citizens. In narrating the Land-Grant Act as a break from the hold that religious institutions had on education and a shift away from European enlightenment philosophies, toward the secular and practical as the organizing principles of universities, Eddy stabilizes the creation of land-grant institutions as continuous with the “liberatory”

¹⁵ Edward Danforth Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education* (Greenwood Press, 1973), 1.

impulses of the American Revolution, conveniently cropping out the structures of violence that comprised their conditions of possibility, and negating competing visions of freedom.

Put another way, the long history of the American Revolution can be understood as the triumph of a particular vision of freedom at the expense of other visions, and, as is common in settler societies, universities became a crucial site of the production and reproduction of both the values of liberal individualism and of a particular kind of educated citizen. While the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Land-Grant Act might seem to index a triumph of a liberal, supremacist conception of freedom, to read these histories against the grain might also reveal the fragility of the liberal vision: the resources, military energy, and discursive power dedicated to upholding this narrative indicate that its truth value is not self-evident and rather requires persistent enforcement. While Eddy and other mainstream historians of the land-grant system recognize western settlement as foundational to the visions of American freedom articulated in the American Revolution (notably, a bourgeois revolution), the moral goodness of the settler project is unquestioned.

Normative histories of the land-grant system employ a range of discursive and rhetorical strategies that sideline, erase, or retroactively justify the violence of land seizure, and these strategies are downstream from the conception of the “noble savage,” which Philip Deloria describes as “a term that both juxtaposes and conflates an urge to idealize and desire Indians and a need to despise and dispossess them.”¹⁶ Deloria elaborates on the strategy of “playing Indian,” tracing moments in American history such as the Boston Tea Party (in which settlers donned Native garb) where settlers and settler society have selectively identified with elements of indigeneity that are politically convenient. Kim TallBear describes this move as self-indigenization, writing that “the settler state must bring Indigenous

¹⁶ Philip Joseph Deloria, ed., *Playing Indian*, Yale Historical Publications (Yale University Press, 1998), 4.

peoples to the point of death while preserving or resurrecting us within the colonial state's nationalist body, its institutions, and in the bodies and lives of individual non-Indigenous citizens. Indigeneity must be made to live in the settler body politic even while the settler nationalist project simultaneously narrates and works to produce Indigenous death."¹⁷ We see this impulse, to make indigeneity live in the settler body politic, in the repeated and persistent claims by land-grant historians that the land-grant system was an "indigenous" system of education. Aileen Moreton-Robinson fleshes out the implications of noble savagery in her theorization of "possessive logics," which she describes as "a mode of rationalization, rather than a set of positions that produce a more or less inevitable answer, that is underpinned by an excessive desire to invest in reproducing and reaffirming the nation-state's ownership, control, and domination."¹⁸ This possessive logic helps to visibilize how the structure of desire that undergirds settler colonialism is a desire for, at the same time, the elimination of the Native and the claiming of elements of indigeneity by settlers. Institutional histories of the land-grant system consistently describe it as a "native" or "indigenous" form of education that emerged as part of the American experiment in democracy, a move that performs the contradictions between elimination and possession that undergird the conception of the "noble savage."

In the foreword to *Colleges for our Land and Time*, Russell Thackery, the former Executive Secretary of the Association for Land-Grant Colleges and State Universities, strikingly performs a move toward self-indigenization, writing that "the story of how a system of higher education that was clearly inadequate to the needs of its society acquired a drastic redirection that was *indigenous to America*, of the movements and events that led up

¹⁷ Kim TallBear, "Indigenous Genocide and Reanimation, Settler Apocalypse and Hope," *Aboriginal Policy Studies* 10, no. 2 (2023), 95.

¹⁸ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, Indigenous Americas (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xii.

to the change, and of the results that flow from it down to the contemporary period, is a fascinating one whose lessons may be useful in a variety of ways as we look to the future.”¹⁹ (emphasis mine). Thackery is not alone in making this claim. Earle D. Ross writes that the land-grant institutions represented a “distinct native product and the fullest expression of democracy in higher education.”²⁰ Agricultural scientist L.H. Bailey wrote in 1908 that rural institutions are “natural expressions of indigenous needs.”²¹ Self-indigenization runs rampant in the land-grant historiography, and is employed to garner legitimacy at the same time that Indigenous people are subjected to genocidal policies of removal and cultural assimilation. Settlers desired an intimacy with the land that they settled on, and saw Indigenous people as possessing that intimacy. Deloria describes this ambivalence as “speaking the simultaneous language of cultural fusion and of violent appropriation.”²² Patrick Wolfe has argued that settler colonial societies pivot on a logic of elimination that seeks the destruction of Native society and the establishment of a settler society on territory that has been cleared of Indigenous people.²³ Importantly, this elimination is never fully complete or successful, and the figure of the Native continues to haunt the margins of American identity, in turns an object of assimilation and destruction. Manu Karuka describes this haunting through the lens of *countersovereignty*, or the sense that “settler invocations of sovereignty require recognition of Indigenous modes of relationship, however muted or displaced, in order to maintain any semblance of stability or coherence.”²⁴ Seen in this light, the persistent tendency to evoke

¹⁹ Russell Thackery, “Foreword,” in *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education*, by Edward Danforth Eddy (Greenwood Press, 1973), ix.

²⁰ Earle D. Ross, *Democracy’s College: The Land-Grant Movement in the Formative Stage* (Arno Press, 1969), 182.

²¹ L. H. Bailey, *The State and the Farmer* (Macmillan & Co., 1908), 123.

²² Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 5.

²³ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.

²⁴ Manu Karuka, *Empire’s Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad*, American Crossroads 52 (University of California Press, 2019), 2.

indigeneity in the land-grant historiography, somewhat paradoxically, indexes the precarity of the assertion of settler sovereignty, and deep engagement with institutional archives at land-grant universities reveals the potent disconnect between the commemorative narrative of the land-grant system as a triumphant ascendancy of democratic populist ideals and the on-the-ground messy realities of institutional construction. The land-grant system can be understood as a materialization of the ideals that shaped the American revolution, and as an attempt to resolve specific contradictions that surfaced in the period between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, and its historical significance is frequently articulated through the language of indigeneity wherein “uniquely American” is collapsed into “indigenous.”

This project proceeds from an assertion that in the context of U.S. political economy, land-grant universities function as sites of ongoing accumulation through dispossession.²⁵ By granting millions of acres for states to use or sell to jump-start and enhance their higher education capacities, the 1862 Morrill Land-Grant Act bound together land policy and higher education at an unprecedented scale. The foundation of knowledge production materialized through soon-forgotten forms of destruction: forests of tamarack trees and sugar maples felled to make way for institutions that combined agricultural and military instruction. The Morrill Act, I argue, inaugurated a transformative period in American higher education that bound settler-colonial violence to the discipline of scientific agriculture.²⁶ The persistent alibi for this process was promised upward class mobility for poor white farmers. As the Morrill Act mandated military instruction, it set the stage both for the militarization of the university and for slippages between scientific agriculture and military technology (evidenced most clearly

²⁵ See: Abigail Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, Nick Mitchell and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein, *Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation*, n.d., accessed August 10, 2026, <https://abolition.university/invitation/>.

²⁶ Dylan Rodríguez, “Racial/Colonial Genocide and the ‘Neoliberal Academy’: In Excess of a Problematic,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2012): 809–13.

in the use of ammonium nitrate, an industrial fertilizer, by the US military in its construction of explosives).²⁷

This project takes land and the processes of property formation that have been installed through it to pose a reading of the land-grant system in which the dispossession of Indigenous people figures as central, rather than ancillary, to the history of American higher education. Each chapter tells a different story about the land-grant system, organized around a particular charge in the text of the Morrill Act: the institution itself, the curricular mandate for instruction in scientific agriculture and the mechanic arts, and the inclusion of military tactics. Rather than producing a comprehensive history, I work to proliferate stories in the aim of dislodging hegemonic narratives that situate higher education as a self-evident good or an inherently progressive social force.²⁸ The stakes of this proliferation are multifaceted, and involve pushing back on narrative forms and modes of historical production that naturalize and obfuscate settler violence. Emphasizing the ruptures and discontinuities of the settler project through a close examination of its university-based modes of production and reproduction pushes back on normative conceptions of settler colonialism as an organic and deterministic force, and reveals its internal incoherences and contradictions. This project is *unsettling*: I take up objects and histories that are typically found at the margins of institutional history in order to rattle the foundations of normative and hegemonic stories about higher education in general and the land-grant system in particular. I ask how and why the university resists taking itself as an object of study, and what must be forgotten, consigned

²⁷ Tom Philpott, "A Brief History of Our Deadly Addiction to Nitrogen Fertilizer," *Food, Mother Jones*, n.d., accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.motherjones.com/food/2013/04/history-nitrogen-fertilizer-ammonium-nitrate/>.

²⁸ Eman Ghanayem and Theresa Rocha Beardall, "The University Is a Colony," *Diacritics* 52, no. 1 (2024): 8–23, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2024.a955183>.

to footnotes, and erased as a condition of possibility for university-based knowledge production.

I begin with a section on the historical context of the passage of the Morrill Act that examines nineteenth century federal and state land-policy to more fully situate my analysis of the land-grant system in distinct processes of private and public property formation. The 1862 legislative slate that included the Morrill Act, the Homestead Act, and the Pacific Railway Act index the ascendancy of a Lockean theory of property wherein a title claim is contingent on both continuous occupation and improvement. Against the backdrop of a federal government with limited centralized capacities (both administrative and military), I ask how these pieces of legislation represent the expansion and formalization of a mode of territorial acquisition and governance that maintained nominal fidelity to the ideals of the American revolution. I examine the concept of improvement as an operative logic in both property formation writ large and in the establishment and expansion of the land-grant system before moving into a consideration of the ideological and nationalistic underpinnings of the Morrill Act through an analysis of a small body of secondary scholarship on the land-grant system.²⁹ This historiographical analysis teases out the stakes of historical and narrative production around the land-grant system and situates the Morrill Act against the backdrop of moral, religious, and economic justifications for westward expansion and territorial acquisition.

Chapter One is an inquiry into the modes of production of institutional history at land-grant colleges and universities. I examine two sites of the production of institutional history: university archives and genres of commemoration and memorialization. The chapter

²⁹ Edward Danforth Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education* (Greenwood Press, 1973); J. B. Edmond, *The Magnificent Charter: The Origin and Role of the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges and Universities*, 1st ed (Exposition Press, 1978); Allan Nevins, *The State Universities and Democracy* (1962; University of Illinois Press, 1962); Earle D. Ross, *Democracy's College: The Land-Grant Movement in the Formative Stage* (Arno Press, 1969).

focuses on two specific land-grant institutions, Michigan State University and Pennsylvania State University, both of which lay a claim to being the “model” for the Morrill Act and subsequent institutions of scientific agriculture. These mutually exclusive claims to firstness offer a potent entry point into a consideration of the constructedness of university history, and rather than trying to settle a scholarly debate over the legitimacy of these claims, I ask what these narratives *do* for both the institution and the broader settler project, working to read archival and commemorative objects through the lens of recursive dispossession.³⁰ I take a methodological approach in this chapter informed by methods in feminist and Indigenous studies that take story as a central unit of analysis.³¹ Michel Rolph-Trouillot employs an approach to historical work that emphasizes the production of silences, writing that “silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective

³⁰ See: Robert Nichols, *Theft Is Property! Dispossession & Critical Theory*, Radical Americas (Duke University Press, 2020); Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, 2nd ed, Routledge Classics (Routledge, 2003); la paperson, *A Third University Is Possible*, Forerunners: Ideas First From the University of Minnesota Press (University of Minnesota Press, 2017); “Chapter 4: Accumulation by Dispossession,” in *The New Imperialism*, by David Harvey (Oxford University Press, 2003); Claudio Saunt, *Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory*, First published as a Norton paperback (W.W. Norton & Company, 2021); Sharon Stein, *Unsettling the University: Confronting the Colonial Foundations of US Higher Education*, Critical University Studies (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022); Michael John Witgen, *Seeing Red: Indigenous Land, American Expansion, and the Political Economy of Plunder in North America* (Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and the University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

³¹ see: Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Errantries (Duke University Press, 2021); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Second edition (Zed, 2012); Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Next Wave (Duke University Press, 2011); Leanne Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*, Indigenous Americas (University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Duke University Press, 2014); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2009); Kevin Bruyneel, *Settler Memory: The Disavowal of Indigeneity and the Politics of Race in the United States*, Critical Indigeneities (The University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Duke University Press, 2019).

significance (the making of *history* in the final instance.”³² This chapter examines university archives with an eye toward their modes of production: where are the silences in the archive? What has been erased and by whom? How might the silences in the archive open up a theorization of the university as simultaneously productive of knowledge and productive of forgetting?³³ The work of historical production that attends to these silences is not organized around simply giving them voice, or acceding to colonial demands for recognition and intelligibility, but rather to rigorously examine the production of silence as a constitutive feature of colonial knowledge production. As Karuka, Goldstein, and Pegues write, “we are emphatically not arguing for making visible, rendering comprehensible, or restoring to presence as a response to forms of colonial unknowing and willful ignorance.”³⁴ Transitioning to an investigation of commemorative and memorial materials, I inquire into both the moment of fact retrieval and the moment of retrospective significance to ask how the production of institutional history might be usefully understood as recursive. The continuous production of institutional history recasts the origin stories and conditions of possibility of the university, constraining the horizon of the thinkable and circumscribing the limits of critical thought—critical engagement with the university is sanctioned and encouraged insofar as it avoids a set of questions around the dispossessive conditions of possibility of the institution.

Chapter Two examines the curricular charge of the Morrill Act to teach scientific agriculture and the mechanic arts. The disciplinary history of scientific agriculture overlaps unevenly with the history of the land-grant college system, with most historians of agricultural science dating the origin of the field to the 1890s, upwards of thirty years after

³² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing The Past: Power And The Production Of History*, (Boston), 1995, 26.

³³ Manu Vimalassery et al., “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016), <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/633283>.

³⁴ Vimalassery et al., “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing,” 1.

the passage of the Morrill Act.³⁵ This chapter draws from methods in literary studies and affect theory to consider the structures of feeling that shaped the development of the field—I consider agriculture as a sticky attachment object that, at various historical junctures, compresses particular desires around citizenship, labor, settlement, and national character.³⁶ This chapter tells a story about a set of material transformations in nineteenth century America around agricultural labor regimes, industrialization, and territorial expansion through the lens of the disciplinary formation of scientific agriculture and, to a lesser extent, the mechanic arts. Ultimately, though in the text of the Morrill Act scientific agriculture and the mechanic arts were situated as of equal importance, the indeterminacy of the field of “mechanic arts” and the influence of farmer-led reform efforts led to a prioritization of agricultural science and a marginalization of the mechanic arts in the land-grant curricula until the early twentieth century, when the discipline of engineering was absorbed into the category of the “mechanic arts.”

Agricultural science emerged as a coherent discipline in response to a broad range of social and economic factors, including the crisis of soil exhaustion up the eastern seaboard beginning in the eighteenth century, the material conditions of agricultural labor, and the distinct ways that labor was racialized and exploited. I posit that the development and formalization of agricultural science and its location in the land-grant institutions post-Morrill Act index a transformative moment in the mechanisms of American property formation.³⁷ I

³⁵ Alan I. Marcus, *Agricultural Science and the Quest for Legitimacy* (Iowa State University Press, 1985); Margaret W. Rossiter, “The Organization of the Agricultural Sciences,” in *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860-1920*, ed. Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

³⁶ see: Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Duke University Press, 2021); Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011); Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*, Perverse Modernities (Duke University Press, 2021).

³⁷ Stuart Banner, *American Property: A History of How, Why, and What We Own* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

bring populist and farmer-led reform efforts into the frame to consider the class dynamics of the Morrill Act and American attachments to “practical” science. Against this backdrop, the successful efforts of grange movements in the northeast to transfer the land-grants from private universities to public agricultural colleges indicate that, rather than a monolithic institution, universities are sites of struggle where contested meanings of freedom, citizenship, professionalism, and productivity were (and are) being made and remade. However, the mutual investments in the settler project by distinct class interests perform an early iteration of the land-grant university’s capacity to absorb and manage difference and to constrain the horizon of allowable critique. This chapter argues that science and its attendant modes of knowledge production function to naturalize colonial capitalist relations to land, both materially and discursively displacing noncapitalist and nonwhite practices of land stewardship. Viewed in this way, the development of agricultural science mirrors the territorial logic of westward expansion: the becoming-science of agriculture is, in part, a process of determining its insides and outsides; which practices “count” as science and which do not. Given the primacy of practicality in the development of nineteenth century agricultural science, “improvement” of land became an operative principle in the legitimacy of land-based practices, and, through the Homestead Act, would become the precondition for the formation of private property.

Chapter Three is organized around the charge in the 1862 Morrill Act that land-grant colleges include instruction in military tactics, to theorize the entanglements and co-productions of universities and militarism. Given the backdrop of a federal government with limited administrative, regulatory, taxation, and military capacities, I ask how, independently of their curricula, the construction of land-grant colleges functioned as a rearticulation of state and military power in concert with the Homestead and Pacific Railway

Acts, along the logic of demographic and population management, i.e., securing white demographic strongholds in unincorporated territories in advance of application to statehood.³⁸ I argue that the tripartite 1862 legislative slate of the Morrill Act, the Homestead Act, and the Pacific Railway Act index a transformative moment in the history of American property formation, and, furthermore, represent a decentralized and territorial approach to building state power. In other words, given post-revolution American allergies to centralization (of the federal government and of military capacities), the mandate that land-grant institutions teach military tactics is only the most visible wing of the entanglement between the university and militarism. I argue that, in the nineteenth century, the federal government worked to democratize military capacities and endow ordinary citizens and students with the potential for militarization, rather than pursued a process of centralizing power.³⁹

This chapter detours through federal and state land policy in the nineteenth century and the histories of American property formation to argue that the university and the military represent two distinct but related articulations of what Manu Karuka terms “continental imperialism,” a heuristic that resists the distinction between foreign and domestic policy. On continental imperialism, Karuka writes that “there is no ‘national’ territory of the United States. There is no ‘national’ U.S. political economy, only an imperial one, which continues to be maintained, not through the rule of law, contract, or competition, but through the renewal of colonial occupation.”⁴⁰ This chapter proceeds from the contention that in the

³⁸ Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion*, First paperback printing, Princeton Studies in American Politics Historical, International, and Comparative Perspectives (Princeton University Press, 2019).

³⁹ See: Andrew R. Graybill, *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mounties, and the North American Frontier, 1875-1910* (University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Holly M. Karibo and George T. Díaz, eds., *Border Policing: A History of Enforcement and Evasion in North America* (University of Texas Press, 2020); Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*, Anarchist Intervention Series 06 (AK Press, 2013).

⁴⁰ Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad*, American Crossroads 52 (University of California Press, 2019), xii.

context of the nineteenth century United States, capital had not developed to the point at which a division of labor of the enforcement of domestic policy and foreign policy was an operative distinction. This chapter asks how the 1862 legislative slate facilitated a *democratization*, rather than a centralization of the capacity for dispossession.⁴¹ I argue for a capacious understanding of the relationship between universities and militarism—though the inclusion of military tactics in the land-grant curricula is a potent site of entanglement, I posit that the land-grant system functioned *infrastructurally* in tandem with military agendas and aims. In short, I argue that the land-grant system and the U.S. military were two wings of territorial governance that operated to secure U.S. territorial dominance in the nineteenth century.

This project brings a settler colonial analysis to the history of higher education, and considers the university as a central object of settler colonial studies. This intervention belongs to emergent conversations within the history of science,⁴² settler colonial studies,⁴³

⁴¹ Michael S. Neiberg, *Making Citizen-Soldiers: ROTC and the Ideology of American Military Service* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁴² See: Benjamin R. Cohen, *Notes from the Ground: Science, Soil, and Society in the American Countryside*, Yale Agrarian Studies Series (Yale University Press, 2009); Anderson Hunter Dupree, *Science in the Federal Government: A History of Policies and Activities to 1940*, Three Centuries of Science in America (Harvard University Press, 1957); Margaret W. Rossiter, *The Emergence of Agricultural Science: Justus Liebig and the Americans, 1840 - 1880*, Yale Studies in the History of Science and Medicine 9 (Yale Univ. Press, 1975); Alfred Charles True, *A History of Agricultural Education in the United States 1785-1925* (United States Government Printing Office, 1929).

⁴³ See: Maile Arvin, *Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai'i and Oceania* (Duke University Press, 2019); Joanne Barker, "Territory as Analytic: The Dispossession of Lenapehoking and the Subprime Crisis," *Social Text* 36, no. 2 (135) (2018); Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, First Peoples: New Directions Indigenous Studies (University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Charles Edward Cleland, *Faith in Paper: The Ethnohistory and Litigation of Upper Great Lakes Indian Treaties* (University of Michigan Press, 2014); Emilie Connolly, *Vested Interests: Trusteeship and Native Dispossession in the United States* (Princeton University Press, 2025); Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Samera Esmeir, *Juridical Humanity: A Colonial History* (Stanford University Press, 2012); J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity*, Narrating Native Histories (Duke University Press, 2008); Jean Maria O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England*, Indigenous Americas (University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Gerald Robert Vizenor, *The White Earth Nation: Ratification of a Native Democratic Constitution*, with Jill Doerfler and David E. Wilkins (UNP - Nebraska Paperback, 2012).

critical university studies,⁴⁴ environmental humanities,⁴⁵ and feminist geography.⁴⁶ These conversations upend longstanding methodologies in the study of higher education by foregrounding Indigenous dispossession as the condition of possibility for the land-grant college system. They do so by emphasizing sites and objects that are rarely taken as representative features of “the university.” The paper trail linking these objects is necessarily sketchy and incomplete. As itself a product of settler violence, the archive is an unreliable source for reading that violence. In complicating the democratic populist ideal that the agricultural college has come to represent, my contribution emphasizes the messy, contested, foundational moments of the university.

Methods

In the early stages of research for this dissertation, I put in a request to the University of Maryland College Park Archives for eight or nine boxes of materials related to the Morrill

⁴⁴ See: Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, Nachdr., Cultural Front (New York University Press, 20); Piya Chatterjee, *Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, with Sunaina Maira (University of Minnesota Press, 2014); William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (University of Chicago Press, 2006); Roger L. Geiger and Nathan M. Sorber, eds., *The Land-Grant Colleges and the Reshaping of American Higher Education*, Perspectives on the History of Higher Education 30 (Transaction Publishers, 2013); Richard Hall, *The Hopeless University: Intellectual Work at the End of the End of History* (Mayfly Books, 2021); Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013); Andy Hines, ed., *University Keywords*, 1st ed, Critical University Studies (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2025); Isaac A. Kamola, *Making the World Global: U.S. Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary* (Duke University Press, 2019); Eli Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Ellen Schrecker, *The Lost Promise: American Universities in the 1960s* (The University of Chicago press, 2021).

⁴⁵ See: Gina Caison, *Erosion: American Environments and the Anxiety of Disappearance*, 1st ed (Duke University Press, 2024); Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Kai Erikson et al., eds., *American Indian Environments: Ecological Issues in Native American History*, 1st ed (Syracuse University Press, 1980); Piers Blaikie and Harold C. Brookfield, eds., *Land Degradation and Society* (Methuen, 1987); Edwin C. Hagenstein et al., *American Georgics: Writings on Farming, Society and Culture, 1782-Present* (Yale University Press, 2012); Archer Butler Hulbert, *Soil: Its Influence on the History of the United States* (Yale University Press, 1930).

⁴⁶ See: Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, American Crossroads 21 (University of California Press, 2007);

land-grant, agricultural education, the university's role in the Civil War, and any records that discussed treaties or property claims in the period between the years 1850 and 1870. I confirmed my visit with the archivist, drove nine hours from Providence to College Park, Maryland on a hundred-degree day with no air conditioning, and, flushed and dehydrated, wound my way through the endless and labyrinthine parking structures, finally finding Special Collections. When I arrived I went through the requisite protocol of putting everything but a computer, a phone, and a pencil in a locker, and the chatty archivist wheeled over my cart of boxes, telling me about an undergraduate project on the land-grants he'd helped with.

As I started flipping through boxes and folders I noticed that there was nothing from before 1890 in any of the folders, despite the box listing ranges beginning in 1850. I looked through all eight boxes to no avail. When I went up to talk to the archivist, I asked him if I'd missed something, because I wasn't working past 1870 at the time. He looked at me like I was a little stupid and said, "Oh, anything before 1912 is just odds and ends we've acquired from other institutions, but the Confederates burned down the school in 1912 including all the records." He stated this as though it should have been common knowledge. To the students who attended first year orientation, who had been inculcated with the founding myth of the university as emerging from a devastating fire with a more committed student body than ever before, who resolutely devoted their time and labor into rebuilding the campus, it would have been common knowledge. I don't know what kind of face I was making at the archivist, but he gave me a pitying grin and said, "we pulled everything we could find pre 1870." I left less than an hour later with four document scans uploaded to my computer: a paper on the mission of the rural school written by Jacob Elry Metzger (a University of Maryland agronomy professor who began his tenure in 1914 and went on to be the director of the Maryland

Agricultural Experiment Station in 1937);⁴⁷ a 1915 paper by the same on training agricultural professors;⁴⁸ a series of Evening Globe newspaper clippings from 1896 on the incorporation of the Farmers' Institute;⁴⁹ and the Farmers' Institute annual report for the 1896-97 academic year.⁵⁰ I paged through the documents back at home, and puzzled over what the archivist had told me. I had been writing about the erasure of the settler colonial conditions of possibility of the university, and the archive had burned down. It was almost too on the nose.

The more I researched the fire that had destroyed the archive the more confused I became. The University of Maryland libraries boast a "digital exhibition" pertaining to the fire, but when I click on it there's only one picture and three short sentences: "On November 29, 1912, smoke and flames interrupted a Thanksgiving dance in the Barracks of Maryland Agricultural College. Most students and faculty members had gone home to celebrate Thanksgiving, but the fifty or so who remained on campus faced a scene that would change the course of the institution's history. Eerily enough, a student had already wondered what would happen if the college were to burn in a poem written for the 1897 Reveille yearbook."⁵¹ Below this description is a photograph, a portrait of the attendees of the dance, which was apparently taken only minutes before the fire was discovered. The aforementioned poem is indeed eerie, ending with the stanza "At last it seems that all are saved / We stand around with yearning, / For work is vain / It now is plain, / nought can prevent its burning."⁵²

⁴⁷ Jacob Elry Metzger, "How the Rural School Can Best Fulfill Its Mission," 1915, Collection 0246-UA, Box 1, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

⁴⁸ Jacob Elry Metzger, "Proper Preparation of Equipment, Academic, and Professional, of Teachers in Schools of Agriculture," 1915, Collection 0246-UA, Box 1, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

⁴⁹ "Clippings 1896-97," *The Evening Globe*, 97 1896, Farmers' Institute Records 005-UA, Box 1, Folder 3, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

⁵⁰ *Farmers' Institutes Report 1896-97* (1897), Farmers' Institute Records 005-UA, Box 1, Folder 1, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries.

⁵¹ "The Great Fire at Maryland Agricultural College," accessed July 1, 2026, <https://exhibitions.lib.umd.edu/fire>.

⁵² Maryland Agricultural College, *1897 Reveille* (Maryland Agricultural College, 1897), 121.

I wonder about how many students have fantasized about their universities burning down. I read through all the records of the fire I can find, and there is no mention of Confederates starting the blaze.

I tell you this story because the burning down of a university archive is a stark example of the quite literal erasure of knowledge that is a constitutive feature of settler colonial institutions. This erasure more frequently takes shape through selective memorialization and narrative production, but occasionally it proceeds through the material destruction of knowledge. The University of Maryland archive contained a mess of physical, material knowledge. Knowledge that once was matter does not always remain that way. Understood dialectically, settler knowledge is both knowledge and anti-knowledge.

Beginning from the understanding that university archives are necessarily incomplete, containing an immanent critique of their conditions of possibility, I seek to make strange objects that are typically understood as representative of institutional history, and to surface objects that have been scarcely considered. I move through university archives by following curiosity and taking note of both major and minor registers of absence and dissonance: strange correspondences leading to puzzling maps, cartographic marginalia pointing toward contested chains of property, fierce interpersonal feuds and the affects that stick to them. In looking askance at university history, I seek to denaturalize settler logics and intervene in the re(production) of the normal. If the goods that land-grant universities purport to offer—upward class mobility, the trappings of the well-rounded liberal citizen—are contingent on the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land, I ask what methodological practices might resist the disciplinary apparatuses of the institution. Importantly, this project is not an Indigenous history of the land-grant system. Those stories are not mine to tell, and I hope that this consideration of the mechanisms through which those

stories have been sidelined and erased can make room for their proliferation. There are countless stories that have yet to be told about the violences of the land-grant system on the lands and bodies of those most directly harmed by it, stories about the myriad and ongoing ways that Indigenous people resist settler invasion, stories that do not just fill the absences in the archive but obliterate its existential legitimacy. This project is an inquiry into the mechanisms of valuation that elevate settler epistemologies, and the devastating stakes of that valuation.

My methodological approach in this project emerges out of deep suspicion toward the archive as a technology of erasure and out of a commitment to the non-recuperability of the institution. These commitments are animated by critical work on refusal—Audra Simpson’s work on ethnographic refusal,⁵³ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s call for “the refusal of what has been refused,”⁵⁴ and Bayley Marquez’s assertion regarding archives that “Black and Indigenous peoples often had no chance to refuse what is saved there.”⁵⁵ Given that this project examines the mechanisms through which universities coopt, absorb, and defang dissent, I retain a sensitivity to the ways that marginalized voices can be taken up by the institution to foreclose deeper structural analysis and authorize ongoing dispossession. As such, while this work is resolutely in solidarity with movements for non-symbolic decolonization, I refuse to position the university as the site in which those movements can be fully realized. I insist that the university must be understood as a *target of* decolonizing movements, not as a good-faith collaborator in their aims.

⁵³ Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Duke University Press, 2014).

⁵⁴ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 96.

⁵⁵ Bayley J. Marquez, *Plantation Pedagogy: The Violence of Schooling Across Black and Indigenous Space*, *American Crossroads* 72 (University of California Press, 2024), 22.

Foregrounding the transformation of Indigenous land into settler infrastructure and knowledge formation opens up the university as a powerful analytic. It underscores, and seeks to contribute to, a larger set of conversations between scholars, activists, and Indigenous communities about the educative character of settler colonialism.⁵⁶ My approach here offers an interdisciplinary frame through which to engage the material, social, and epistemological impacts of colonial forgetting. Methodologically, it combines theoretical work in the politics of knowledge, with primary archival research in university, agriculture, and policy history.

I examine the historical substance the archive offers, though sometimes obliquely—treaty signings, maps that document treaty violations and land theft, blueprints for campus construction, legislation on land policy, syllabi and curricular materials, and records of student recruitment. I place these objects in conversation with institutionally-produced histories to attend to documentary forms and genres that facilitate forgetting. I conducted five university archive visits in the research for this dissertation: Michigan State University, Pennsylvania State University, University of Georgia, University of Maryland, and University of Minnesota. Alongside my time in the archives, during each of these visits I toured the campus, collected marketing and recruitment materials, and sought out land-grant memorials on the campuses. These additional modes of data gathering add a layer of experiential geography to this analysis: I consider how campus construction and university self-narration are productive of particular sets of affects, and how those affects can be understood in

⁵⁶ See: Bayley J. Marquez, *Plantation Pedagogy: The Violence of Schooling Across Black and Indigenous Space*, American Crossroads 72 (University of California Press, 2024); Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, 1st ed., Difference Incorporated (University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Leigh Patel, *No Study Without Struggle: Confronting Settler Colonialism in Higher Education*, Paperback edition (Beacon Press, 2022); Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, First U.S. edition (Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

relation to the archival materials that come into the frame.⁵⁷ University archives and their absences index the relationship between the material and the epistemological.

At the same time, the colonial archives can be read against the grain. Drawing from feminist and anti-colonial approaches to archives and their limits, I consider the archive as a register of gaps, fissures, and erasures.⁵⁸ This work aids me in emphasizing institutions of knowledge production as social and material technologies of forgetting. Scholars in settler-colonial studies have termed this process *agnosia*, or the production of unknowing, and identified it as an animating force of settler-colonial institutions.⁵⁹ Colonial education has always served as an assimilatory technology that delegitimizes Indigenous, feminized, and folk knowledges. The accumulative apparatus of the colonial university, then, requires simultaneous and entangled processes of knowledge production and the production of forgetting, both of which occur on and through occupied Indigenous land.

As much as possible, I work to retain the slippery affect that has constituted much of this research, and emphasize resistances to narrative and discursive enclosures. This could be understood as a maximalist approach to historical research—rather than elevating particular narratives through their perceived veracity, I aim to proliferate possible narratives to build an ongoing sense of the constructedness of history. In this process, a central problematic emerges: how to theorize the logics of settler colonial violence without treating settler colonialism as a more internally coherent system than it actually was. Naming violence as a

⁵⁷ See: Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, Next Wave (Duke University Press, 2012); Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History*, The Institution for Social and Policy Studies (Yale University Press, 2008); Russ Castronovo, *American Insecurity and the Origins of Vulnerability* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

⁵⁸ See: Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, 2. Print, American Encounters/Global Interactions (Duke University Press, 2007); Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, New University of Minnesota Press ed (University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Second edition (Zed, 2012).

⁵⁹ Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/633283>.

constitutive settler process runs the risk of discursively reinstalling that violence, retroactively ascribing a kind of internal order that is not present in the on-the-ground operations of settler expansion. There is a tenuous balance to strike between posing a theorization of the constitutive violences of settler colonialism and framing settler colonialism as inevitable or deterministic. The legibility of settler colonialism as a system does not inherently or necessarily imply intentional, coordinated, agential planning of this system. I work to retain a sensitivity to the stakes of retroactively mapping internal coherence onto settler apparatuses of property formation and enforcement while at the same time recognizing the continuities of logic that these apparatuses perform.

Contextualizing the Morrill Act

Federal and State Land Policy

In the early nineteenth century, the U.S. government was worried about settlement. In the wake of the enthusiasm for democracy and democratic ideals that had burst forth during the American revolution, the question of territorial management was worrisome, and that worry filtered into questions around citizenship and education. The federal government was small, with no standing army and no capacity to collect taxes. In the mid-nineteenth century, the federal government reversed its restrictive policies on westward expansion and passed a series of legislation that would formalize and expand the mechanisms undergirding the formation of state property. The Morrill Act was one such piece of legislation, and its full impact is best understood in concert with the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railway Act. This section offers a gloss of this legislative slate to examine the maturation of a property regime in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This zoomed out frame more fully situates the Morrill Act and the land-grant system in a context of decentralized territorial management and racialized demographic manipulations.

In 1862 three pieces of federal legislation were passed that would fundamentally alter the relationship between the state, land, and capital accumulation: the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railway Act, and the Morrill Land-Grant Act. As a tripartite structure, this cluster of legislation inaugurated a new post-emancipation property regime in which the state played a much more active role in the conversion of land into sites of capital accumulation, and crystallized the mechanisms that facilitated speculation on those lands. Furthermore, it sutured military power to land policy, offering particular incentives for settlers to take up arms and defend the frontier. The Homestead Act was the first of the three to be signed into

law, on May 20, 1862, and “granted” adult male heads of households who had never taken up arms against the federal government up to 160 acres of surveyed land for a small filing fee. The condition of property ownership was continuous residence on the land for at least five years, and demonstrated “improvement” of that land. The act was an implicit adoption of Locke’s labor theory of property by the state: the belief that property originally comes into existence through the mixing of labor with natural resources. For Locke and his adherents, settlement of Indigenous lands is not only justified, but considered a moral and political imperative. Conveniently, Indigenous modes of agricultural science and land stewardship are cropped out of Locke’s definition of labor, and thus Indigenous claims to land are understood as fundamentally illegitimate. The Homestead Act of 1862 was not the first time that the federal government had formalized the labor theory of property into law—the Preemption Act of 1841 similarly allowed settlers to claim up to 160 acres of land on the condition of continuous residence and improvement, and the Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 allowed white settlers to claim 320 acres of land in the Oregon territory, though it was repealed in 1855. Importantly, the Donation Land Claim Act explicitly prohibited Black citizens from applying for land ownership, a move which tightened the relationship between whiteness and property. Since the 1830s the federal government had increasingly adopted policies of preemption, which the Jackson administration argued would serve to stave off potential settler/squatter unrest. Preemption, or the right of first refusal, authorized and legitimized westward expansion and territorial land claims in advance of the settlement or migration itself, thus undercutting potential competing property claims.

Until the 1840s, the federal government had taken a restrained position on the issue of westward expansion. Paul Frymer notes that “both the Jefferson administration and Republican majorities in Congress largely maintained the approach of their predecessors,

tightly regulating the distribution of the public lands so as to constrain the movement of settlers and slow territorial expansion.”⁶⁰ This tight regulation of westward expansion reflected profound national anxieties about the risks of too-rapid expansion. Of the Louisiana Purchase, Alexander Hamilton wrote that rapid emigration into the newly acquired territory could “hasten the dismemberment of a large portion of our country, or a dissolution of the Government.”⁶¹ In the first half of the nineteenth century, property claims based on preemption were routinely rejected. A slate of legislation passed in the first decade of the nineteenth century that included the Intrusion Act of 1807, the Embargo Act of 1809, and the Non-Intercourse Act of 1808 were all aimed toward preventing settlement on public land and authorizing punishment for illegal settlement. By the time the Preemption Act was passed in 1841, the federal government had almost completely reversed its position, opting instead to crystallize occupation and improvement of land as the condition for property formation. This reversal in position can largely be ascribed to a shifting consensus among politicians regarding the best way to prevent and stave off settler uprisings—by the time the Preemption Act was passed, the regulatory and military effort required to remove “squatters” from lands they had no title to was overextending the capacities of the weak federal government. The expansion of the railway system was quelling anxieties about national cohesion through a geographically dispersed population, and Andrew Jackson became convinced that preemptively authorizing and incentivizing homesteading was the most effective way to restrain the possibility of settler unrest.

The anxieties that structured the policies of restraint in the first half of the nineteenth century crystallized around the fear that a geographically dispersed population would threaten

⁶⁰ Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion*, First paperback printing, Princeton Studies in American Politics Historical, International, and Comparative Perspectives (Princeton University Press, 2019), 74.

⁶¹ Alexander Hamilton, “Purchase of Louisiana,” *New York Evening Post*, July 5, 1803.

the stability of the state, a fear that was only sharpened as the movement for southern secession gained power. The shift away from this position is due in no small part to rapid industrialization and the construction of railways that produced a more tightly connected citizenry and a substantially more cohesive national economy. Furthermore, despite the federal position against preemption in the early part of the nineteenth century, state courts frequently took a different approach, stabilizing cultivation and singular possession as the legal criteria for property claims. Frymer writes that “when interpreting claims within Indian territories, courts consistently held (often inaccurately) that because Native Americans were in constant motion, they could not claim attachment to a specific area of land to legitimate a right to property.”⁶² As such, state courts frequently upheld continuous occupation and improvement of land as the necessary condition for settler property claims, regardless of the federal position on the issue. With the passage of the Preemption Act, the federal government formally adopted a Lockean labor theory of property that would be consolidated through the Homestead Act, the Morrill Act, and the Pacific Railway Act.

The restrained position of the federal government toward western settlement in the antebellum period reflected a persistent tension: southern slaveowners opposed preemption and homesteading because they feared that settlement patterns and demographic shifts as a result of westward expansion would limit their own political power. As such, the southern defense of slavery was in direct conflict with the western promotion of white settlement, though of course both positions proceeded from a racist commitment to the whiteness of the nation. As Frymer writes, “both sides endorsed expansion, but in different directions and forms, with different methods, and with very different goals. Slave owners wanted to move into populated regions to the south, like Cuba, in order to expand their industry and interests.

⁶² Frymer, *Building an American Empire*, 104.

White settlers, meanwhile, wanted to expand west into territories they construed as empty, including Indian territory.”⁶³ The discrepancies between the federal position of restraint and the practices of state courts to uphold preemption deferred the intensity of this conflict somewhat, which was ultimately resolved by the absence of southern representation in Congress following the Civil War.

Increasingly, militarized language structured much of the congressional debates about homesteading. Republican representative Galusha Grow of Pennsylvania, often referred to as the “father of the homestead law,”⁶⁴ would argue in 1852 that the Homestead bill would create “a self-constituted and self-supporting army to repel frontier attacks and foreign invasion.”⁶⁵ Other congressmen would echo this position, arguing that the passage of the Homestead Act would allow the government to avoid financing a large armed force to defend the frontier, and instead would deputize settlers into the armed enforcement of occupation. This logic of militarism is present in the Morrill Act as well, in its mandate that land-grant colleges teach military tactics and strategy. Crucially, the Homestead Act, the Morrill Act, and the Pacific Railway Act both consolidated mechanisms of property formation and centralized military power. This move toward the militarization of the frontier reflects a set of anxieties about military might that had come to a head during the Civil War—the federal government did not have a standing army that was large enough or resourced enough to take on the work of defending the frontier as a militarized area, and so we might usefully read the tripartite structure of the Homestead, Morrill, and Pacific Railway Acts as a democratization

⁶³ Ibid., 132.

⁶⁴ James T. DuBois and Gertrude S. Matthews, *Galusha A. Grow: Father of the Homestead Law* (1917; Houghton Mifflin Company, n.d.).

⁶⁵ *Appendix to the Congressional Globe* (Washington, 1852), 428.

of defense, a set of policies that conscripted students, homesteaders, and entrepreneurs into what Karuka refers to as the “war-finance nexus.”⁶⁶

Policies of preemption were adopted in fits and starts, and the legislative efforts that surrounded the passage of the Preemption Act indicate the extent to which the militarization of the frontier was a primary aim of the state. For example, in 1842 Congress passed the Armed Occupation Grant, which would provide 160 acres of land to individuals who were able to bear arms and willing to occupy land south of Gainesville, Florida. After the Civil War, U.S. land policy shifted away from purchasing land or securing treaties as the primary grammar of colonial conquest, and began to rely on military action to acquire westward land. The Homestead Act had been a source of debate and contention in Congress for upwards of a decade, but by 1862 most southerners were gone from Congress, and the act passed easily. The Homestead Act would distribute more than 96 million acres of land to approximately 718,000 applicants over the subsequent four decades.

The Pacific Railway Act was the second of the three pieces of legislation to be passed, and Lincoln signed it into law on July 1, 1862 (the day before the Morrill Act was signed). The act was originally titled “An act to aid in the construction of a railroad and telegraph line from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean, and to secure to the government the use of the same for postal, military, and other purposes.” According to Manu Karuka, the act was speculative in nature, an instance of “U.S. sovereignty as a provisional declaration, sovereignty on credit, a colonialist bond to be honored on future maturation.”⁶⁷ In effect, the law reclassified Indigenous lands as public lands, and, in keeping with the logics of the Homestead Act and the Morrill Act, established a legal and political framework to authorize

⁶⁶ Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad*, American Crossroads 52 (University of California Press, 2019), 67.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

and incentivize settlement that, in important ways, preceded “any functional colonial occupation of the region.”⁶⁸ In Karuka’s formulation, colonial sovereignty is better understood as countersovereignty—the sense that “settler invocations of sovereignty require recognition of Indigenous modes of relationship, however muted or displaced, in order to maintain any semblance of stability or coherence.”⁶⁹ Put another way, federal land policy of the time was consistently shot through with anxieties about the stability of the colonial project; anxieties about citizenship, whiteness, nationalism, and labor. These anxieties are evidenced in the speculative character of this cluster of legislation, which can be understood as productive, rather than reflective, of a particular set of property relations—each of these acts formalized financial speculation on “public” land as a primary mechanism for capital accumulation. If, as Karuka articulates, settler sovereignty is always hedging against its own unraveling, then this cluster of legislation offers a potent window into the war-finance nexus, or the relationship between colonization and capital accumulation. With the Pacific Railway Act, the imperial state chartered the corporation (the Union Pacific Railroad Company), which was then tasked with the on-the-ground manifestation of colonial sovereignty. The war-finance nexus, according to Karuka, describes the simultaneous and mutually constituted projects of building military security and managing the risks of financial capital, and this cluster of legislation indexes the rise of speculative finance as a primary grammar of settler sovereignty.

The rise of financialized territorial expansion was bolstered by the Emancipation Proclamation—the dissolution of the slave property claim was entangled in the expansion of speculative real estate claims, resulting in a reorganization of the imperial state’s implicit and explicit logics of property formation. Karuka notes that “relations of credit and real estate

⁶⁸ Ibid., 68.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 2.

animated the expansion of continental imperialism,”⁷⁰ which resulted, in part, in the increasing militarization of the frontier. After the Dakota uprising that began on August 17, 1862 and culminated in their surrender on September 26, the United States treated Dakotas as war criminals, imprisoning them in concentration camps at Fort Snelling and Davenport. Four months later, Lincoln signed orders for the execution of thirty-eight Dakota men, the largest public execution in U.S. history. Lincoln’s response to the Dakota Uprising indicates an adoption of Locke’s conception of Native peoples as fundamentally enemy combatants with no political or legal basis for territorial claims.

The Morrill Act was the last of the three acts to be signed into law, on July 2, 1862. The logic of increasing military power was present in the Morrill Act as well—the only substantive difference between the version of the act that was vetoed by Buchanan in 1859 and the version that was ultimately adopted in 1862 was the inclusion of the mandate that land-grant schools teach “military tactics and strategy” alongside agricultural science and the mechanic arts. Similar to the Pacific Railway Act, the Morrill Act cemented a logic of financialized territorial expansion, providing the legal mechanisms through which Indigenous land was reclassified as public and made available for speculation. As I explore in depth in Chapter One, the Morrill Act sutured individual improvement of the mind to improvement of the soil, a slippage that deputizes students of the land-grant colleges into the settler colonial project. Each of these pieces of legislation reflects the “underlying imperative to transform specific places into extractive claims on credit.”⁷¹ Homesteads, railways, and universities functioned as, at the same time, institutions of state-building, sites of the production of forms of citizenship that rested on dispossession, mechanisms for the centralization and expansion of military force, and, on their surface, public goods. Crucially, access to these goods is

⁷⁰ Ibid., 69.

⁷¹ Ibid., 70.

contingent on either active participation in or passive complicity with the mechanisms of dispossession and extraction that form the underbelly of settler freedom.

If this cluster of legislation marks a transformational moment in the federal government's explicit adoption of financialization and Locke's labor theory of property, three pieces of legislation passed in 1887 can be understood as cementing those logics. The Hatch Act, which formalized federal support for cooperative extension programs through the land-grant colleges, the Dawes Act, which subdivided Indigenous communal landholdings into individual allotments, and the Interstate Commerce Act, which regulated railroad transportation across state lines, all moved to cement property formation and resolve sets of contradictions that had surfaced in the twenty five years since the passage of the Homestead, Railway, and Morrill Acts.

Between 1862 and 1887, the land-grant college system had become a site of intense class conflict between populist and farmer-led movements and an old guard of agricultural gentry. The establishment of cooperative extension programs (through additional land-grants) was a move to address the populist criticisms of the land-grant institutions as having fundamentally failed in their charge to educate farmers toward the farm, instead reproducing an educated aristocracy. Most historians of scientific agriculture date the formation of the field to the Hatch Act, articulating an intellectual genealogy that owes more to farmer self-organization than to institutional formation. While the Morrill Act had established a precedent for the federal support of higher education broadly and agricultural education in particular, the establishment of cooperative extension via the Hatch Act marked the consolidation of discrete agricultural methods and strategies into the discipline of scientific agriculture, signalling the beginning of a new phase of agricultural education and research in an extra-institutional context.

The Dawes Act, under the guise of enfranchising individual Indigenous people through property ownership, established an allotment system that subdivided communally held Indigenous land into individual parcels, undercutting traditional structures of Indigenous land claims. Functionally, the Dawes Act further cemented capitalist property claims as a condition for citizenship, and elaborated a logic of corporate personhood that facilitated a massive expansion of corporate activity (primarily by railroad corporations) in Indian country. Karuka notes that “allotment was a mechanism for this corporation explosion, a seemingly bloodless dispossession through the capital relation, proceeding through its own definitions of personhood.”⁷² The immediate result of the Dawes Act was the loss of approximately two-thirds of Indigenous land in the contiguous United States. The 1895 *Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners* lays out the aims of the federal government in this period quite plainly: “We believe it to be the duty of the United States Government to maintain its supreme sovereignty over every foot of land within the boundaries of our country, and that no treaties can rightfully alienate its legislative authority, and that it is under a sacred obligation to exercise its sovereignty by extending over all the inhabitants of the Indian Territory the same protection and restraints of government which other parts of our country enjoy.”⁷³ The logic of the commission proceeds from Locke’s labor theory of value—in which the formation of private property is an organic occurrence that follows the mixing of labor and natural resources—and articulates the supremacy of legislative authority over the authority of treaties. The passage and implementation of the Dawes Act spurred fierce resistance by the Five Civilized Tribes, including a group called the Four Mothers Society, who lobbied against the Dawes Commission in Washington, and the

⁷² Ibid., 165.

⁷³ *Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners to the Secretary of the Interior*, (Washington), 1895, 6.

Snake Uprising, led by Chitto “Crazy Snake” Harjo, which spent more than a decade fighting against the Dawes Commission. The grammar of this resistance frequently took the form of pleas for the federal government to uphold and respect treaties with Indigenous nations. The response by the federal government to resistance to allotment was consistently aggressive—Native Americans were presented with the choice of either allotment or imprisonment. Redbird Smith, a member of the Cherokee nation, told a Senate committee in 1907 that “to take and put the Indians on the land in severalty would be just the same as burying them, for they could not live.”⁷⁴ In response, the chairman told Smith, “I can not impress upon you too forcibly that what you ask for and wish is wholly and totally out of the question, for it can never be; and I wish in the name of the committee as a whole to further impress upon you the absolute importance of taking your allotment, if you do not you will soon find yourself without land altogether.”⁷⁵ The imposition of settler property regimes onto Indigenous communities must be understood as part of the larger project of Indigenous eradication. As Smith lays out so plainly, the imposition of a property regime was a kind of death, in that it foreclosed non-property relations to land and to others.

The Interstate Commerce Act was passed four days before the Dawes Act, on February 4, 1887. The act was intended to regulate railroads engaged in transportation across state lines, and instituted an Interstate Commerce Commission that would be tasked with regulating the movement of people and goods across state lines. Crucially, this legislation articulated a particular geographic space as the “interior” of the United States, a move that extended administrative control over territory. Karuka writes, of the Dawes and Interstate Commerce Acts, that “the two laws can be read together as acts of imperial state formation,

⁷⁴ *Report of the Select Committee to Investigate Matters Connected with Affairs in the Indian Territory* (59th Congress, 2nd Session, 1906), 99.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

controlling and regulating bodies in relation to places.”⁷⁶ The Interstate Commerce Act significantly broadened the scope of regulatory control by the federal government, and further entrenched the legal basis for corporate personhood. The period between 1882 and 1887 can be understood as, somewhat paradoxically, a period of the simultaneous maturation and extension of corporate personhood, and the systematic denial of personhood and its attendant legal and political benefits to nonwhite subjects. Karuka names this tendency “sharecropping whiteness,”⁷⁷ a shorthand that gestures toward the contradictions in the period between oligarchic economic development and liberal individualism.

All told, the land policies of the federal government between 1862 and 1887 served to reify Locke’s labor theory of property through the consolidation of state power, to reinscribe the frontier as a militarized zone, requiring the expansion of military and police power (frequently through the conscription of students and homesteaders into the military role), and to establish a logic of real estate speculation as one of the primary grammars of state-building. Furthermore, the cluster of 1862 legislation intractably sutured a certain set of public goods (transport, the homestead, and higher education) to dispossession and extraction.

The Land-Grant Colleges: Historical Threads

The predominant commonsense narrative of American higher education presents its current iteration as, simultaneously and paradoxically, historically inevitable and a triumph of the American underdog in the democratic project. Frederick Rudolph writes that “nothing about colonial America suggested that the college was going to become a characteristic American institution nor that in time it would be a popular American institution.”⁷⁸ Though

⁷⁶ Karuka, *Empire’s Tracks*, 164.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷⁸ Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History*, 7. [repr.] (Univ. of Georgia Press, 1991), 20.

the role of the university in American society was in flux in the early colonial period, there is ample evidence that colonists seriously considered the political, economic, and military functions of higher education long before the massive expansion in university construction following the Civil War. The education of Native people was understood to be a crucial component of the multi-pronged project of territorial dominance. Harvard's 1650 charter articulates this explicitly, writing that the college would educate "the English and Indian youth of this country in knowledge and godliness."⁷⁹ The education of Native people in religious institutions of higher education was taken seriously as a strategy of colonial conquest. However, early colonial colleges were far from structural features of American society, inaccessible to the majority of the population due to cost, impracticality of curriculum, and distance. It was not until after the Civil War that the American college would emerge as a core institution, and it was not until the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 that there was any comprehensive federal support for higher education.

In examining the historiography of the land-grant college system, I hone in on a small sub-field of the history of higher education that emerged between 1940 and 1980. The four texts that I take to be representative of this sub-field are Earle Ross's *Democracy's College* (1942), Edward Danforth Eddy Jr.'s *Colleges for Our Land and Time* (1956), Allan Nevins's *The State Universities and Democracy* (1962), and J.B. Edmond's *The Magnificent Charter* (1978). These texts are significant in contrast to the broader field of the history of higher education, which generally de-emphasizes the significance of the land-grant college system. Each offers particular entry points into an exploration of the political, economic, and social forces that produced the land-grant system, and each traffic in a grammar of romanticized determinism that forcefully conceives of the land-grant system as a triumph of democracy. I

⁷⁹ "Charter of 1650," May 31, 1650, <https://id.lib.harvard.edu/via/olvwork368905/catalog>.

argue that these texts naturalize the foundational conditions of land-dispossession and the political role of universities in the management of the frontier by over-emphasizing the democratic populist elements of the land-grant movement. Although not uncritical of institutions, this body of scholarship produces the “romance myth of education”⁸⁰ that hedges against a structural analysis of the university, taking the “goodness” or value of higher education as self-evident. In the stories put forth in these texts, Indigenous people figure as background characters or unfortunate casualties of the inevitable progression of the American nation, if they appear at all. In these stories, the goodness and the whiteness of the American empire are foregone conclusions.

Ross, Eddy Jr., Nevins, and Edmond all narrate higher education in the colonial period as stultified and impractical, “clinging to its inhibiting concepts”⁸¹ that had been inherited from Europe. In their view, the land-grant system represents a decisive break from the old, a differentiation from Europe that indexes, in no uncertain terms, the viability of the American experiment in democracy. The grammar of this differentiation is instructive, frequently taking the form of claims to indigeneity. Ross describes the land-grant system as having “developed under native conditions,”⁸² and as “manifestations of latent nationalism” that were “so genuinely indigenous and practically purposed that systematic formulation was not required to justify them.”⁸³ Eddy cites L.H. Bailey, a prolific advocate of agricultural education, who proposes a guiding philosophy of education as “fundamentally native and indigenous.”⁸⁴ These claims to indigeneity are central to the logic of settler colonial

⁸⁰ Eli Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

⁸¹ Edward Danforth Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education* (Greenwood Press, 1973), 1.

⁸² Earle D. Ross, *Democracy's College: The Land-Grant Movement in the Formative Stage* (Arno Press, 1969), 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸⁴ Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education*, 118.

dispossession, and can be read through Manu Karuka's framework of "countersovereignty," which emphasizes the tendency of articulations of settler sovereignty to selectively incorporate elements of indigeneity in order to access political legitimacy.⁸⁵ At the heart of this simultaneous disavowal and selective incorporation of indigeneity is a logic of possession. Kanaka Maoli scholar Maile Arvin describes this process as "whiteness making itself Indigenous in order to control and own a place."⁸⁶ Patrick Wolfe theorizes that settler colonialism "destroys to replace,"⁸⁷ and the narration of the land-grant system as an "indigenous" system of American education reveals an important nuance of this logic: destruction sometimes looks like incorporation. The persistence of these claims to indigeneity in the secondary literature on the history of the land-grant system indexes how what Aileen Moreton-Robinson terms "the white possessive" is naturalized and "operationalized within discourses to circulate sets of meanings about ownership of the nation, as part of commonsense knowledge, decision making, and socially produced conventions."⁸⁸ In the context of the land-grant system, the logic of self-indigenization functions to articulate a decisive break from Europe and to legitimize that break through the selective possession of elements of indigeneity.

For Eddy, the land-grant idea and related land policy represents the enactment and materialization of the ideals laid out by the framers of the Constitution, and the triumph of particular national values around democracy, individualism, and property formation. He writes that the 1820s was a period in which "the country became conscious of the great

⁸⁵ Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad*, American Crossroads 52 (University of California Press, 2019).

⁸⁶ Maile Arvin, *Possessing Polynesians: The Science of Settler Colonial Whiteness in Hawai'i and Oceania* (Duke University Press, 2019), 3.

⁸⁷ Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>, 388.

⁸⁸ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, Indigenous Americas (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xii.

discrepancy between actual life and the noble sentiments espoused in the Constitution.”⁸⁹

Institution building was one attempt to resolve this discrepancy, and was sharpened with the rise of the populist movement and the 1828 election of Andrew Jackson. The tension between ideal and actual would play out for decades in the context of the land-grant system through the populist and farmer-led reform efforts of the late nineteenth century, which culminated in the successful transfer of the land-grants from elite private institutions in the Northeast to state schools.⁹⁰ Eddy, Edmond, Nevins, and Ross each traffic in a particular and peculiar discursive paradigm that over-emphasizes the democratic impulses of the settler-colonial project, at the expense of a robust theorization of land, property, and population management that was and remains at the heart of the land-grant system. The predominant affect of the secondary scholarship on the history of the land-grant movement is one of triumphant determinism that frequently resembles religious fervor.

In a moment of surprising lucidity, Nevins writes that while “the material resources provided by the Morrill Act were important, [...] the moral encouragement was an equally effective stimulus,”⁹¹ a rare acknowledgment of the discursive role that the Morrill Act played in the production of a sense of national coherence. As a whole, the secondary scholarship on the land-grant system glosses over the “material resources” and the process through which the federal government acquired and distributed those resources (land, primarily), and instead forwards a conception of the land-grant institution as a site of and mechanism for the expansion of democracy. Eddy writes that the land-grant system represents a “uniquely American type of freedom.”⁹² The moral legitimacy and inherent goodness of this type of

⁸⁹ Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education*, 2.

⁹⁰ Nathan M. Sorber, *Land-Grant Colleges and Popular Revolt: The Origins of the Morrill Act and the Reform of Higher Education* (Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁹¹ Allan Nevins, *The State Universities and Democracy* (1962; University of Illinois Press, 1962), vi.

⁹² Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education*, 1.

freedom is taken as self-evident, and the conditions of possibility of that freedom (namely, the systematic dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands) does not enter the interpretive frame. Nevins, Eddy, Ross, and Edmond are in agreement that the land-grant system played a significant role in the stabilization of the nation following the Civil War. More specifically, the land-grant movement was a site of the elaboration, consolidation, and expansion of certain forms of nationalism—the architects of the land-grant system were explicit in their aim of developing a model of higher education that produced citizens who would be well-equipped to steward the settler colonial project, and institution-building figured centrally in this aim.

In the story that this body of scholarship tells, the establishment of the land-grant system can be understood as continuous with a long process of differentiation from Europe that began in the seventeenth century. This break took a number of forms and was expressed through a variety of mechanisms, including the drafting of the Constitution, policies around religious freedom, the project of representative democracy, and the establishment of institutions of higher education. An emphasis on the utility of education in stabilizing the nation-state is clear and present in the historical record. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 notes, for example, that “religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary for good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”⁹³ In Eddy’s frame, the break from European modes of education is articulated primarily along the lines of religion and relationship to the past. He articulates the early colonial period as a period of general dissatisfaction with higher education, and attributes this dissatisfaction to a perception that higher education was impractical (i.e., oriented toward the past). Eddy articulates the break from older modes of education as a

⁹³ Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, “An Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States, North-West of the River Ohio.”

temporal transformation: in order to meet the needs of a broader swath of Americans, higher education would have to reorient itself toward the future through a valorization of practicality. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the backdrop of the precarious American nation-state positioned university construction as a site of accumulation by dispossession, which David Harvey describes as “the release of a set of assets (including labour) at very low (and in some cases zero) cost.”⁹⁴ In the context of the land-grant system, these assets took the form of nearly 11.5 million acres of land.

While Eddy emphasizes religion and practicality as structuring forces of the land-grant idea, Edmond takes a slightly different tack, attending to the elements of democratic populism that were present in the land-grant movement. He writes that “the first settlers dreamed of a new kind of education. They wanted colleges that would meet the practical needs of *all* the citizens more directly than did the institutions that stressed classical studies and training only for the learned professions of law, human medicine, and the ministry. They wanted people’s colleges that their sons *and daughters* could attend at minimum cost and that would put emphasis on research and instruction that might increase agricultural production, improve the conditions of life of *all* of the people, and support the young nation’s growing industries.”⁹⁵ In this narrative, the nation’s institutions of higher education had *failed* to meet the needs of the populace, and failed to operate as sites of representative democracy, a crisis which triggered the creation of the land-grant institutions. Edmond consistently emphasizes the inclusion of women in the land-grant institutions. Although a number of early land-grant colleges were officially coed, women made up small or nonexistent fractions of the student bodies. Rather than reflective of a meaningful

⁹⁴ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 149.

⁹⁵ J. B. Edmond, *The Magnificent Charter: The Origin and Role of the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges and Universities*, 1st ed (Exposition Press, 1978), 5.

commitment to gender equality, Edmond's emphasis on coeducation serves to rhetorically flag a democratic or progressive character that neatly feeds into the historical narrative of the land-grant system as a triumph of populist democracy.

Nevins, too, holds democracy as central to the particularities of the land-grant system. In a musing on the academic inadequacies of American research institutions when measured globally, he remarks that "American universities have been criticized on many grounds. [...] Few, however, have ever criticized the contribution our public universities have made to democracy."⁹⁶ What, precisely, Nevins means by "democracy" is obscured in his text. He writes that the land-grant system "widen[ed] the gates of opportunity, it made democracy freer, more adaptable, and more kinetic."⁹⁷ When Nevins writes of democracy, he is writing of something larger and more significant than mechanisms of representative governance, gesturing toward a complex arrangement of affect, knowledge production, land policy, and nationalism. Perhaps Nevins felt that the concept of democracy was self-evident to his readers, and that a lengthy explanation would be redundant or unnecessary. Though he explores the concept at length, in its capaciousness and abstraction "democracy" becomes a floating signifier, its invocation signaling a particular cluster of liberal values that conveniently papers over dispossession of land as a key condition of possibility for the enactment of those values. The instantiation of lofty democratic ideals is positioned alongside concrete problems regarding soil exhaustion and agricultural productivity. The land-grant system, then, is legitimized along at least two distinct axes: that of fidelity to democratic ideals, and that of practical interventions in agricultural productivity through science. Taking a cue from models of industrial education, the land-grant system was intended to harmonize

⁹⁶ Nevins, *The State Universities and Democracy*, vii.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, vi.

higher education with “the needs of a practical, growing people.”⁹⁸ In Nevins’s estimation, though excitement about scientific development, a rejection of European models of education, and plans for industrial instruction all motivated the land-grant movement, “none of these causes enlisted their feelings like the cause of greater democracy.”⁹⁹ In this instance, he uses “democracy” as a shorthand for freely and widely available public education, reflecting a predominant paradox of the time: democratic impulses were fundamentally organic and innate to man, and at the same time could not be fully realized without education. Here he comes closest to offering a comprehensive definition of democracy, and his rambling abstractions are instructive. He writes

Social and economic democracy in America means primarily liberty of action and equality of opportunity. The central idea behind the land-grant movement was that liberty and equality could not survive unless all men had full opportunity to pursue all occupations at the highest practicable level. No restrictions of class, or fortune, or sex, or geographical position—no restrictions whatsoever—should operate. The struggle for liberty when carried to its logical conclusion is always a struggle for equality, and education is the most potent weapon in this contest. Democracy implies intellectual liberty with full freedom to think, write, and speak. It implies an open society, without caste lines, giving its members full freedom to move from calling to calling, rank to rank; and a mobile society, with equal freedom to move geographically, to change environment, and to find without agonizing effort new positions or fields of enterprise.¹⁰⁰

For Nevins, freedom of movement is a central feature of democracy: the freedom to move geographically, the freedom to move between class positions, and the freedom to move between industries. There is an unnamed irony in this valuation of the freedom of movement—as the federal government was expanding its infrastructures of property formation and territorial management that, in its estimation, were necessary to facilitate and

⁹⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 17.

uphold freedom of movement for white Americans, the freedom of movement of Black and Indigenous people was being sharply constrained. This conception of settler liberty rests on a fundamental assumption of the supremacy of freedom of movement of white settlers, over the freedom of movement of Indigenous people and nations, enslaved Africans, and other racialized populations. To put it simply, the expansion of settler freedom relies on the restriction of freedom for marginalized populations. The vision of an open, democratic society that Nevins sketches rests on racialized assumptions about who counts as a person and a citizen: Black and Indigenous people are never afforded the same access to freedom that white settlers, regardless of class position, are promised.

The slippages between democracy and settler colonialism emerge, in part, from the obscured class character of the American revolution. Though the rhetoric of democracy, liberty, and equality looms large in the historical record, it must be emphasized that the American revolution was a settler revolt in a settler society, and was motivated as much by settler frustrations with the restrictions on westward expansion put in place by the British crown as it was by fealty to lofty and liberatory ideals. Freedom, in this instance, referred to the freedom to dispossess Indigenous people from their lands and the freedom to continue to enslave Africans for their labor. As historian Gerald Horne writes, “ironically, the founders of the republic have been hailed and lionized by left, right, and center for—in effect—creating the first apartheid state.”¹⁰¹ In short, American democracy is inextricable from dispossession, exploitation, and racialization, and the romantic affect that structures much of this body of secondary scholarship must be understood as participating in a project of knowledge production that naturalizes those forms of violence, cropping them out of the interpretive frame.

¹⁰¹ Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America* (New York University Press, 2014), 4.

Writing several decades prior to Nevins, Edmond, and Eddy, Ross claims that particular educational philosophies at play in the development of the land-grant colleges was less significant than the practical concerns of farmers around agricultural productivity, soil degradation, and farm economics. He writes that “the immediate concerns—political participation, social uplift, and industrial efficiency—were too pressing to allow time for the consideration of origins and philosophies.”¹⁰² His emphasis on practicality operates as a form of *agnosia*, or the production of forgetting: in framing the “immediate concerns” in opposition to “origins and philosophies,” Ross naturalizes the ideological underpinnings of the land-grant system. Philosophies of liberal freedom (reliant on particular forms of unfreedom), of the god-given right of the individual to pursue profit and of settler supremacy indelibly shaped the development of the land-grant system, but in framing its emergence in primarily practical terms Ross participates in a deterministic logic that presupposes the ascendancy of the American nation-state and obscures its conditions of possibility.

Eddy, Edmond, Nevins, and Ross perform a version of what Nick Mitchell and Abbie Boggs have termed the “crisis consensus,” described as “a mainstay of political ideology that functions with particular ardor in higher education, where it pivots on the invocation of the university as a good in itself, as an institution defined ultimately by the progressive nature at its core.”¹⁰³ In the logic of the crisis consensus, universities are able to ascribe their failures to having lost sight of their fundamental character, inequities are understood as incidental rather than fundamental to the university system, and horizons of possibility are filtered through nostalgia—what the university *could* be is only ever what it once was, a conservative theory of change. In this body of scholarship on the land-grant system, higher education prior to the

¹⁰² Ross, *Democracy's College*, 2.

¹⁰³ Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell, “Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus,” *Feminist Studies* 44, no. 2 (2018): 432–63, 434.

passage of the Morrill Act is described as failed and failing. For instance, Nevins describes American universities prior to the land-grant system as places of “incredible isolation, stagnancy, and eighteenth-century primitivism.”¹⁰⁴ Eddy describes the “limiting concepts” that dominated higher education pre 1862, and Ross emphasizes the marginality of universities as social and political institutions in the first century and a half of the United States.

In Frederick Rudolph’s *The American College and University: A History*, he parses competing tendencies in educational philosophy that were at play during the first half of the nineteenth century, differentiating between the “scholasticism” of the older institutions and a new tendency, a “philosophy of experience.”¹⁰⁵ For Rudolph, scholasticism is marked by a concern with what ought to be, methodologically organized around deduction. The new tendency that he outlines organizes itself around the experiment, an orientation which would be instrumental in the development of the laboratory method of scientific agriculture. This new tendency draws from the intellectual lineages of Newton, Locke, and Hume, and is understood as the foundation of a system of *practical* higher education. In Eddy’s periodization, this impulse toward the practical is also a feature of the move away from religious institutions, which is continuous with the impulses of the American revolution. “One of the phases of the revolution was about to take place, and one of significance to education, was the break from the hold of orthodox religion on the minds of the people. It took its most dramatic form in the emergence of a fixed belief in materialism as the credo of American life. The words *more* and *better* became the guiding symbols of men who believed that anything was possible in the new nation. Man was considered both capable and close to

¹⁰⁴ Nevins, *The State Universities and Democracy*, 1.

¹⁰⁵ Rudolph, *The American College and University*, 31.

perfect.”¹⁰⁶ It is against this backdrop of the perfectability of man that the philosophies of education shaping the land-grant system unfolded.

In tracing the conditions of possibility of the land-grant idea, Ross emphasizes continuities between the Morrill Act and the American revolution, writing that “from the winning of independence there were proposals for the national establishment and control of education as a means of safeguarding the blessings of liberty and attaining the fuller realization of the great social ideals that had inspired the revolutionary movement on both sides of the water. To both Old and New World philosophers the infant republic offered the great opportunity for a conscious promotion of the instructional function for the attainment and direction of social progress.”¹⁰⁷ The development of American higher education, then, carried all the weightiness of actualizing a set of “revolutionary” ideals. Debates over the role of the federal government in higher education were fierce, and represented attempts to reconcile ongoing contradictions between the role of the states and the federal government. Unsurprisingly, the Civil War sharpened these tensions, and fomented a particular urgency in the development of a national system of higher education. Ross views Jacksonian democracy as one of the primary forces that created public interest in affordable higher education, and clearly traces the populist impulses of the land-grant system as continuous with and responsive to the version of democracy put forth by Jackson. Ross remarks that “agitation for free schools was a natural phase of the leveling trend of the Jacksonian era; there was an unanswerable and irresistible logic in universal education for manhood suffrage.”¹⁰⁸ Ross’s emphasis on the land-grant system as emerging in response to mass agitation and desire serves rhetorically to reinforce the conception of higher education as a self-evident good.

¹⁰⁶ Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education*, 1.

¹⁰⁷ Ross, *Democracy’s College*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

Consistent with his contemporaries, Ross emphasizes the importance of the development of the physical and natural sciences, writing that “the innovation that was ultimately to work the greatest revolution in modern education was the movement to develop the natural and physical sciences as regular and coordinate subjects.”¹⁰⁹ In general terms, Ross, Nevins, Eddy, and Edmond each emphasize the transition from “classical” to “practical” education that marked the land-grant movement. “Practicality” comes to function as a floating signifier, meant to index both the anti-elitist populist tendencies of this new form of education and to suture the reproduction of the nation to particular modes of relationship to land.

Nevins, for his part, describes the “revolt against the classics”¹¹⁰ that was underway in Europe as early as the late eighteenth-century. While this revolt took a particular character in the United States, movements to reshape higher education were taking form globally. Former army commander James A. Garfield presented an address at Hiram College in 1867, presenting the results of a survey he had conducted of twenty college catalogues. In an analysis of Harvard, Garfield found that “in the whole program of study, lectures included, no mention whatever is made of physical geography, of anatomy, physiology, or the general history of the United States. A few weeks of the senior year given to Guizot, the history of the Federal Constitution, and a lecture on general history once a week during half of that year, furnish all that a graduate of Harvard is required to know of his own country, and the living nations of the earth. He must apply years of arduous labor to the history, oratory, and poetry of Greece and Rome; but he is not required to cull a single flower from the rich fields of our own literature. English literature is not named in the curriculum.”¹¹¹ In the project of reimagining higher education, as well as in the development of nationalisms, science

¹⁰⁹ Ross, *Democracy's College*, 9.

¹¹⁰ Nevins, *The State Universities and Democracy*, 3.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

occupied an outsized role as the object to which utopian and romantic impulses around democracy and citizenship were attached. The perception of science as a field of limitless possibility, a territory that was ripe for the claiming, mirrored the perception of the frontier as “terra nullius,” or empty, unoccupied land whose Indigenous inhabitants were legally, militarily, and discursively marginalized. It is no coincidence that the field of scientific agriculture and the institutional form of the agricultural college gained purchase and momentum at the same time that the frontier was closing and decades of western expansion were slowing. The precedent that was set in the Northwest Ordinance of federal rights to preemption inaugurated a new phase of territorial management that pivoted on the creation of the legal category of the public domain (i.e., state property) as a precursor to the formation of private property and the expansion of land speculation. This legal mechanism would authorize the parceling out and “granting” of land to generate the start-up capital for agricultural colleges, and improvement—of the land through scientific agriculture, of the liberal citizen-subject through education, and of the nation through institution building—would become an operative logic in the settler colonial project in the second half of the nineteenth century.

While Edmond, Eddy, Nevins, and Ross adopt a flattened-out, triumphant narration of the success of the land-grant system, there are a handful of scholars and historians who take a more critical approach to both the history and historiography of the land-grant system. Roger L. Williams, in his 1991 *The Origins of Federal Support for Higher Education*, is attentive to the romantic affect that structures much land-grant history. He writes, “considered as a whole, the work of Ross, Eddy, Nevins, and Edmond tends toward a perspective of land-grant history that is evolutionary, impersonal, deterministic, and—especially—romantic. The overriding implication of their work is that the land-grant movement was inevitable, the

colleges called into being by the educational demands of a rapidly expanding and democratizing nation.”¹¹² This deterministic historicization functions rhetorically to de-emphasize the university as a terrain of struggle, naturalize the mechanisms of settler-colonial nation-building, and obscure the ideological underpinnings of the movement. Situating these historical narratives alongside institutional archives works to destabilize the discursive power of framing the land-grant system as an inevitability; close readings of institutional archives reveal the fractures and glitches in the settler project, undermining its internal coherence.

Williams notes that the deterministic bias of land-grant historiography has gone largely unchecked. To his credit, Williams theorizes the land-grant universities as terrains of struggle, emphasizing the contestations over the role of the federal government in education as reflective of broader debates around the relationship between the federal government and the states. He notes that, “in simple, concrete terms, the [land-grant] movement is the collective story of the emergence of seventy-one colleges and universities that were predicated on an exclusive relationship with the federal government and a shared set of obligations to their respective states.”¹¹³ For Williams, alongside curricular innovations and broadened access, the significance of the land-grant movement largely lies in the role of federal support for higher education, which, he argues, became a precedent for advocating for federal support that would extend beyond the land-grant system. While Williams is to be commended for these moves toward critical historiography, these critical impulses do not extend to the perception of the innate goodness of public education. That said, his attention to the contestations that shaped the development of the land-grant system opens up a

¹¹² Roger L. Williams, *The Origins of Federal Support for Higher Education: George W. Atherton and The Land-Grant College Movement* (Penn State University Press, 1991), 2.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.

theorization of the university as a continuous and iterative terrain of struggle, rather than as a monolith.¹¹⁴ Elaborating on his earlier definition, he writes, “in more complex terms, the land-grant movement is the expression and diffusion of certain political, social, economic, and educational ideals. The motives typically attributed to the movement involve the democratization of higher education; the development of an educational system deliberately planned to meet utilitarian ends, through research and public service as well as instruction; and a desire to emphasize the emerging applied sciences, particularly agricultural science and engineering.”¹¹⁵ This definition neatly brings together distinct motives that share a common logic of improvement and practicality. In the story of the land-grant institutions that I put forward, the institutions themselves figure as sites of struggle over the meanings of freedom, citizenship, and democracy. In other words, how did the eventual structure of the land-grant colleges and universities reflect the supremacy of particular visions of freedom and citizenship at the expense of competing visions? And furthermore, how might its development be understood as a dialectical collision of distinct property regimes around labor and territory?

The development of the land-grant system occurred alongside related but distinct developments in agricultural science and the laboratory method, the latter of which would become the defining characteristic of American agricultural education. The forms that these institutions took reflected the shifting nature of American settler colonialism—a waning interest in and capacity for acquisition of land, alongside an increased prioritization of improvement, both of land and of individuals. The educative tendencies of settler colonialism, which have taken form in boarding schools, religious missionary work, and all

¹¹⁴ See: *Beyond Education*, Eli Meyerhoff; *Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus*, Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell; *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower*, Davarian L. Baldwin

¹¹⁵ Williams, *The Origins of Federal Support for Higher Education: George W. Atherton and The Land-Grant College Movement*, 1.

forms of colonial schooling, found purchase with the land-grant movement through suturing the improvement of land to the promise of upward class mobility dangled ahead of land-grant students. Educational institutions provide convenient cover to authorize the settler project, and can be understood as productive of the kind of citizen who can be materially, rhetorically, and epistemologically sutured to colonial violence. Native boarding schools are perhaps the most well-documented articulation: the logic of “kill the Indian save the man” that guided the genocidal impulses of the boarding schools resulted in horrific and ongoing violences of language and cultural eradication, as well as the conscription of a broader range of settlers (and educated Natives) into the colonial project. Land-grant institutions have persisted in part due to their capacity to narrate their project flexibly, and to cover over settler violence with ideals of liberal individualism, an educated citizenry, and democratic education; ideals which were struggled over in the crucible of the Revolutionary War and consolidated through emergent nationalisms following the Civil War.

The years surrounding the 1862 passage of the Morrill Act were marked by profound instabilities in the United States. The Civil War and its attendant expenses revealed the necessity for the federal government to be able to access capital for war-making, and the nearing horizon of the abolition of slavery was profoundly economically destabilizing and, perhaps more significantly, heightened the inherent contradictions of citizenship under racial capitalism. Historians of the land-grant movement tend to situate the land-grant idea as continuous with the individualizing impulses of the American Revolution. The formulation of the ideal citizen—the white, property-owning male—was foundational to the emergent nationalism that privileged the opportunity for the improvement of one’s social and economic position. Eddy in particular emphasizes the land-grant system as emblematic of the epistemic break from religious orthodoxy that began with the earliest colonists. If, as he argues, the

land-grants were a break both from European models of higher education and from the role of religious institutions in education, then it can be no surprise that the production of the liberal individual took on a kind of religious fervor. Eddy takes a progressive view of the production of knowledge, implicitly situating scientific knowledge and experimentation as of a higher order than pedagogies grounded in religion. A feminist, affective analysis of this shift in the dominant forms of knowledge production might instead ask how scientific knowledge functioned as an object that met or responded to the *same set of desires* as did religious education. In other words, like religion, science promised access to a universal set of principles (and attendant ethics), furnished particular social arrangements that facilitated collective inquiry and intimacy, and offered an epistemic frame less vulnerable to the limitations of man. Indeed, prior to the establishment of the agricultural college, the dissemination of agricultural knowledge took the form of the traveling agricultural fair, formally continuous with the traveling preachers that marked the religious revival of the 1830s. Agriculturalists and advocates of agricultural education did not hesitate to encode agricultural labor with moral and spiritual weight, framing the cultivation of the nation through the cultivation of land as an elevated, sacred enterprise. The construction of settler colonialism as “divinely ordained” thus minimizes and justifies any violence that may occur in the fulfillment of this sanctified project. “The supreme worth and dignity of the individual was becoming a political credo as well as a religious and democratic concept. It followed that the people should be given opportunity and means to develop their latent talents.”¹¹⁶ In short, the land-grant project contained two stated goals: to revolutionize American higher education in keeping with the principles of the American Revolution, and to expand access to higher education for poor white farmers who had been historically excluded from the university.

¹¹⁶ Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education*, 2.

Undergirding these aims are deeper, more insidious motives: to justify the mass theft of Indigenous land via investments in education as a public good, to devalue nonwhite territorial claims, and to stabilize and sanctify the liberal individual as the ideal subject at the expense of other social arrangements and relationships to land.

This refashioning of American higher education (and, more broadly, the iterative reconstitution of the American citizen) articulated itself largely through the development of science (particularly botany, soil science, and, generally, what would come to be understood as scientific agriculture). Francis Wayland, a Baptist minister and the president of Brown University from 1827 to 1855, authored a report to the governing corporation of the university in 1850 that performs an early instantiation of the crisis consensus in his analysis of the reasons for declining enrollment and funding crises in the university. He diagnoses the problem as one of impracticality, writing that “our colleges are not filled because we do not furnish the education desired by the people. We have produced an article for which the demand is diminishing. We sell it at less than cost, and the deficiency is made up by charity. We give it away; and still the demand diminishes”¹¹⁷ Wayland’s characterization of higher education as a commodity absent demand is significant in the ongoing production of the crisis consensus—crisis is understood as the failure of higher education to be a profitable and desirable commodity. This criticism of educational institutions in the first half of the nineteenth century would reverberate—in differentiating itself from Europe, the United States would break from traditional religious education, and that break was frequently narrated as a refashioning of higher education around both practicality and accessibility. In other words, universities would become objects of an optimism that placed great stake in democracy, as

¹¹⁷ Francis Wayland, *Report to the Corporation of Brown University, on Changes in the System of Collegiate Education, Read March 28, 1850* (G.H. Whitney, 1850), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000315185>, 34.

well as sites to work out the ongoing contradictions raised in the framing of the Constitution around liberal citizenship. There was an urgency in the calls for the construction of a uniquely American form of education—as sites of capital accumulation and surplus population management, universities have long served an economically stabilizing and disciplining function, and the structural reverberations of the Civil War left the nation grasping for stability.

In Eddy's narration of the land-grant institutions as a break from the hold that religious education had in the United States, he emphasizes that the development of science played a key role in the transformation of universities. He categorizes the older educational institutions as concerned primarily with the past, a rarefied, elitist set of attachments that resulted in public mistrust of higher education. At the same time that he disavows the inheritances of European educational forms, there remains an attachment to "education for the whole person." The process of institutionalizing the discipline of scientific agriculture required a discursive linkage with the liberal arts, routed through the language of improvement. In order for agricultural education to meet the needs of the American people, science must be situated in a liberal arts curriculum that would educate the whole person. It is impossible to talk about the origins of science without exploring the profound and inextricable relationship that science has had and continues to have with militarism. Although claims to firstness are contested and contestable, it is undeniable that the earliest institutions of scientific knowledge production in the United States were militaristic in character. West Point Academy narrates its 1802 establishment as the beginning of scientific education in the United States, and the field of engineering has been tangled with militarism since its inception. This entanglement would be formalized with the passage of the Morrill Act, which mandated that agricultural institutions teach military tactics and strategy—an oft-forgotten

condition of the land-grant colleges and universities. It is no accident that agriculture and militarism were formally sutured in 1862, a moment both of federal scrambling for capital to make war and of the impending abolition of slavery which would profoundly restructure the labor arrangements of American agriculture.

In the decades prior to the passage of the Morrill Act, advocates of publicly funded higher education would correctly recognize that the kinds of subjects produced by educational institutions that inherited their structure and curricula from European enlightenment were poorly suited for participation in the American settler-colonial project. A different form of education, uniquely American, would emerge as a vehicle for the production of citizens who could be reliably conscripted into the colonial project, who could be entrusted with both the engineering of war and the improvement of soil. While the form of these new educational institutions would be hotly debated for decades both prior to and after the passage of the Morrill Act, there was an emerging consensus among educational theorists of the time that practicality and utilitarianism ought to be guiding values in curricula and pedagogy. There are echoes of anxiety around populism in these proposals; declining enrollments in universities indexed potential social upheaval that the United States quite literally could not afford—the War of 1812 and the Civil War had drained federal coffers. Practical, scientific education was offered to anesthetize these latent tensions which, nonetheless, would spike in the Granger movements of the second half of the nineteenth century, movements which successfully transferred the land-grants of several states away from private, elite institutions and into institutions that more explicitly reflected populist values.¹¹⁸

In 1824, Steven Van Rensselaer, the founder of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY (arguably the first non-military engineering institution) wrote in a letter to

¹¹⁸ Nathan M. Sorber, *Land-Grant Colleges and Popular Revolt: The Origins of the Morrill Act and the Reform of Higher Education* (Cornell University press, 2018).

Reverend Samuel Blatchford that “my principal object is to qualify teachers for instructing the sons and daughters of farmers and mechanics, by lectures or otherwise, in the application of experimental chemistry, philosophy, and natural history to agriculture, domestic economy, the arts, and manufactures.”¹¹⁹ Rensselaer’s language would be echoed in the text of the 1862 Morrill Act, which called for the establishment of colleges in which “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 in the several pursuits and professions in life.”¹²⁰ The nascent field of scientific agriculture would become the grammar through which the legitimacy of educational institutions was asserted, and the field itself would emerge as a proposed “fix” for soil degradation along the eastern seaboard, an anxiety that stoked urgency amongst advocates for agricultural institutions.

The eighteenth century was marked by the devastations of imposed settler agriculture—recent research on erosion and soil degradation in the Chesapeake Bay, for instance, revealed that the rate of erosion increased by a factor of one thousand in the first hundred years following settler invasion.¹²¹ The Revolutionary War, undeniably a bourgeois revolution, was an assertion of a vision of freedom that pivoted on the racialized production of the individual citizen. Over the next century and a half, the values of the revolution and

¹¹⁹ “Stephen Van Rensselaer’s Letter to Samuel Blatchford, Nov.5, 1824 | Institute Archives and Special Collections,” accessed January 23, 2026, <https://archives.rpi.edu/institute-history/early-documents/stephen-van-rensselaers-letter-samuel-blatchford-nov5-1824>.

¹²⁰ Act of July 2, 1862 (Morrill Act), Which Established Land Grant Colleges, Public Law 37-108, Congress of the United States of America, General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11 (1862).

¹²¹ Eric W. Portenga et al., “The Current State of Post-Colonial Landscape Disturbance to the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay,” paper presented at GSA Annual Meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, USA - 2019, September 24, 2019, <https://gsa.confex.com/gsa/2019AM/webprogram/Paper332323.html>.

their enactment would be struggled over on a range of fronts, and economic precarity lent a spike of urgency to these struggles. Agriculture in general, and the discipline of scientific agriculture in particular, would become one of the grammars through which the break from Europe would be articulated and cemented. The combination of waning enrollments in colleges and universities plagued by imperiled funding and the impending crisis of declining soil health along the eastern seaboard situated the agricultural college as a possible site to resurface and resolve the contradictions around freedom and citizenship that the framers of the Constitution had attempted to work through. Massively depleted soil health threatened the agricultural production of the nation, and advocates of the time traffic in a particular rhetorical urgency around the creation of a uniquely American agricultural science, and the kinds of institutions that could house this proto-discipline. Eddy notes that the mandate of the Morrill Act to teach agricultural science ran up against immediate curricular problems, writing that “the failure to provide more agricultural science, as we know it now, was a logical one: there was no agricultural science.”¹²²

A literary analysis of the questions around agricultural science in the decades surrounding the passage of the 1862 Land-Grant Act reveals a persistent and powerful anxiety: despite the lofty ideals laid out in the framing of the Constitution, the fledgling nation was precarious, both economically and existentially. The federal government was cash poor. Despite its extensive theft of land, the mechanisms through which land became property and value extracted were relatively flimsy and often underdeveloped. The perception of limitless land that had so captured the imaginations of early colonists was flickering—although the frontier would not officially close until 1890, there had been hang-ups in the colonial project (these hang-ups are inclusive of a wide range of obstacles:

¹²² Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education*, 57.

Indigenous resistance to colonial expansion, difficult western geography like mountain ranges, militant labor organizing, and the abolition of slavery) that fomented a shift in the character of settler colonialism.

Historians ascribe this shift to a range of causes. Eddy, Edmond, Ross, and Nevins rarely, if ever, name settler colonialism outright, but they are in agreement that major economic, political, and social transformations were afoot in the decades surrounding the passage of the Morrill Act. Eddy, rather poetically, describes the land-grant system as a sleeping giant—a metonym for the nation—that is tenderly stewarded through its infancy by beneficent lawmakers. Ross takes a somewhat libidinal approach, writing of the virulent force of “latent nationality” that was awakened through the land grant project, whose manifestations were “so genuinely indigenous and practically purposed that systematic formulation was not required to justify them.”¹²³ For Nevins, form follows function: the structure of the land-grant institutions is responsive to a revolution in knowledge production. Pursuing a democratizing impulse, “the innovators now intended to put nature and things, meaning applied science and the land, into the forefront of the university scheme, thus effecting a revolution in objects and methods.”¹²⁴ Eddy categorizes the period of economic growth following the Civil War as a growth in “things,” writing that “in this strange period of ‘things,’ the occupation of Western land was completed and with it came a remarkable expansion of transportation facilities. In 1860 only 30,000 miles of railroad track had been constructed in the entire country. By 1890, when the peak had been reached, 163,000 miles of track stretched from coast to coast and connected thousands of hitherto isolated communities

¹²³ Ross, *Democracy's College*, 1.

¹²⁴ Nevins, *The State Universities and Democracy*, 12.

and states.”¹²⁵ Materiality and practicality were held as central values of this emergent educational revolution.

Ross characterizes the first half of the nineteenth century as “an era of youthful, carefree plunging and unreasoned confidence.”¹²⁶ The ascription of youthfulness might be read here as justifying racial and colonial violence, a kind of “boys will be boys”-ification of the United States, a rhetorical infantilization. From its thrashing and unreasoned infancy, the land-grant movement emerges as a sober, mature articulation of the democratic impulse. The closing of the frontier occasioned this transformation: “primitive abundance, of easy appropriation and simple organization, was giving place to settled production and capitalistic control, with consequent inequalities.”¹²⁷ Hardly a historical materialist, Ross does however locate the origins of the emergent educational philosophy in the Industrial Revolution, noting that the primarily agrarian economy of the first two centuries of the United States had not yet fully matured into capitalism. He dizzyingly condenses several decades of complex political and social history, writing: “like the other great reform efforts this ‘Industrial Movement’ passed through the emotional vagaries of the forties into the more stabilized thinking of the fifties only to be obstructed by the sectional conflict and in turn to be unnaturally accelerated by the war for the union.”¹²⁸ The fantasies of limitless Western land expansion that had animated the colonial project of the United States were faltering, racial tensions were simmering, educational institutions were marked by financial and enrollment struggles, and the secession of the southern states, among other profound instabilities, revealed the limits of established infrastructures of value-extraction as well as the ramifications of a lack of formalized military training. Thousands of farmers had enlisted, resulting in both a

¹²⁵ Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education*, 46.

¹²⁶ Ross, *Democracy's College*, 14.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

poorly-trained army and a sharp dip in agricultural output. Edmond notes that while the enlistment of farmers posed some problems to Northern agriculture, it was able to remain productive largely due to the introduction of technologies like “horse-drawn machines, reapers, mowers, cultivators, rakes, and seed-drills.”¹²⁹ These technological developments became objects of optimism around both agricultural productivity and around the forms of national knowledge production, an optimism that was reflected in the Morrill Act’s curricular mandates to agricultural and military education.

The most significant change in the text of the Land-Grant Act between the version that was vetoed by Buchanan in 1859 and the version that was signed by Lincoln in 1862 is the inclusion of the mandate that land-grant institutions teach military tactics and strategy. Eddy ruminates extensively on the military failures that led to this development:

The lessons of the Civil War had been bitter. The lack of Northern military knowledge, experience, and leadership had been astounding. Few were fit to become officers, and the troops were to suffer from incompetence and inexperience. The “educated soldier” was needed badly. Those who had experience were not educated; those who were educated had no experience. The nation was possessed of neither the funds nor the philosophy to support a large standing army. Morrill’s plan was intended to fill the gap without creating the cost or violating the tradition. He called it “military schooling” for those whose principal occupation would be to serve the peaceful arts. Should the need arise again, the kind of tragedy which the North had experienced might be averted.¹³⁰

For Eddy and historians of his ilk, the century following the Revolutionary War was a period of time in which the nation was struggling to enact its founding ideals through institution-building, war-making, and the development of the (still primarily agricultural, but increasingly industrial) economy. Not quite from its inception, but from its passage, the Land-Grant Act explicitly understood the promotion of agricultural education as crucial to

¹²⁹ Edmond, *The Magnificent Charter*, 25.

¹³⁰ Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education*, 41.

both the economic and military stability of the nation. I argue that what Eddy characterizes as a “period of things” marks a shift in the character of American colonialism, a shift that reconstitutes the colonial project around the logic of improvement rather than the logic of acquisition.

As is common in settler colonial societies, improvement has been a guiding social, economic, and political value for the United States project, which has echoed through Protestant religious ethics and a capitalist economic system that extracts value from the mixing of land and labor, and in the American creedal story as theorized by Aziz Rana.¹³¹ As the United States faced a looming economic crisis following the Civil War, improvement gained discursive traction as a mechanism through which value could be extracted from land. The conversion of land into property is no simple process—it requires an infrastructure of social relations through which value can be extracted; social relations which are produced and upheld by a rights-based legal framework that privileges the propertied individual. These social relations do not emerge organically, and their ethical value is necessarily self-evident. In the following chapter, I dive more deeply into the institutional histories of land-grant colleges. I take up surviving documentation of treaty negotiations, land surveys, and maps in the early half of the nineteenth century to provide a glimpse into the instability and precarity of the production of property. Stories of lost surveyors abound, the maps of unincorporated territory are all over the place, and land cessions, when they’re documented at all, are marked by coercions, violence, and manipulations.

¹³¹ Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

Chapter 1: The Institution

On Commemoration

On July 2, 2012, one hundred and fifty years after the signing of the Morrill Act, the White House released a short statement acknowledging the sesquicentennial of the land-grant system.¹³² That same month, Congress passed a resolution celebrating the anniversary.¹³³ Each statement is laudatory, framing the significance of the Morrill Act in terms of the strength of the nation. The statement from the White House is short, a mere three paragraphs, and emphasizes that the land-grant system has “helped generations of Americans lead richer, more productive lives.” The statement concludes with the following charge: “As we commemorate this historic anniversary, let us reaffirm our support for these institutions of higher learning that help America fulfill its great promise as a Nation.”¹³⁴ Both the statement from the White House and the congressional resolution affirm the centrality of public education to the nation’s productivity and security, concretizing the story that the land-grant movement represents a triumph of democratic ideals articulated by the framers of the Constitution. Unsurprisingly, neither statement mentions Native peoples or the process through which land became designated as “public.”

The objects that I take up in this chapter include materials from institutional archives, biographies of founders, and particular legislative and policy documents. In arranging these objects, I am telling a story. I do not pretend that this story is complete or comprehensive, or that the histories I surface are representative. There are risks in any mode of storytelling: choices are always made regarding inclusion or exclusion. As Lauren Berlant writes, “the

¹³² The White House, “Morrill Act 150th Anniversary, President’s Message,” Washington, July 2, 2012.

¹³³ A Resolution Celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the Signing of the First Morrill Act., 502, Senate 112th Congress (2012), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/112th-congress/senate-resolution/502/text>.

¹³⁴ The White House, “Morrill Act 150th Anniversary, President’s Message.”

origin story does not disturb a problem's intelligibility or reproduction."¹³⁵ Surfacing the intricacies of colonial dispossession does not inherently or necessarily disrupt that dispossession. The political grammars at play in various modes of storytelling has long been a concern of feminist theory, and scholars like Clare Hemmings, Robyn Wiegman, and Joan Wallach Scott have worked to make visible the implicit logics that structure particular forms of narrative production. Hemmings and others have correctly identified the prevalence of loss narratives in feminist theory—the rhetorical framing of feminism as always having lost its political potency—but there remains much work to do in approaching disciplines other than feminist theory through the lens of narrative production. This chapter offers a modest incursion into this work by tracing the discursive forms that structure the history of the land-grant college system and scientific agriculture, a realm where feminist methods have scarcely been applied. As Hemmings writes, “how feminists tell stories matters in part because of the ways in which they intersect with wider institutionalizations of gendered meaning.”¹³⁶ I would submit that the matter of stories lies not only in their intersections with gendered meaning, but more broadly in their intersections with power generally. As such, my approach to archival research takes seriously that archives themselves are both emergent *from* and productive *of* particular arrangements of systemic power. In other words, the archive itself contains an immanent critique of its conditions of possibility. Recognizing these entanglements with structural power requires not only reading the archive against the grain (for what might be missing, erased, or hidden), but also reading the archive *with* the grain¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Lauren Gail Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Duke University Press, 2022), 154.

¹³⁶ Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies (Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

¹³⁷ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2009).

to surface the structuring logics that become naturalized through institutional forms of knowledge production.

These methodological commitments support a theorization of the colonial university as engaged simultaneously in processes of knowledge production and processes of forgetting. In their 2016 introduction to a special issue of *Theory & Event* on colonial unknowing, Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hue Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein explore the concept of *agnosia*—or the production of forgetting—as a central feature of colonial institutions,¹³⁸ a feature that determines what is and can be thinkable, reasonable, and naturalized. Crucially, they emphasize that colonial unknowing is not simply a matter of a forgotten history or hidden past, but that unknowing is consistently and forcefully produced and reproduced. While their analysis is not particular to specific colonial institutions, but rather articulates a constitutive feature of colonialism itself, for the purposes of this chapter I focus the concept of agnosia on the land-grant system to theorize the production of forgetting as a central condition of possibility for knowledge production in the American university. The continuous reproduction of forgetting mirrors the continuous process of dispossessive accumulation. The purpose here is not to fill in the absences in the archive, but to investigate the conditions through which these absences are produced. In the following sections, I offer provisional sketches of the formative years of two land-grant institutions, Michigan State University and Pennsylvania State University. These sketches make visible the contested nature of institutional history and the mechanisms through which originary conditions of violence are cropped out of university self-narration.

Close readings of any number of land-grant colleges would open up powerful lines of inquiry into the mechanisms of land dispossession and knowledge production that I concern

¹³⁸ Manu Vimalassery et al., “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016), <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/633283>.

myself with.¹³⁹ I focus here on two institutions: Michigan State University (originally Michigan Agricultural College) and Pennsylvania State University (originally Farmers' High School)—each of which claims to have been the “model” for the Morrill Act, and each of which was an operational agricultural college prior to 1862. Historian Roger L. Williams writes that “the two attempts to establish agricultural colleges that were durably successful occurred almost simultaneously in Michigan and Pennsylvania, with the acts of incorporation for each being signed in February 1855.”¹⁴⁰ In this analysis I situate Michigan Agricultural College and Pennsylvania State College not as representative case studies but as sites of dense narrative production. Land-grant institutions are engaged in a dialectical tension around the production of their own histories. Even as they garner legitimacy through their identification with the larger land-grant system, they must simultaneously self-exceptionalize to compete for enrollments and research funding. Examining the production and proliferation of mutually exclusive histories of land-grant institutions meaningfully undercuts the historical determinism performed by many of the texts themselves, and situates this inquiry in a lineage of scholarship that foregrounds the materiality of knowledge production. Rather than elaborating on these differentiating features, I work to emphasize structural and discursive continuities and parallels between institutions. Foregrounding continuities across institutions opens up a theorization of the inherent coloniality in American higher education, emphasizing that Indigenous dispossession and settler land theft were constitutive features of the project, rather than exceptional or extant instances.

¹³⁹ The Maryland Agricultural College was chartered in 1856 and opened for instruction in 1859, but, by all accounts, never actually provided agricultural education; the Iowa legislature appropriated \$10,000 and formed a board of trustees for an agricultural college in 1858, but the institution didn't open until 1869; Yale established a professorship in agriculture in 1846; and the University of Georgia founded an agricultural college in 1859 that did not exist in practice until 1879.

¹⁴⁰ Roger L. Williams, *Evan Pugh's Penn State: America's Model Agricultural College*, 1st ed (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 52.

Perhaps counterintuitively, this chapter begins with an examination of genres of commemoration and memorialization around the land-grant system, attending in particular to what I refer to as an affect of “feeling institutional.” Commemorative objects are meant to be affectively evoking—to produce particular feelings about the institution. The attendant affects that circulate around feeling institutional are nostalgia, sentimentality, triumph, pride, collectivity, and a form of attachment that most closely mirrors the familial. Genres of commemoration and memorialization bring a distinct cadence of history into the frame—the retrospective—that stabilizes a logic of historical determinism through a consolidated structure of feeling. I read for affect: how are these objects meant to make one *feel* about the institution? And what are the stakes of those particular structures of feeling? What are their modes of production, and, more specifically, how does the production of a certain set of institutional affects foreclose particular epistemological approaches? In other words, what becomes unthinkable when one feels a certain way about an institution? I position the university as an intermediary structure of social organization that lies in between the family and the state (both in terms of the sequencing of attachment and in terms of size). The affects that structure these commemorative materials share commonalities with both the familial and the nationalistic, prompting me to inquire into how the production and reproduction of what I call “feeling institutional” might be understood as a rehearsal or a staging of nationalism. Taking a cue from Michel Rolph-Trouillot, I inquire into the bundles of silence that are constitutive of commemoration, asking what gets erased from the frame when triumphant nostalgia structures the story.¹⁴¹ With an eye toward these silences and their modes of production, I read these commemorative activities as an index of the consolidation of narratives of institutional history that situate public higher education as an inherent good, and

¹⁴¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing The Past: Power And The Production Of History* (Beacon Press, 1995).

how this flattening out of contestation and struggle, experiment and failure, functions to discursively naturalize modes of violence at the heart of university construction.

Alongside small handfuls of scholarly works, much of institutionally-produced university history can be found in a particular genre of coffee table book found in university bookstores and on the desks of adults who identify too strongly with their undergraduate institutions. They have bombastic titles like *The Spirit of Michigan State: America's Pioneer Land-Grant University: Leader in Democratizing Higher Education*¹⁴² and *The College of Agriculture at Penn State: A Tradition of Excellence*.¹⁴³ They contain mostly glossy photographs. They open with a flowery and derivative preface by a president or a provost or a trustee. I buy them on eBay for cheap and I wonder about who is spending \$49.95 on a coffee table book about a university. I wonder where the authors access funding. I wonder about the market for these texts and their modes of production.

I am less interested in representing the precise taxonomies or categorizations that historians parse out to make sense of the history of higher education and more interested in what an attachment to and reproduction of those taxonomies can *do*, both narratively and materially, at the scale of the individual student, the institution, and the American settler project and attendant nationalisms. Which forms of knowledge and institutional arrangements do they elevate, and which do they foreclose? At the expense of what worlds are certain imaginaries forced into materiality? I am uninterested in litigating competing claims of firstness and exceptionality, but profoundly interested in who has a stake in that litigation. In other words, though the coffee table book histories are not particularly compelling as scholarly texts (cloying heaps of praise onto evidently unremarkable men and the glittery

¹⁴² J. Bruce McCristal, *The Spirit of Michigan State*, 1st ed (J. Bruce McCristal, 2004).

¹⁴³ Michael Bezilla, *The College of Agriculture at Penn State: A Tradition of Excellence* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

veneer of marketing teams who have approved every word obscure any substantial or critical engagement with texts or archives), their function as a literary genre crucially indicates the role of narrative production in the construction and reproduction of land-grant institutions. They *matter* in the sense that the production of narrative surrounding American higher education has been so dense and pervasive that the experiential geography of the university is endlessly and recursively filtered through the memorialization, self-narration, and nostalgic history that constitute institutional reproduction.

Coffee table book histories, campus recruitment materials, and commemorative activities comprise dominant narratives of the land-grant institutions that circulate generally in the public, rather than the academic, sphere. Their function is not historical accuracy, *per se*, but institutional reproduction. They are not precisely a form of knowledge production, but can be usefully read as productive of affect. In the preface to McCristal's *The Spirit of Michigan State*, he curiously frames the decision to write this book as a "compulsion," explaining that he "felt compelled to tell the marvelous story of Michigan State University in a comprehensive way because I didn't believe the many achievements and traditions of the university, its alumni, faculty, and students had been pulled together in one place."¹⁴⁴ The gesture toward the libidinal, the compulsive, is revealing: for McCristal, Michigan State University is not just a university, it is the site of dense and consolidated affect and attachment. McCristal goes on to elaborate his family history in East Lansing, and his early childhood memories of wandering the campus with his father. As the child of MSU faculty, McCristal's relationship to the university is inextricable from his relationship to his family, and to hear him tell it, the process of his own self-formation occurred consistently against the backdrop of and in relation to the university. The family is a recurring motif: early childhood

¹⁴⁴ McCristal, *The Spirit of Michigan State*, ix.

memories on the campus with his parents, the bonds he developed with his fraternity “brothers” while a student at MSU, various faculty members who served as surrogate parent figures. The preface is peppered with reproductions of family photographs. Though McCristal is, on the surface, offering an institutional history, he confesses from the jump that this history emerges from the intricacies and intimacies of familial relationships. This is not a critical or disinterested history, it is a “compulsion,” and takes pains to emphasize, rather than crop out, the relations of intimate attachment that drive the compulsion.

Following its cloyingly sentimental preface, *The Spirit of Michigan State* opens with what McCristal terms “A Sesquicentennial Salute: One Hundred-Fifty Highlights of Michigan State History.” McCristal has collected one hundred and fifty factoids, including things like “MSU was the first land-grant college in America, and the model for all others,”¹⁴⁵ “‘Firsts’ are an MSU tradition,”¹⁴⁶ and “MSU was the national leader in formalizing student volunteerism in 1962.”¹⁴⁷ The veracity of these factoids is not the point. It hardly matters that the identification of the “first” land-grant institution is a continuously thorny question with no general scholarly consensus. This litany of facts is meant to convey, in short order, the institutional legitimacy of Michigan State through a logic of self-exceptionalization and the production of feeling institutional. In the year-by-year timeline of the university that makes up the bulk of the text, there are two consistent narrative features that bear mention: crisis and firstness. Many of the events that McCristal chooses to include in the timeline are either crises—“1858: College Broke, Survival in Question,”¹⁴⁸ “1863: College Existence Threatened Again,”¹⁴⁹ and “1867: Appropriations Shortfall; Another Closing Threat.”¹⁵⁰—or

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., xvi.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., xvii.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., xviii.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 18.

firsts—“1863: School’s First War Death,”¹⁵¹ “1872: First Outreach and Ozone Observations,”¹⁵² and “1875: First Farmers’ Institutes Proposed.”¹⁵³ The coherence of these moments of vulnerability and moments of triumph, their particular arrangement and sequencing, is perhaps what McCristal means when he refers to the “spirit” of Michigan State: a sense of the university as a determined underdog, bootstrapping on the institutional scale. Not only does this story of success in the face of adversity confer a layer of legitimacy on the university, it also conveniently hedges against a consideration of the violences tangled up in the establishment of the university. The logic goes something like this: Michigan State University couldn’t possibly be a perpetrator of violent dispossession, for look, here, at all the existential threats it faced in its early years. For a text so preoccupied with firsts, you might think that it would occur to McCristal to wonder who first owned the land that the campus is on, or to consider the first treaty cession, but given that he has already told us at length of his intimate attachment to the university, he is unlikely to take up histories that might threaten the benevolence of his institutional patriarch. As a structure of social organization and object of attachment, the university lies in between the family and the nation in terms of scale. Following Berlant’s insight that “the juridical object and the intimate object were more similar than they were different,”¹⁵⁴ we might read these genres of commemoration and memorialization for what lies under the surface, how universities produce forms of intimacy and attachment that are felt with such intensity that they render a more critical relationship with the university as an object of study unthinkable.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁵² Ibid., 20.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁵⁴ Lauren Berlant, “On Citizenship And Optimism: Lauren Berlant, Interviewed by David Seitz,” interview by David Seitz, *Society and Space*, March 23, 2013, <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/on-citizenship-and-optimism>.

Michigan State University boasts not one but *two* hefty coffee table books on its institutional history (each available new for the low price of \$49.95). Keith R. Widder's *Michigan Agricultural College: The Evolution of a Land-Grant Philosophy 1855-1925* was published in 2005, a year after McCristal's text, and was published as part of a series of sesquicentennial exercises that took place at Michigan State in 2005.¹⁵⁵ Widder's text takes a more disinterested, historical position than does McCristal's. There are no family photographs in this tome, the book features a significantly more comprehensive bibliography, and is generally closer in form to scholarly texts than to commemorative materials. Widder develops an argument: Michigan Agricultural College must rightly be understood as the model land-grant university. As is common with this genre of institutional history, Widder's evidence for this contention is an exhaustive and in-the-weeds five hundred page examination of the specificities of Michigan Agricultural College that is siloed from any kind of comparative analysis of competing claims to firstness made at other institutions. Again, I want to emphasize that the veracity of these claims is not what matters most here; rather, it is their consistency and proliferation across contexts that warrants attention.

Penn State Historian Michael Bezilla may also have had a compulsion, though he is less forthcoming about this than McCristal. Between 1981 and 1987, Bezilla published three books on the history of Pennsylvania State University, each one larger than the last not only in page count but also in physical dimension: the final of the three is an almost comically enormous coffee table book that feels foolish to carry around in public. The first book, published in 1981, *Engineering at Penn State: a Century in the Land-Grant Tradition*, was part of a commissioned research project by the Penn State Engineering Society, and is a normal-sized book that aimed to correct the historical record regarding the importance of

¹⁵⁵ Keith R. Widder, *Michigan Agricultural College: The Evolution of a Land-Grant Philosophy, 1855-1925* (Michigan State University Press, 2005).

engineering at Penn State to the overall success of the institution and situate it in a broader context of shifting agricultural and industrial education.¹⁵⁶ In his preface, Bezilla emphasizes that “I have not hesitated to lay bare the weaknesses of the College of Engineering and its leaders and have been allowed the utmost freedom to do so by the project’s sponsors.”¹⁵⁷ Despite this commitment, Bezilla’s critical eye extends only to the university itself, not to its broader conditions of possibility, which buttresses a story about Penn State that, while occasionally critical of the institution, takes as self-evident the inherent goodness/progressive character of both education and science. Critiques of the College of Engineering frequently take the form of the college’s failure to perform fidelity to the land-grant ideals, leaving the ideals themselves unconsidered.

Bezilla’s second book, *Penn State, an Illustrated History*, was published in 1985 and is larger than the first, printed on heavyweight glossy paper with an embossed dust jacket.¹⁵⁸ *Engineering Education at Penn State* retailed for \$16.95, and though *Penn State, an Illustrated History* is no longer in print, it’s rare to find a copy from a used bookseller for less than \$45. Despite its physical appearance, Bezilla reiterates his position that he is committed to historical rigor, writing in the preface that “histories of colleges and universities are frequently written to celebrate a centennial or some other milestone in the life of the institution. This history of The Pennsylvania State University was commissioned to guide and to inform, rather than to commemorate.” He emphasizes that his access to materials and information has in no way been restricted, and that there was not “at any time pressure exerted on me to show the institution or individuals connected with it in a favorable light or,

¹⁵⁶ Michael Bezilla, *Engineering Education at Penn State: A Century in the Land-Grant Tradition* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981).

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁵⁸ Michael Bezilla, *Penn State, An Illustrated History* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985).

conversely, to avoid discussing topics that might reflect unfavorably on the University.”¹⁵⁹ If Bezilla insists that he is not doing commemorative work, why consider these texts in this section on commemoration and memorialization? The first answer is that each of these publications was commissioned by a branch of the university, funded by the institution, published by the University of Pennsylvania Press, and included as keystone texts in university history. Bezilla’s lack of institutional friction in the process of producing these works might not signal freedom and tolerance on the part of the university, but rather might indicate Bezilla’s political and methodological alignments with the university. We might ask: what kind of historical work might have been met with resistance from the institution?

Bezilla’s insistence that he is producing historical scholarship, not commemoration, sets him up as a very effective and convincing propagandist. He easily reproduces institutional narratives that take the progressive character of the university as self-evident, explicitly articulating a critical position in order to foreclose deeper and more rigorous engagement with institutional history. Bezilla’s third (and largest) book, *The College of Agriculture at Penn State: A Tradition of Excellence*, is closest in form and structure to Widder’s *Michigan Agricultural College*—nominally rigorous with a robust citational practice, but clearly a commemorative object. This last text does not feature a disclaimer by the author about his methods or the influence of the university on the production of his work.

These weighty coffee table books from Michigan State and Penn State are unavoidably physical objects in ways that many of my other points of consideration in this research have not been. They are unwieldy, produced to evoke a feeling of gravitas. They are expensive, frequently not digitized, and difficult to find used. Engaging with these objects is qualitatively different from the feeling of carefully picking up a sheet of paper that seems to

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., xi.

be wearing right away out of an archival folder. Several times I use the coffee table books to squash invasive spotted lanternflies in my yard. At one point I accidentally drop Bezilla's largest book on my foot. It draws blood and my ankle swells up to twice its normal size. It's almost certainly an oversimplification to claim that the weight and heft of a book corresponds directly to its capacity to function propagandistically, but it is true that Bezilla's publication record reflects that correspondence. The physical character of these books, the space they take up, the resources they require, *matters* in my examination of infrastructures of knowledge production. Feeling institutional can go a long way toward stabilizing a materially precarious institution, and these texts can be understood as attempts to hedge against certain kinds of institutional vulnerabilities. Feeling institutional, the concentration of that affect, is not a sufficient resource to keep the lights on and the workers paid in a university—but it is a resource nonetheless. If the affect of institutionality is a resource that the university can accumulate toward self-stabilization, these texts are speculative investments in that affective accumulation.

In 1962, the centennial of the Morrill Act, land-grant institutions across the country kicked off a year of commemorative exercises. The land-grant centennial was also the United States Department of Agriculture's centennial, and in advance of the anniversary, President Kennedy issued a proclamation in September of 1961 stating that 1962 would be the "United States Department of Agriculture Centennial Year," and requested that "in its centennial observances, the Department of Agriculture cooperate with the land-grant universities and colleges in recognition of a century of mutually beneficial cooperative relationships."¹⁶⁰ The proclamation emphasizes the role of the land-grant system in both agriculture and the military, writing that "the land-grant system of higher education is the Nation's largest single

¹⁶⁰ Centennial of the Establishment of the National System of Land-Grant Universities and Colleges, Pub. L. No. Proclamation 3426 (1961).

source of trained and educated manpower and now contributes more than one-half of the Nation's trained scientists and nearly one-half of all Regular and Reserve officers entering the armed forces through the military programs conducted at civilian institutions."¹⁶¹ Importantly, the significance of the land-grant system is articulated primarily through its function as a pool of labor (both agriculture and military) that can be readily tapped. The United States Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Land Management published a pamphlet titled, simply, "The Land-Grant Colleges Centennial: 1862-1962." The pamphlet opens with a consideration of the other significant anniversaries that the Bureau of Land Management observed in 1962, including the Homestead Act, the establishment of the General Land Office, and the centennial of the Transcontinental Railroad Act. The pamphlet participates in the narrative logic of crisis-triumph-crisis-triumph that structures much of these commemorative materials.¹⁶² In his introduction to the pamphlet, Kennedy writes that "even as the Nation trembled on the brink of destruction, the vast lands of the American West were open to final settlement. A new America of unbound abundance began to grow and the most ambitious and fruitful system of higher education in the history of the world was developed."¹⁶³ In this story, the land-grant system wasn't just a site of the expansion of democracy, it *saved* the nation. The authors of the pamphlet celebrate that the land-grant schools "stand as a living and ever growing endowment from the great public domain."¹⁶⁴ There are multiple layers of obfuscation in this statement—the "great public domain" evokes a sense of vast, untapped available resources, and papers over both the material process through which land became classified as "public" (i.e. state) property, and the protracted

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² See: Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell, "Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus," *Feminist Studies* 44, no. 2 (2018): 432–63.

¹⁶³ Centennial of the Establishment of the National System of Land-Grant Universities and Colleges.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

forms of Indigenous resistance to this process. Also of note is the emphasis on perpetual accumulation. The Morrill Act was not merely a one-time injection of start-up capital for the creation of universities, it set up the mechanisms through which the lands that were “parceled” out could continue to generate wealth for the universities. The “gift that keeps on giving,” as it were.¹⁶⁵ The pamphlet puts it quite straightforwardly: “a century ago the United States Congress created a perpetual educational trust out of the public domain.”¹⁶⁶ If the benefits to the nation are perpetual, then so too are the legislation’s dispossessive impacts.

In advance of the centennial, the Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (which opened an office in Washington DC in 1945) published a checklist for the national centennial celebrations and the events that would be organized. This was no small undertaking. The association would serve as the central hub for the coordination of centennial activities across the country, publishing a regularly updated report of centennial events as reported by the state centennial committees. They published a 52-page report (titled “Centennial Year—a Program in Progress” that was sold for \$2.50 per ten copies. They organized a lecture series that featured international scholars and students. They published a 44-page “Land Grant Fact Book” (available from the Centennial office for \$2 without a cover or \$3 with). They published a book excerpt by Edward Danforth Eddy Jr. and printed Earle D. Ross’s *Colleges for Our Land and Times*. In collaboration with Alice Songe of the Library of Congress, they developed a comprehensive bibliography of the land-grant movement. The section on the historical background of the land-grant system also included publications of Mary Turner Carriel’s *The Life of Jonathan Baldwin Turner*, reproductions of Justin Morrill’s papers, and a series of essays out of the University of Arizona on “The Spirit of the Land

¹⁶⁵ Elizabeth A. Mack and Kevin Stolarick, “The Gift That Keeps on Giving: Land-Grant Universities and Regional Prosperity,” *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 32, no. 3 (2014): 384–404, <https://doi.org/10.1068/c11164r>.

¹⁶⁶ United States Department of the Interior, “The Land Grant Colleges Centennial: 1862-1962.”

Grant Institutions.”¹⁶⁷ Beyond just publications, the association organized lectures and conferences, most significantly the Centennial Convocation in Kansas City, Missouri from November 12-16, 1961, the AFL-CIO Centennial Conference on Equal Opportunity for Higher Education from January 4-5, 1962, and the Centennial Conference on Educational Institutions and International Labor at Michigan State University from March 25-30, 1962.

Although they operate in a different register than the coffee table books, the centennial materials from 1961 and 1962 also produce an institutional structure of feeling. The centennial was meant to evoke nostalgia, certainly, but also a feeling of triumph and recommitment to the vision of the land-grant movement, and a sense of collectivity. The centennial was a rare moment in the hagiography of the land-grant system in which the system itself is recognized and taken as a whole, rather than individual institutions scrabbling to self-differentiate. Crucially, this commemorative form of knowledge production was meant to secure affective investments in the institution and its promises, to reaffirm the value and viability of the project of public higher education. Commemoration requires a kind of historical smoothing, a flattening out of inconvenient histories, and then pivots on an affective justification for the consequent erasures. *Don't ruin the party*, is the message.

The genres of commemoration that I have explored in this section indicate two important structural features of the land-grant university. First, they reveal a continuous process of the production and accumulation of affect (specifically the affect of feeling institutional) as a strategy to secure material security. This affective accumulation can be understood as part of the speculative character of these institutions: what structures of feeling can stabilize an institution through moments of crisis? Second, the frequency and forcefulness

¹⁶⁷ Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, *Checklist; Land-Grant Centennial Materials*, (Washington DC), 1962, Land Grant Centennial Collection, University of Pennsylvania Archives.

with which commemorative activities were taken up indicate that, contrary to the narratives that these materials espouse, the system itself might be far more precarious than it appears to be. Narrative production, knowledge production, and the production of affect take *work*, and that work is a constitutive feature of institutional reproduction.

Who's Your (Land-Grant) Daddy?

There are two distinct but related originary lineages that are present in the hagiography of the land-grant system: the “institutional model,” and the “father of the idea.” At the same time that land-grant institutions themselves are engaged in narrative production that serves to emphasize their exceptionality through laying claims to originality, there was a series of fierce debates over who was the true father of the land-grant system. Supporters of Jonathan Baldwin Turner, an Illinois-based agriculturalist and abolitionist, argued that Morrill had claimed stolen valor and that Turner was the true visionary behind the land-grant system. In 1910, the fifth president of the University of Illinois, Edmund J. James, authored a short paper with a long title: *The Origin of the Land Grant Act of 1862 (The so-called Morrill Act) and Some Account of its Author Jonathan B. Turner*.¹⁶⁸ James is single-minded in his attempt to correct the historical record: Illinois farmer and professor Jonathan B. Turner, not Vermont legislator Justin S. Morrill, deserved the credit for the land-grant idea. He argues that Turner and his tireless efforts of agitation through Illinois agricultural societies have been unfairly cropped out of the historical narrative. James’s defensive fervor is illustrative of the stakes of the production of institutional history—although he is catty and snide, James is also a skilled and strategic capitalist who grew the endowment of the University of Illinois by a factor of seven during his tenure as president from 1904-1920. It would be naive to assume that James

¹⁶⁸ Edmund James, *The Origin of the Land Grant Act of 1862 (The so-Called Morrill Act) and Some Account of Its Author Jonathan B. Turner* (University of Illinois, 1910).

is not familiar with the role of the production of narrative and the commemoration of history as methods of capital accumulation and institutional reproduction of universities. In other words, claims to firstness, individuality, and exceptionality *matter* in the arrangement and distribution of resources and capital.

James sketches a characterization of Justin Morrill as a savvy politician with loose morals and shoddy citational practices. He argues that, though Morrill had a handful of useful ideas about industrial and agricultural education, the particular form of the land-grant system has its uncontested origin point in a proposal put forth to Congress by the Illinois legislature in 1853, and that given the enormous return on investment that the land-grant system had already generated by 1909, it would be materially advantageous for the University of Illinois to claim a more central role in its history and development. As the president of the University of Illinois, James had a clear stake in this debate, though other historians have generally dismissed competing authorial claims. Morrill biographer William Belmont Parker writes that “it was not until after the supplementary act of 1890 had increased their resources and put their permanence and prosperity beyond peradventure that claimants arose to divide with Morrill the honors of his achievement. Then, when the land-grant colleges were numerous and strong, some of them rich and crowded with students, there awoke a desire to share the glory of calling them into being.”¹⁶⁹ In a 1938 article on the history of the land-grant system, historian Earle D. Ross echoes Parker’s sentiment, writing that “there is no more conclusive evidence of the secure establishment and wide approval of a law or of an institution than an active and prolonged dispute as to authorship and origin. [...] It is indeed a rare tribute to the success of the land-grant college, in popular estimation no less than in professional judgment, that, since the full establishment in the first decade of the present century, there should have

¹⁶⁹ William Belmont Parker, *The Life and Public Services of Justin Smith Morrill* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), 272-73.

arisen a rather heated controversy among leading educators regarding the institution's true paternity."¹⁷⁰ In other words, the stakes of narrative production correspond more or less directly to the profitability of the land-grant system.

Similar institutional claims to firstness exist throughout the land-grant system. A webpage devoted to the land-grant history at Michigan State University (predictably hosted by the "university communications and marketing brand studio"), notes that "founded in 1855 as the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan, Michigan State University was the nation's first agricultural college and the vanguard for a national movement to make useful advanced education available to a broad public."¹⁷¹ The University of Georgia exceptionalizes itself as "the first state-chartered university in the country in 1785."¹⁷² Archival research conducted at Michigan State University, the University of Georgia, the University of Maryland, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Minnesota all revealed the range of originary claims attached to particular universities—from identifying as the "model" for the land-grant system to claiming a "father" of agricultural education to enumerating curricular innovations. As mentioned earlier, the stakes of these narrative formations are material and have to do with resource and funding allocations. They also reflect a burgeoning corporate model of higher education under which specific institutions must stylize themselves as a unique product that the student-as-consumer can purchase. I raise this particular instance of authorial contestation to point out both the material importance of narrative production and the throughline of property logic that persistently structures originary claims. Debates over the true "father" of the land-grant system reflect and rehearse the property relation through

¹⁷⁰ Ross, *Democracy's College*, 151.

¹⁷¹ "History & Land-Grant Identity | MSU Brand Studio," Michigan State University, accessed January 27, 2026, <https://brand.msu.edu/storytelling/msu-history>.

¹⁷² "University of Georgia History," *UGA Public Service and Outreach*, August 28, 2008, <https://outreach.uga.edu/about/history/>.

the social formation of the nuclear family—the “child,” it is implied, is the property of the “father.”

Michigan Agricultural College

General Lewis Cass was not one of the fathers of the land-grant system. In fact, he was the sort of man that any liberal or progressive worth their salt would consciously disidentify with. A slaveholder, one-time presidential candidate, flaming racist, Secretary of War under Andrew Jackson, and staunch advocate of the doctrine of popular sovereignty, Cass was responsible for negotiating the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw, which “ceded” approximately four million acres of land from the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples. Though he scarcely registers in the normative histories of the land-grant system, Michigan Agricultural College (and, according to the institution’s self-narration, the land-grant system as a whole) would not exist without the violent and coercive land cessions that Cass facilitated across Michigan. Cass was not a good faith negotiator. He had served as the governor of the Michigan territory from 1812 to 1831, and had been Andrew Jackson’s Secretary of War, enacting and advocating for some of the most violent and genocidal policies of removal in the nation. As he prepared for the treaty council at Saginaw, Cass realized that the federal government had not paid their annuities from the 1807 Treaty of Detroit. Anticipating the tensions that this would exacerbate, Cass took out a loan from a Detroit bank to cover the debt in advance of the negotiations. Ojibwe scholar Michael Witgen reflects that the presence of some 4,000 Anishinaabeg (approximately half of the settler population of the Michigan territory at the time) at Saginaw was a visible display of Indigenous resistance to colonial incursion. Witgen writes that, “in Ohio, when he [Cass] pressed Native peoples to cede land, they could feel the presence of a settler population of

approximately two hundred thousand people and easily imagine losing their land, without compensation, to squatters. At this council, it was the American delegation that must have felt surrounded and in danger of losing their land or lives to their Indigenous neighbors.”¹⁷³ Cass began the negotiations with a dehumanizing, paternalist tone, attempting to convince the Anishinaabeg in attendance of their own lack of humanity, insisting that confining themselves to reservations was in their own best interest. Three men, Ogamawkeketo, Giishako, and Mishenenanonequet, had been designated as Anishinaabeg representatives in the negotiations. Ogamawkeketo was incensed by Cass’s speech.

Your young men have invited us to come and light the Council fire. We are here to smoke the pipe of peace, but not to sell our lands. Our American father wants them. Our English father treats us better. *He* has never asked for them. Your people trespass upon our hunting grounds. You flock to our shores. Our waters grow warm. Our land melts like a cake of ice. Our possessions grow smaller and smaller. The warm wave of the white man rolls in upon us and melts us away. Our women reproach us. Our children want homes. Shall we sell from under them the spot where they spread their blankets? We have not called you here. We smoke with you the pipe of peace.¹⁷⁴

This speech angered Cass, and he abandoned strategic communication in favor of open threats of violence, claiming that the American triumph against the British crown had already forfeited Indigenous claims to land, and that should the government decide to, it could easily take the land without any compensation at all.

Following this exchange, the negotiations broke down and enraged negotiators on all sides retreated to their respective lodging to regroup. Cass had anticipated these tensions, and had secured a large amount of alcohol to be included in the goods brought to Saginaw. With liquor flowing and formal negotiations stalled, Cass attempted to secure consent for the land

¹⁷³ Michael John Witgen, *Seeing Red: Indigenous Land, American Expansion, and the Political Economy of Plunder in North America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 141-142.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

cession through backroom deals and conversations. Cass and his men ensured ongoing intoxication, particularly of Giishako, who adamantly opposed land cession to the federal government and who refused to participate in the council after that first day. Recognizing that collective opposition to the proposed treaty was fierce, Cass tried a different strategy, meeting individually with the ogimaag and promising them particular tracts of land should the treaty be signed. The bribery worked, and Ojibwe took advantage of policies of mixed-race Indigeneity to secure tracts of land for themselves and their children. In total, the Treaty of Saginaw ceded 4.3 million acres of land that cut through the heart of Anishinaabeg land in the Michigan territory. Significantly, 10% of the land was set aside for the mixed-race descendants of traders. Stung by the failure of the federal government to make good on the annuities of the 1807 Treaty of Detroit, the Ojibwe insisted that their annuity be “paid in full and specie.”¹⁷⁵ Influential fur trader Louis Campau, who was present at the Saginaw negotiations, claimed that the Ojibwe owed him fifteen hundred dollars in trade debt, which ought to be paid out of the annuity of the Saginaw Treaty. Giishkako and others fervently opposed this claim, and Cass, recognizing that paying Campau would destabilize the already tense negotiations, refused to pay him.

In a fervor, Campau attacked fur trader Jake Smith and once again the negotiations nearly broke down. Of the resulting tensions, Witgen writes “after being denied his payment, Campau opened ten barrels of whiskey and began to give away as much alcohol as possible. Copious amounts of alcohol and the tension created by the forced land cession led to an increasingly hostile atmosphere. Once again, the Saginaw Ojibweg began to threaten the Americans. At this point, Cass feared for his life and begged Campau: “Louis, Louis, we shall all be killed. Stop the Liquor.”¹⁷⁶ The upheavals were ultimately quelled, and the treaty

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 145.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 146.

agreements signed. Through the Treaty of Saginaw, the land upon which the Michigan Agricultural College would be constructed some thirty years later was designated as “public” land. This legal category of public land was first formalized with the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, which placed the majority of the Northwest territory in the “public domain.” The designation of “public” here is somewhat misdirecting: public lands and the public domain were certainly not a commons, and might be more accurately understood as “state property.”

The treaty agreement, however, does not represent an unqualified triumph of settler land theft. The tract of land that was “ceded” included the land near East Lansing that, thirty years later, would become the campus of Michigan Agricultural College. The earliest map of the Michigan Agricultural College depicts the college on its opening day in 1857. The map features several campus buildings, the Red Cedar River, and, in the southwest corner, an “Indian Encampment.” Michigan State University’s extended land acknowledgment makes mention of the map, noting that “according to a map within the University archive, Anishinaabeg maintained an ‘Indian Encampment’ south of the Red Cedar River when classes were first held at the University (then known as Michigan Agricultural College) on May 13, 1857.”¹⁷⁷ The language in the land acknowledgement is striking, emphasizing that “settler and Indigenous signatories understood the terms of the treaties in starkly different terms.”¹⁷⁸ These “different terms” are not a matter of a simple misunderstanding—the assertion of settler claims to territory involved an epistemic collision: the imposition of a property relation which relied on the undercutting of nonwhite and noncapitalist claims to land. This epistemic and material collision of mutually exclusive property regimes (that of state property and that of Indigenous claims to land) requires some nuancing. As Stuart

¹⁷⁷ “MSU Land Acknowledgement,” American Indian and Indigenous Studies, accessed January 27, 2026, <https://aiis.msu.edu/land/>.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

Banner has argued, the claim that Indigenous people didn't understand settler forms of property reinscribes a perception of Indigenous people as innocent, passive, and not able to understand what was happening in the process of settler seizure of land.¹⁷⁹ Banner asks, rather than trying to identify a particular land cession as a function of either contract or conquest, how might contract and conquest be understood as locations on a spectrum that describe a range of coerced choices? In other words, even if a contract was signed, that is an insufficient standard in establishing a land transfer as consensual. The presence of a signature does not indicate the absence of coercion.

After reading the contemporary land acknowledgement, I turn to the Michigan State University archives in search of the aforementioned map. I find it easily, download a high-resolution copy, and zoom in on the encampment. The map is sparse, the Red Cedar River bisecting the upper and lower halves. To the north of the river is the campus: in 1857 consisting only of "Faculty Houses," a "Brickyard," "Burcham Cabin," "College Hall Dormitory," "Barn," and "Smith House." The "Indian Encampment" is south of the river, in a cluster of trees labeled "Jipson's Woods" and containing an odd bit of script which reads "which are as deep and thick as those of 'Brocéliande' in which Tennyson says Merlin was lost to 'use and name and fame,' by the acts of the Lissomé Vivien." Brocéliande is a French forest that is said to be enchanted, made famous for its associations with Arthurian legends. In the first half of the nineteenth century close to 91,000 acres of sugar maple trees surrounding East Lansing would be logged. Maple sugaring was and remains a traditional practice of the Ojibwe people who did not consent to the occupation of their land by a colonial university. In 1857, the remaining forest was designated "Jipson's Woods," by the makers of the map of the campus. The cartographer is unknown. "Jipson" remains lost to

¹⁷⁹ Stuart Banner, ed., *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

history. But the reference to the haunted woods in France indicates the unsettling character of settlement. If the settler colonial logic of elimination is meant to turn Indigenous peoples into ghosts,¹⁸⁰ absent from their lands and from the annals of history, the map glitches this logic. The spatial association of the encampment with the haunted woods is no accident—the ascription of magical powers to Indigenous peoples is an old story to justify settler violence. But, haunted though the forest might feel to the settlers, the Ojibwe people in the encampment south of the river were not ghosts. They were people, and their presence on their land registered as significant enough to the colonial cartographers to note it.

Early settlers in the Michigan territory were faced with unanticipated geographical difficulties. As I trawl the archive for maps of the Treaty of Saginaw, I notice that each map I find draws the treaty differently. These aren't minor differences—the total area of the cession varies from 4.3 million acres to just over 6 million acres depending on the map you look at. I write to the Michigan State archivist about the treaty, asking if there is a definitive map. She writes me back:

Michigan's geography was not well known by the US at the time the treaty was negotiated. When surveyors started fanning out and walking every township line and section line, maps of the lower peninsula started to get more and more accurate starting with the Detroit area and over a few years the accuracy spread north and west coinciding with the survey. Mapmakers drew the supposed Treaty of Saginaw all over the place during this time. That doesn't mean the treaty changed or the land area changed, just mapmakers' understanding of the shape of the mitten changed.¹⁸¹

Sparse settlements and low total numbers of settlers in the Michigan territory concerned Cass, and much of his political work was organized around the project of presenting Michigan as an attractive place to settle as the promise of gold drew colonists further west. The thickly

¹⁸⁰ Maile Arvin et al., "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections Between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy," *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 1 (2013): 8–34, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2013.0006>.

¹⁸¹ Kathleen Weessies, "Map Library Message," personal communication, February 4, 2021.

wooded landscape of much of the territory had posed problems for surveyors and mapmakers, and in 1817 one of the government surveyors remarked that the Michigan territory was an “indeterminable swamp”¹⁸² before abandoning his survey. Fur trading was the primary industry in the region, and traders and surveyors alike pushed the narrative that “not one acre in ten thousand was fit for cultivation”¹⁸³ with the aim of discouraging agriculture, which, with its propensity for ecological destruction, threatened the livelihood of the fur traders. They preferred beavers over farmers. Alongside his advocacy for policies of genocidal removal in the Jackson administration, Cass mounted a propaganda campaign that extolled the virtues of the Michigan territory, foregrounding its potential in the growing steam navigation industry and writing laudatory letters to his compatriots on the east coast about the attractiveness of the territory.

In 1819 when the Treaty of Saginaw was forced through the tribal council, there had not yet been a comprehensive survey of the Michigan territory. The “indeterminable swamp” resisted cartographic and settler incursions, meaning that the conversion of land into property was not finalized with the signing of the treaty, but rather was contested and struggled over for many subsequent decades. Geographic contestation might be one reason for the presence of the “Indian Encampment” on the opening day of Michigan Agricultural College. Resistance to the imposition of a property logic might be another. While the details of the encampment remain unincorporated into the university archive, its presence itself—both on the campus and on the map—indexes Indigenous presence where there is supposed to be absence, and, crucially, links the presence of actual Indigenous people to the classification of Jipson’s Woods as haunted. Given that cartography is a technology of Indigenous erasure that

¹⁸² Frank B. Woodford and Arthur M. Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays: A Brief History of Detroit* (Wayne State University Press, 2017), 123.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 123.

contributes to how “colonial histories and present times construct Native and indigenous peoples as always already vanishing,”¹⁸⁴ the choice not only to include the encampment on the original map but to archive and reference that map in institutional history is significant. It does not indicate any anti-colonial commitment on the part of the institution, but rather points toward a failure of the settler colonial imaginary in which Indigenous peoples have been eliminated. Map-making is one grammar through which colonial ontology (re)asserts itself, and in the context of treaty cessions in the Michigan territory, must be understood as productive rather than descriptive of property delineations—this particular map’s articulation of settler sovereignty is a quite literal illustration of countersovereignty.

On May 13 of 1857, then, when Michigan Agricultural College opened its doors to 63 students, alongside the handful of buildings that had been hastily constructed was an encampment of an unknown number of Native people. The encampment would disappear in all subsequent maps of the campus. The duration of its collision with the university is unknown. It surfaces in the institutional narrative only three times: the inclusion of the map itself into the university archive, a brief mention in university historian Madison Kuhn’s *First Hundred Years*, and the twenty-first century land acknowledgment. In Kuhn’s prodigious history of Michigan Agricultural College, the encampment warrants a single sentence: “Hundreds of Indians had camped across the river each spring and summer in the early 1850s, boiling maple sap, fishing, hunting, and coming to the Burcham cabin to trade beadwork or baskets for garden vegetables or flour.”¹⁸⁵ Kuhn’s dispassionate narration gives us very little information about the relationship between the university and the encampment. He suggests a

¹⁸⁴ Maile Arvin, “Acting Like a White Person Acting Like a Native: Ghostly Performances of Global Indigeneity,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 103-116, <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0103>, 104.

¹⁸⁵ Madison Kuhn, *Michigan State: The First Hundred Years, 1855-1955* (Michigan State University Press, 1955), 12.

peaceful coexistence, but rewriting violent invasion as harmonious is a favorite trick of settler historians. What Kuhn does tell us is that the encampment was present for more than a season, and that its population numbered in the hundreds. With only 63 students in the first class of Michigan Agricultural College, this presence is significant.

As was common at the time, much of the advocacy for the establishment of an agricultural college occurred through the Michigan Agricultural Society, which was founded in Lansing on March 17, 1849. There had been a mandate for agricultural education on the books in Michigan since the first legislative session following the establishment of statehood (January 26, 1837). The law stated that “there shall be a department of agriculture, with competent instructors in the theory of agriculture, including vegetable physiology and agricultural chemistry, and experimental and practical farming and agriculture.”¹⁸⁶ This mandate was largely ignored until the founding of Michigan Agricultural College due to the more pressing problems of low enrollment numbers and shoddy/incomplete construction of campus buildings. Parallel to the language that would eventually be adopted by the Morrill Act, the Michigan legislation trafficked in the same kind of speculative futurity: the importance of scientific agriculture was clear, particularly given increasing problems with erosion and soil degradation, but the discipline of scientific agriculture did not yet exist, no matter how firmly the state legislation advocated for it. Higher education in Michigan had struggled with the problem of attracting students, and the University of Michigan, originally founded in Detroit in 1821, failed to enroll sufficient students until the university was moved to Ann Arbor in 1837. According to university historian Madison Kuhn, the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 occasioned an influx of a new type of settler, who were “not frontiersmen fleeing the restraints of an older society, but ambitious people who hoped to build a

¹⁸⁶ Wilfred Shaw, ed., *The University of Michigan, an Encyclopedic Survey* (University of Michigan Press, 1941).

civilization in the image of the one they had left behind in New England and upper New York.”¹⁸⁷ How much of this influx was due to Cass’s propagandizing is unknown, but his reach among east coast society was undeniably significant.

By 1849, the failure to materialize the agricultural colleges called for in the state constitution had begun to attract the ire of agriculturalists. At the Michigan State Fair in 1849, orator E.H. Lothrop remarked that “four-fifths of the children of our State ... will probably pursue agriculture as a profession. [Agriculture] as yet has no seminary in which to teach her sons the most valuable of all arts.”¹⁸⁸ Crises of soil degradation in Vermont and Virginia piqued the anxiety of Michigan farmers, who worried that without dedicated study of soil science and crop yields they too would be plagued by unproductivity. These anxieties collided with more general worry about maintaining settler population in Michigan against the seductive lure of California and its promise of gold. At the same state fair, soon-to-be president of Michigan Agricultural College Joseph R. Williams implored the crowd to “close your ears to the syren song of untold wealth in California or the moon.”¹⁸⁹

Kuhn attributes the willingness of Michigan farmers to adopt practices of scientific agriculture to the 1840 publication of Justus Liebig’s *Organic Chemistry in its Applications to Agriculture and Physiology*, which had captured the imaginations of agriculturists of the time and posed straightforward chemical solutions to problems of soil health. Science, then, had begun to figure as a tantalizing resolution to the cluster of political and social problems that articulated themselves through agriculture. At the time, traveling agricultural fairs and circulating agricultural periodicals were the predominant form of agricultural knowledge production. In a form that resembled the religious revivals of previous decades, the traveling

¹⁸⁷ Kuhn, *Michigan State*, 1.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

agriculturalist extolled the virtues of applied chemistry and horticulture, recruiting popular support for his cause.

John C. Holmes was one such itinerant agriculturalist. Born in Massachusetts, he had migrated to Michigan at the age of twenty six and married into a Detroit merchant family. He served on the Michigan Board of Education and as president of the Detroit Horticultural Society before founding the Michigan Agriculture Society in 1849. Holmes was unwavering in his insistence on an agricultural college, and on that institution's independence from the University of Michigan. Michigan already had two state-funded universities at the time, the University of Michigan and the Michigan State Normal School, and the Agricultural Society was imagining something entirely different. Many of the men of the society were educated, upper-middle class gentleman farmers who, in addition to being canny businessmen, viewed agriculture through a film of pastoral romanticism that attached a moral goodness and capacity for improvement to the labor of agriculture. Their university would be no mere trade school, but an institution of "enlightened liberal education."¹⁹⁰ This investment in liberal education viewed alongside the exhortations for practicality and usefulness reveal the kind of citizen that it is imagined the institution would produce: roundly educated, able to contribute both to the field of scientific agriculture as well as the agricultural productivity of his own farm, deputized into the colonial project through improvement. Between 1849 and 1855 Holmes and the Society agitated ceaselessly for the creation of an agricultural college, ultimately overseeing the 1855 passage of a bill for the establishment of the Michigan Agricultural College, which would be directed to "improve and teach the science and practice of agriculture."¹⁹¹ Providing some evidence of the claim that Michigan State was the model

¹⁹⁰ Herbert Andrew Berg, "Financial Support of Michigan Agricultural College During Formative Years With Emphasis on the College Swamp Lands" (Michigan State University, July 1966), <https://sanweb.lib.msu.edu/maps/MSU-Scanned/Michigan/MSU-Swamp/berg-MAC-swamplands.pdf>.

¹⁹¹ Kuhn, *Michigan State*, 9.

for the Morrill Act, the Michigan legislation required that the agricultural college not exclude the classical disciplines of English, mathematics, philosophy, geography, political economy, and history, while also educating students in the mechanic arts and including a provision that required manual labor of all students. In line with its charge to improve agricultural science, the institution would occupy a 500-acre experimental farm.

Despite this legislative success, Congress offered a measly fifteen dollars per acre, which was scarcely enough to secure land that was suitable for a college and an experimental farm. The Committee accepted a bid by Colonel A.R. Burr to sell 677 acres of forest. The land was less than ideal, and would require much improvement, but it was selected due to its proximity to established travel routes to Detroit and Ann Arbor. When the time came to begin construction on the campus, the Board consulted Holmes for an architectural proposal for the institution. Holmes responded that the construction depended on the program of study, and the Board followed up by asking him to propose one. Kuhn writes,

Into the design of College Hall, the first building in America erected for instruction in scientific agriculture, Holmes wrote a novel educational philosophy. Although he hoped that in the future there would be a central structure with two detached wings, economy dictated the immediate construction of only the west wing, which became College Hall. Because chemistry lay at the heart of the new education, it was assigned the entire first floor, half of which was a lecture room and half a series of laboratories. On the two upper floors Holmes planned four classrooms, a library, and an agricultural museum. There would be seven large “working rooms for the professors whom he considered indispensable in the opening years: English studies, chemistry, biology, veterinary art, mathematics, practical agriculture, and practical horticulture.”¹⁹²

It is worth lingering on Kuhn’s description of the interrelationship between the curriculum and the campus. He goes to great pains to stress the innovative elements of both the course of study and the architecture. Holmes insists that a novel form of education requires the

¹⁹² Ibid., 12.

construction of an institution that is spatially conducive to its needs. The spatial, disciplinary, and pedagogical constraints that marked the institution's innovations also cohered to produce a particular kind of student, and a particular kind of citizen. The refrain of "practicality" hums through nearly all philosophies of agricultural education of the time. Practicality functions as a floating signifier that can be employed to gesture toward a working class imaginary, to refuse the ivory-tower model of higher education, and to suture moral goodness to the cultivation of land. The 677 acres of land selected as the site of the college were not "desirable" acres of land. They were thickly wooded, marshy, and dense. In writing of its acquisition, Holmes emphasizes its potential for improvement. The manual labor required by the university would be directed toward the improvement of the land and the improvement of the campus, and was meant to furnish an improvement of the self. If Michigan Agricultural College has any originary claim, it might be this marriage of the improvement of the self through the manual labor of cultivation with the improvement of a field of knowledge through the development of scientific agriculture.

Kuhn implies that the innovative pedagogy and curricula of the Michigan Agricultural College could have only occurred in the particular built environment imagined by Holmes. The specificity of the institution reflects the imposition of settler sensibilities onto the environment. It's worth remembering that at the time the college was being conceived, there was no discipline of scientific agriculture. The architects of the campus and the curriculum were attempting to take the landscape itself as an object of study, an institutional incorporation that was guided by values of "practicality." Given that the campus was understood to be an embodiment of this new pedagogy, Kuhn devotes significant time to recounting the construction of the campus. By all accounts, it was rife with crisis. In an attempt to save on transportation costs and begin the cultivation of the experimental farm,

many of the building materials were sourced directly from the campus itself. As the scheduled opening day drew nearer, the Agricultural Society delayed the day by several months due to complaints about shoddy construction and concerns about the structural integrity of the new buildings. While Kuhn and other historians maintain an optimistic affect about this period of struggle in the institution's history, even their sanitized accounts perform an anxiety that indexes the continuous precarity of the project. Kuhn writes,

As the buildings neared completion, they revealed major flaws which delayed by several months the opening of the College. The Board complained that some doors would not open, others would not close, and few would lock. It found flooring of soft pine, flooring that was grossly uneven, flooring so shrunken that it did not reach the walls. Baseboards were loose, basement cisterns leaked, and the kitchen range was a "smoky concern" described as "entirely useless." Because the roofs leaked, every rain moistened the plaster until it weakened and fell; not until the roofs were rebuilt was the plaster reasonably secure. The foundations were beginning to *settle* (emphasis mine) and in the opening month of classes piers were placed under a sagging partition of College Hall. A financial settlement adjusted the visible defects but it was not known until years later that the foundations of College Hall rested on plank footings or that one corner of its basement wall enclosed a large stump.¹⁹³

The settlement of what was once 91,000 acres of sugar maple trees was no easy endeavor. While university historians adopt a predetermined telos in which the triumph of the institution was always a foregone conclusion, this narrative shudders under the weight of leaking roofs and unsettled foundations. The early years at Michigan Agricultural College were bleak, despite president Joseph R. Williams's best efforts. In his 1978 history of Michigan Agricultural College, Harold W. Lautner writes that the difficulties around campus construction caused long term problems. College Hall "tumbled down" in 1918, revealing that the building was constructed on "plank footings, that the bricks were soft and the walls

¹⁹³ Ibid., 15.

were hollow.”¹⁹⁴ Lautner opens his history with an extensive consideration of the shoddy construction of campus buildings, writing that “the problems they caused contributed to the precarious financial and political situation of the college the first ten or so years of its existence. They drained away both money and attention, and perhaps some self-respect.”¹⁹⁵ The attention paid to these inflection points of crisis and struggle contribute to the narrative that the institution was a determined underdog; that its success was somehow at the same time inevitable and a function of the hard work of devoted individuals who stewarded the institution.

Joseph R. Williams, the first President of Michigan Agriculture College, like Holmes, was from the east coast. Described by Kuhn as a “lawyer, merchant, miller, editor, and gentleman farmer,”¹⁹⁶ these accolades led him through Harvard and into a lucrative career as a land speculator. Upon his arrival to the Michigan territory he became active in the Agricultural Society and was nominated to be the first president of Michigan Agricultural College. In William James Beal’s *History of Michigan Agricultural College and Biographical Sketches of Trustees and Professors*, Williams is described as steadfast and principled in the early tumult of the college. Beal writes “this [the college] he pioneered through the troubles and difficulties attendant upon a novel experiment, with ability, skill and far-sightedness, although he had an element of discord to contend with, of extreme religious bigotry within and political partisanship without.”¹⁹⁷ This “element of discord” likely had something to do with the brevity of Williams’s term as president (a short two years). By most accounts, Williams shared Holmes’s vision of a novel form of education that would “begin with the

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 263.

¹⁹⁵ Harold B. Lautner, *From an Oak Opening: A Record of the Development of the Campus Park of Michigan State University, 1855-1969* (Michigan State University Press, 1978), Michigan State University Archives, 21-22.

¹⁹⁶ Kuhn, *Michigan State*, 17.

¹⁹⁷ William James Beal, *History of the Michigan Agricultural College and Biographical Sketches of Trustees and Professors* (Michigan Agricultural College, 1915), 386.

farmer himself ... morally, physically, intellectually, he must be a man, before he can be a farmer.”¹⁹⁸ Williams, Holmes, and other early advocates of agricultural education were threading a rhetorical needle: in order to be attractive to the farmers they intended to recruit, the institution needed to be set up to meet the particular practical needs of farmers, but this practicality was meant to occur in tandem with a liberal arts curriculum that, for all its efforts to differentiate itself otherwise, owed much of its guiding philosophy to a European enlightenment model of education. Williams anticipated the hurdles of materializing this kind of institution, writing that “we shall be delayed by the lack of precedent, by the necessity of subduing the almost virgin forest, and by friends and enemies who will demand too much, and that too early... the orchard we plant this year, will not afford a harvest of fruit the next.”¹⁹⁹ Much of the writing by advocates of agricultural education at the time takes a speculative tone: Williams and his contemporaries situate themselves as a vanguard, tasked with the construction of institutions that did not yet exist to meet the needs of farmers that they themselves might not know. Their writings are shot through with paternalism, and historians consistently refer to the land-grant institutions as children, needing strong patriarchs to steward them through their infancies.

Whether or not Michigan Agricultural College was the first agricultural college in the United States based on any legible contemporary metric is ultimately less important than the success the institution has had in marketing itself as such. The claim to firstness allows the institution to, essentially, take credit for the institutions that would follow, wrapping itself in an air of gravitas and authority. Beyond staking a position in relation to other land-grant institutions, the claim to firstness must also be understood in relation to broader policies of settlement and territorial expansion. Michigan Agricultural College was founded in a period

¹⁹⁸ Kuhn, *Michigan State*, 20.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

when the state's internal economy was precarious: the fur trade was declining, and its role in a rapidly industrializing nation was uncertain. The presence of a college—and not just any college, but the *first* agricultural college—signaled more “advanced” settlement in operative taxonomies of stages of civilization. In particular, the emphasis on the democratic character of the land-grant institutions offered a convenient rhetorical slippage: if the land-grant system is an organic expression of American democracy, then the site of the first land-grant college must also be the site of a robust democratic society. The perception of the state as civilized, educated, and democratic could be leveraged as a resource to secure capital (in the form of land, in the form of people, and in the form of federal funding) and speculative investment. Though its claims to firstness are tenuous and contingent at best, Michigan Agricultural College powerfully illustrates the material stakes of the production of institutional history, a set of processes that Michigan's proximity (both geographic and temporal) to the frontier throws into harsh relief. The Michigan territory was granted statehood in 1837, and twenty years later, in the first year of the Michigan Agricultural College, much of its land was still unsurveyed. Title disputes between Native and settler claimants were common and frequently bloody. If its claim to be the “model land-grant institution” is to be believed, Michigan Agricultural College clearly illustrates the disciplining of “public” land as a key phase of the installation of settler sovereignty.

Pennsylvania State College

On January 6, 1860, Evan Pugh wrote to American agricultural chemist Samuel W. Johnson of what he viewed as his life's work: “to develop upon the soil of Pennsylvania the best Ag. college in the world for the ag. student of America.”²⁰⁰ A modest charge, but then,

²⁰⁰ Evan Pugh, “Pugh to Johnson,” January 6, 1860, Pugh Papers, Box 5, Folder 12, Pennsylvania State University Special Collections.

Evan Pugh had never had a problem with low self-esteem. Pugh would serve as the first president of Pennsylvania State Agricultural College, stewarding its transition from Farmer's High School and advocating for its receipt of the Morrill Land Grant. Pedestalizing the founders and early presidents of the land-grant institutions is a constitutive feature of land-grant history, and Pugh is no exception—a bust of his head rests on a very literal pedestal in the entryway of the Old Main building on the campus. Roger L. Williams penned the most comprehensive biography of Pugh, *Evan Pugh's Penn State: America's Model Agricultural College*, and enthusiastically participates in the reification of Pugh, writing that he was “a visionary with a driving sense of purpose—a man of unusually high educational attainment for his era who exuded extraordinary intellectual energy as well as physical and emotional stamina.”²⁰¹ In much the same way that the institutional histories of Penn State perform a bootstraps story of the little agricultural college that could, Pugh's biographers figure him as a man born with little in the way of wealth or connections, who strove doggedly to realize his vision of an agricultural college. Both man and institution reproduce the story that through hard work and sacrifice, science might offer, in Charles Rosenberg's terms, the fulfillment of individual aspirations, evangelical pietism, faith in the virtue of progress, and a cohering nationalism that staves off critiques of elitism. In other words, the construction of the figure of Evan Pugh is inextricable from the construction of Penn State. The university consistently and persistently returns to the exceptionality of Pugh in its production of institutional history, suturing its own differentiating features to its first president.

The Penn State campus is organized around Old Main, one of the original university buildings, and the home of the famous Morrill Act frescoes, which were completed for the centennial of the Morrill Act. Pugh's bust sits to the right of the imposing stairway leading up

²⁰¹ Roger L. Williams, *Evan Pugh's Penn State: America's Model Agricultural College*, 1st ed (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), x.

to the frescoes, and a bust of William Atherton, the fourth president of Penn State, sits to the left of the stairs. The two patriarchs of the institution welcome visitors up the sweeping staircase to the center panel of the frescoes, which depicts Abraham Lincoln in the foreground next to another figure who is holding what appears to be a pitchfork that has grown roots. Behind Lincoln and the farmer are two groups of people. On the right side, they are poring over a set of books, hands placed contemplatively on chins, appearing to be engaged in a lively debate. On the left side are six figures who appear to be examining soil. Two are kneeling, hands in the earth. The other four hold farm tools as they consider the soil. Lincoln and the farmer anchor the disparate scenes of the intellectual and the agricultural, retrenching the story of the land-grant institutions as projects of democratic populism. Perhaps meant to inspire gravitas, the enormous scale and muted color palettes of the frescoes inspire a feeling of futility, or perhaps exhaustion in the viewer. Following the perimeter of the room, there are panels that depict the triumphs of industry the land-grant institution has facilitated: exhausted railway workers continue to toil on a track; strangely Cubist welders are drawn to the light of the forge like moths.

The busts of Pugh and Atherton oversee this sprawling work, secure in their positions as the fathers of Penn State. While Michigan Agricultural College self-exceptionalized through its claim as the first agricultural college, Penn State takes a different tenor in its self-narration, emphasizing the exceptional character of its founders. Eddy notes that “no one person had left his imprint on the early years of Michigan Agricultural College, but it was Evan Pugh who fought, sometimes alone, for his Pennsylvania scheme.”²⁰² It is of note, perhaps, that Williams consistently refers to Pugh by his first name, rhetorically building out the mythology of Pugh as a Great Man of American agriculture. Pugh himself contributed to

²⁰² Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education*, 19.

this self-mythologization, positioning himself as a kind of savior. He wrote in 1855 “I am aware that the way is loaded with labor, but the inestimable results that must flow from it are worth the labor of a hundred lives like mine and I was preparing for the sacrifice.”²⁰³ In Williams’s narration, Pugh embodies a clarity of vision that distinguished him from other agricultural advocates of the time.

In 1849, Pugh opened a school on the second floor of the blacksmith shop on his family farm. At the Jordan Bank Academy, Pugh “taught the usual studies, with laboratory and fieldwork in botany, analytical chemistry, geology, and mineralogy,”²⁰⁴ and, per the Quaker ethos of gender equality, opened up his lectures and demonstrations to students studying at “Misses Pughs’ Pleasant Valley Seminary for Girls,” his aunt’s school. By all accounts Pugh thrived as the head of school. During his tenure he composed a song for the students, titled “Education,”

The elements that form our globe,
by chemistry we’ll know,
The truths this science will unfold,
Analysis will show;
The soils and minerals of our globe,
beneath our eyes shall fall,
And we will never stop to rest,
till we have learned them all.²⁰⁵

The lyrics perform a relationship to knowledge production that is inextricable from conquest and possession, and demonstrate a faith in science both as an a priori good and as a vehicle of progress. Given that Whitestown and other manual-labor institutions were predominantly religious, one is left to wonder whether religious zeal found a new object to attach to in

²⁰³ Evan Pugh, “To S. W. Johnson,” February 22, 1855, True Papers, Pennsylvania State University Special Collections.

²⁰⁴ Williams, *Evan Pugh’s Penn State*, 5.

²⁰⁵ Jacqueline Bloom, “Evan Pugh: The Education of a Scientist 1828-1859” (Master’s Thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 1960), 9.

scientific agriculture. In *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought*, Charles Rosenberg describes Pugh as “extremely achievement-oriented, dominant in personal relations, as physically vigorous as he was ambitious; yet many of his culture’s normal paths to achievement—politics and the law, for example—seemed to him tainted by materialism and sordid compromise. The role of scientific entrepreneur, on the other hand, promised accomplishment and a spiritually irreproachable strategy for ego aggrandizement.”²⁰⁶ In other words, Pugh conceived of science as morally and ethically superior to other vocations, imbued with a progressive optimism. Pugh’s biographers and historians of Penn State emphasize the significance of Pugh’s Welsh Quaker community in supporting his scientific aspirations, noting that the social structure of Quaker meetings dovetailed easily with the methods of experimentation that Pugh held as central to agricultural education. Rosenberg notes that Pugh emerged from a context in which “enthusiastic religion had coexisted peacefully with a surprisingly strong interest in natural philosophy.”²⁰⁷ One of Pugh’s significant mentors was a man by the name of Dr. William Darlington, a Quaker physician, botanist, and politician. Darlington, who grew up on his family’s farm in Chester County, Pennsylvania, deeply resented that the pressures of the family farm had interfered with his education, and his trajectory—as a physician’s apprentice to a naval surgeon to the steward of his own small farm to a banker and, finally, to a botanist—deeply shaped Pugh’s conception of what it meant to be a learned man and, perhaps more significantly, how to escape the stultifyingly narrow pressures of the family farm. It was Darlington who encouraged Pugh, in 1853, to travel to Europe to further his education in scientific agriculture.

²⁰⁶ Charles E Rosenberg, *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 152.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

In the summer of 1853 Pugh closed the Jordan Bank Academy, sold his family farm to his uncle, and used the profits to finance his advanced study. Historians have noted that even at the age of twenty-five, when he left for Europe, Pugh demonstrated a clarity of vision regarding the future of American agricultural education. In a newspaper dispatch in 1853, he wrote that his purpose was “to bring about a properly informed agricultural community,” explaining that “the subject of agricultural chemistry should be made an important item in the education of farmers’ sons. We want agricultural schools where boys can get a thorough knowledge of the theory and practice of agriculture and the collateral branches of botany, geology, and mineralogy; much of the time that is now spent in mathematics and the languages would be far more advantageously spent in becoming familiar with these sciences.”²⁰⁸ Following Darlington, Pugh turned to agricultural education in Germany as a possible model for the kind of institution he hoped to bring to the United States. The first school of agricultural science was founded by Albrecht Thaer in 1807, and Thaer was an early proponent of the model of experiment-focused agricultural education that Pugh admired.

Prior to the establishment of the land-grant college system, the primary locus of scientific thought in the United States was the network of learned societies and agricultural associations. Pugh himself had been steeped in the discourse and debates of the Chester County Horticultural Society, the Chester County Agricultural Society, and the *Pennsylvania Farm Journal*, which was published in West Chester. Williams writes that “the scientific spirit, or at least the enthusiasm for empirical investigation, enjoyed a remarkable popularity in the 1830s and 1840s.”²⁰⁹ While Pugh certainly benefitted from this enthusiasm, he was

²⁰⁸ Evan Pugh, “To the West Chester (Pa.) Register and Examiner,” September 1853, Pugh Papers, Box 1, Folder 7, Pennsylvania State University Special Collections.

²⁰⁹ Williams, *Evan Pugh’s Penn State*, 15.

critical of the dispersed structure of agricultural knowledge production, writing of the necessity for dedicated institutions of agricultural education that could outlast any popular fervor. In *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought*, Charles Rosenberg notes that the absence of formal graduate education in agricultural science in the United States created exploitative and untenable labor conditions for research scientists. Rosenberg highlights Pugh's pursuit of graduate education as an act of faith, writing that "though chemistry had, in the 1840s, come to replace geology as the generation's 'glamor' science, it offered at best a problematical career in a society still unwilling to recognize and support the professional research scientist."²¹⁰ Williams and Rosenberg spend significant time parsing the motivations of Pugh and his contemporaries that led to their studies in Europe, emphasizing the difficulty, material precarity, and unguaranteed future prospects that shaped their chosen vocations. Rhetorically, foregrounding this difficulty serves to undergird the commonsense conception of the a priori goodness of education: the slippage between difficulty and value covers over thornier ethical questions. In other words, the difficulty of Pugh's pursuit of an education is understood to imply that it was worthwhile, and to diminish the weight of critiques of the complicity of scientific agriculture in settler colonial violence.

Pugh's studies in Europe will be taken up in more depth in Chapter 2, but aside from the content of his education, one of the most significant occurrences while he was enrolled at Leipzig University was Pugh's contact with Samuel W. Johnson in the fall semester of 1853. Johnson, a recent graduate from Yale, which boasted the first professorship in agricultural science, would become Pugh's lifelong friend and interlocutor. According to Rosenberg, the two shared four main motivations: "the fulfillment of individual aspirations," "evangelical pietism," "an unquestioning faith in the unambiguous virtue of progress," and "a shared

²¹⁰ Rosenberg, *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought*, 136.

nationalism” that “legitimated what might have been seen as elitist and personal ambitions.”²¹¹ As we shall see, these motivations directly shaped the institutional, curricular, and pedagogical priorities of Penn State and the land-grant college system more broadly. In particular, the entanglement of personal fulfillment (the production of the individual) with agricultural science and national “progress” imbued higher education with both the promise of upward class mobility through contributing to a progressive nationalism, and sutured individual fulfillment to participation in that nationalism.

Pugh studied at Leipzig, focusing on applied chemistry, for just over a year before traveling through Germany, on foot, and enrolling at the University of Göttingen in April of 1855. At Göttingen, Pugh hoped to concentrate more on agricultural science. His doctoral degree was conferred in March of 1856, and by the summer he had left Göttingen to study gas analysis under Robert Bunson at the University of Heidelberg, where he spent much of his time collecting botanical specimens in anticipation of the agricultural college he planned to found back home in Pennsylvania. In 1856 Pugh wrote to Darlington of his desire to “devote my life to Agricultural Chemistry as a teacher and investigator,”²¹² and mentioned his interest in a teaching appointment at the recently chartered Farmers’ High School (which would become Penn State). Williams writes that “Pugh’s time in Europe paralleled the founding and early development of the institution he eventually would come to lead. [...] As the decade of the 1850s entered its final year, the trajectories of Pugh’s education abroad and the school’s ‘completion’ coincided propitiously. The Farmers’ High School opened for instruction in February 1859, just as Pugh was finishing his work at Rothamsted and communicating with the president of the school’s governing board about accepting the presidency.”²¹³ Following

²¹¹ Ibid., 137.

²¹² Evan Pugh, “To William Darlington,” August 20, 1856, William Darlington Collection, New York Historical Society.

²¹³ Williams, *Evan Pugh’s Penn State*, 37.

his time in Germany, Pugh studied in both France and England, and by 1859 was pulled back toward Pennsylvania as the prospect of realizing his vision of an agricultural college moved closer in reach.

Back in Chester County, PA, the skeleton of Penn State was beginning to take shape. The Pennsylvania Agricultural Society, founded in 1851, had sponsored a convention in 1853 to consider the formation of an agricultural college. The society was well versed in the prevailing populist sentiments of the time. Williams writes that “to differentiate the institution from the collegiate mainstream of classical or literary colleges—and to address the suspicions of farmers about such institutions and their pernicious influence on young men—the committee came up with the title of “The Farmers’ High School.”²¹⁴ Although the original charter for the school, which stipulated one trustee per county agricultural society—63 in total—was authorized in 1854, the institution found it too difficult to convene a quorum of such an unwieldy number of trustees, and the school reincorporated under a new charter—requiring thirteen trustees, this time—on February 22, 1855. While Pugh was honing his expertise in applied chemistry at Göttingen, leading agriculturalists in Pennsylvania were hotly debating the curricular structure of the fledgling institution. Frederick O. Watts, the founder of the Pennsylvania Agricultural Society, wrote to Governor William Bigler in 1854 that Farmers’ High School must depart from the existing models of agricultural education, which were ill-suited to “the business of agriculture.”²¹⁵ Contrary to Pugh’s later position, which foregrounded the pursuit of professional science, Watts wrote that “it is not proposed to educate young men for the professional pursuit of scientific subjects; but to teach them that which is valuable for a farmer to know.”²¹⁶ This tension

²¹⁴ Ibid., 38.

²¹⁵ Frederick O Watts, “To Governor William Bigler,” January 20, 1854, Pugh Papers, Box 5, Folder 23, Pennsylvania State University Special Collections.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

between practical education for the working farmer and the pursuit of purely scientific knowledge would continue to shape the institutional formation of Farmers' High School, particularly when Pugh returned from Europe chock full of cutting edge applied chemistry and soil science.

The Board of Trustees solicited bids for the location of the school, eventually settling on a location in Centre County that included 200 acres of land from ironmaster James Irvin, alongside \$10,000 to be collected in scrip from the residents of Centre County and Huntingdon County. The location was selected primarily for its geographic centrality: though it was an inaccessible location, it was equally inaccessible from all parts of the state. Farmers' High School faced similar sets of problems in its construction that Michigan State did; namely, shortages of building materials, and the fallout of the Panic of 1857, which halted campus construction from the summer of 1858 to December of that year. In his *History of the Pennsylvania State College*, Wayland Fuller Dunaway writes that "the financial panic of 1857, accompanied by the failure of crops in some counties, rendered conditions unfavorable for collecting subscriptions already made, and especially for securing new ones. Enthusiasm for the enterprise began to cool, subscriptions came in slowly, the funds in hand were rapidly becoming exhausted, and one of the trustees resigned from pessimism over the prospect."²¹⁷ Despite these conditions, in December of 1858 the Pennsylvania legislature appropriated \$25,000 to the institution, on the condition that another \$25,000 could be raised by private subscription, and despite the fact that what had been built so far could hardly be called a campus, the trustees authorized opening the school by February of 1859. In the 1858 annual report, Watts claimed, more than a little aspirationally, that "a new light is about to break

²¹⁷ Wayland Fuller Dunaway, *History Of The Pennsylvania State College* (Pennsylvania State College, 1946), 19.

upon the agricultural community.”²¹⁸ The phrase “humble beginnings” hardly does justice to the bereft institution that opened its doors on February 16, 1859. According to Williams, “with sixty-nine students present, four faculty members but no president, a building one-third complete in an improbable location, but with well-defined purpose and lofty ambition, the Farmers’ High School of Pennsylvania opened its doors and went to work.”²¹⁹

Pugh made his strong feelings about the character of the institution known from across the Atlantic, writing to Alfred W. Elwyn sometime before the summer of 1855 that “quacking has already done our cause no little harm and hundreds of farmers are disgusted at what they (with too much reason) term scientific humbug.”²²⁰ In these correspondences, Pugh advocated for what would come to be cooperative extension sixty years later with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act of 1915, infrastructure that would facilitate the transmission of scientific knowledge from experts to the farmers themselves. In his communications from Europe and subsequent reports on curricular philosophy, Pugh espouses four features of his agricultural college: “scientific control, scientific method, scientific inquiry, with the resultant scientific benefits.”²²¹ Pugh writes about the values and potentials of science with a near-religious fervor, a feature which Rosenberg identifies as a continuity amongst the leading agricultural chemists of the day. “Even though they came from widely varied backgrounds (Johnson, for example, was a Congregationalist, Pugh a Welsh Quaker), they all adhered to a peculiarly evangelical and intensely pious faith, their lives necessarily consecrated to a worthy stewardship.”²²² These scientists are figured as singularly purposeful, their ascetic personal habits reflective of submission to their vocation.

²¹⁸ Frederick O. Watts, *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Farmers’ High School of Pennsylvania for 1857* (A. Boyd Hamilton, 1858).

²¹⁹ Williams, *Evan Pugh’s Penn State*, 42.

²²⁰ Evan Pugh, “To Alfred W. Elwyn,” before 1855, Pugh Papers, Box 3, Folder 11, Pennsylvania State University Special Collections.

²²¹ Williams, *Evan Pugh’s Penn State*, 44.

²²² Rosenberg, *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought*, 137.

It's not incidental that this fervor arises with particular sharpness in the nineteenth century, a transitional moment of settler colonialism. As Stephanson demonstrates, settler colonial dispossession in the first half of the nineteenth century was routed through a religiosity that situated the settler as divinely ordained in his vocation of expansion into *terra nullius*.²²³ By the 1850s, however, the frontier was closing, westward expansion had been slowed by geographic barriers, and the fantasy of a limitless expanse of land to the west was flickering. Science in general, and agricultural science in particular, provided a ready object for religious fervor to attach to, reconstituting the settler project around the systematic improvement of land, rather than its acquisition and occupation. As Rosenberg writes, "it was, in many ways, the similarity rather than the difference between scientific and religious values which made it natural for many Americans to move fluidly from one intellectual realm to another."²²⁴ Pugh, who struggled with the drudgery and anonymity of his short-lived blacksmithing apprenticeship, was able to locate personal fulfillment through his devotion to science, reaping the social and material benefits afforded to faith leaders through the reproduction of the divinely-ascribed value of his labor. Pugh's untimely death at the age of 34 in a buggy accident somewhat conveniently positioned him as a martyr for the cause of agricultural education.

When the institution officially opened in February of 1859, the conditions were bleak. In a chapter fittingly titled *College Starts on Faith*, Dunaway writes:

Only one wing of the building was in use, and this contained no chapel, no dining room, and no kitchen; hence it was necessary to make use of temporary buildings for cooking and eating. A long, low shanty, which had been used by the workmen constructing the building, was converted into a dining room by knocking out the partitions and whitewashing it, and an

²²³ Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right*, 2. print (Hill and Wang, 1998).

²²⁴ Rosenberg, *No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought*, 139.

adjoining shanty was used for a kitchen. The shanties thus requisitioned to meet an emergency leaked in wet weather and could not be kept warm when the weather was cold. No part of the main building was suitable for laboratories, museums, or even for recitation rooms. All about the premises were unsightly piles of lumber, brick, and stone to be used for further use on the building, “presenting a most forlorn aspect to the students, who first entered the building through the well-tramped mud of the breaking up of the winter frosts.”²²⁵

Since there were no dormitories, the students and four of the five faculty members slept in the main building, which, a little more than a century later, would become the home of the land-grant frescoes that memorialized the early days of the college. At the time of its opening, Farmers’ High School did not have a president. Horticulturist William G. Waring, who had supervised the planning for the grounds of the campus, served as the acting president until Pugh’s return, but would leave in 1860 over “difficulty getting along with the faculty.”²²⁶ Enrollment in Farmers’ High School was capped at 100, slots apportioned by county based on the number of taxable residents and the recommendations of the County Agricultural Societies. Initially, there was only one course of study, though students were divided into two classes based on entrance examinations: a four year course and a three year course.

Pugh’s associations with Göttingen and Rothamsted, two of the most prestigious sites of applied chemistry research, made him an ideal candidate for the presidency in the eyes of the trustees. Just before the institution began instruction, in February 1859, Frederick Watts wrote to Pugh extending him an offer to serve as professor and president of Farmers’ High School. In March of 1859, Pugh wrote to Watts accepting the job, which he described as “a position to which I had hoped to devote the labors of my life.”²²⁷ Contestations over firstness and innovations were already taking hold. In celebrating the horizon of possibility that Pugh’s

²²⁵ Dunaway, *History Of The Pennsylvania State College*, 21-22.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

²²⁷ Evan Pugh, “To Watts,” March 3, 1859, Pugh Papers, Box 3, Folder 11, Pennsylvania State University Special Collections.

appointment promised for the school, Watts wrote “ours is among the first indeed... the very first that has gone into operation; for whilst there is an Agr. School in Michigan it differs from ours in what we deem essential features.”²²⁸ What constituted those differences was left unnamed by Watts, though one can speculate that Pugh’s prestigious academic pedigree facilitated a profound optimism about the exceptionality of the fledgling college. Pugh had succeeded in fashioning himself as the kind of man and scientist who could lead the institution.

Pugh arrived at Farmers’ High School to begin his tenure as the president on October 26, 1859. Dunaway narrates his arrival to the campus as practically messianic, writing that “everybody was anxious to see him and hear him, partly from curiosity, but more from the general feeling that here was the man who was to save the school from threatened failure.”²²⁹ Pugh was met with an enthusiastic welcome by students and faculty, and, despite the conditions (“the campus was unsightly, the farm was rough, the location was inaccessible, the equipment was meagre, the library was negligible, the village of State College was in the process of being born, and all supplies had to be hauled long distances”²³⁰) began his tenure hopefully and with a clarity of purpose that his biographers would extoll. In his preface to the 1859 course catalog, Pugh wrote that “while the most strenuous efforts have been made to bring all the knowledge that modern science can afford, to bear upon many of the learned professions and the industrial arts, by making those who follow them familiar with scientific principles, the education of the agriculturalist has been in this respect almost entirely neglected. And yet there is no branch of human industry involving more scientific principles,

²²⁸ Frederick Watts, “To Pugh,” April 10, 1859, Pugh Papers, Box 5, Folder 23, Pennsylvania State University Special Collections.

²²⁹ Dunaway, *History Of The Pennsylvania State College*, 31.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

in the practical operations of its various departments, than does that of agriculture.”²³¹ The time was ripe for Pugh to launch his institution: an array of agricultural crises (soil depletion, erosion, and anxieties around agricultural labor post-Emancipation, primarily) had sharpened a sense of urgency, and “the byword of the day became ‘scientific agriculture,’ increasingly viewed by reformers as the ultimate solution to problems of American agriculture.”²³²

Scientific agriculture, then, took on the qualities of a faith object as it was increasingly posed as a “fix” for a larger set of social, economic, and ecological problems. This optimism is reflected in the original business plan of Farmers’ High School, which, in sharp contrast to the average college enrollment at the time of 75 students, planned for 200 matriculants who would each pay \$75 in tuition.²³³ It would take more than a decade for the institution to meet that goal, and Pugh arrived to a somewhat disappointing class of 61 students, whose boisterousness and rowdy behavior offended his ascetic sensibilities and detracted from the seriousness with which he took his charge as the steward of the college. In February of 1860, after a semester as president, Pugh laid out the stakes of the experiment of the agricultural college in his inaugural address, titled *On the Mutual Relations of the Teacher and the Taught*:

We owe it to the friends of this Institution, and to the people of our great Keystone State that we resolve not to let this great experiment fail. We owe it to the cause of agricultural science, now struggling in its infancy, without proper means for its promulgation, that we carry on our enterprise with a resolute and persevering energy. We owe it to the cause of agricultural practice now groping its way in the labyrinthine uncertainties of empiricism, quackery, and ignorance, that the light of science be set upon to guide it in the onward march of modern improvement. We owe it to the agriculturalist himself who treads upon a soil rich in subjects of thought, and who feeds and

²³¹ Cited in Bezilla, *The College of Agriculture at Penn State*.

²³² Williams, *Evan Pugh’s Penn State*, 51.

²³³ Frederick O Watts, “To Governor William Bigler,” January 20, 1854, Pugh Papers, Box 5, Folder 31, Pennsylvania State University Special Collections.

cultivates his crops that reward his labors by processes he knows nothing about, that we develop a system of instruction which shall unlock the beauties and the mysteries of nature around him. And lastly, my young friends, we owe it to ourselves, that we should now so shape our course and mould our actions, that when life's early vigour shall have passed, and we look back from a ripe-old age upon our duties in connexion with the Farm School, we shall have the pleasure of feeling that we have done all that lay in our power to acquit ourselves in a manner worthy of the responsibilities that evolved upon us.²³⁴

By all accounts the dining hall food fights that had so incensed Pugh ceased after he delivered this address. Whether the students subscribed to his lofty vision, or were simply afraid of his somewhat brutal style of discipline, is more difficult to say. At the time that he delivered this address, Old Main, the building that, more than a hundred and fifty years later, would house Varnum Poor's land-grant frescoes and the busts of Pugh and Atherton, was still under construction. Given that it was the only building on campus, completing the construction was a priority for Pugh and the Trustees. Despite the existential threat that the Civil War posed to Farmers' High School, a contract was awarded to George W. Tate of Bellefonte to complete the building by December 1, 1862. Dunaway writes that "work was begun promptly, but the difficulty of securing labor and the mounting cost of materials due to the war delayed its completion until December 1863."²³⁵

While the institutional histories of Pennsylvania State University emphasize Pugh as the primary driver of curricular and scientific innovation that set the university apart from its contemporaries, the Civil War and its effects on the institution shaped the language and logic of the Morrill Act in significant ways. While Farmers' High School was working to get on its feet in Pennsylvania, the fight for agricultural colleges on the national level was taking shape.

²³⁴ Evan Pugh, "On the Mutual Relations of the Teacher and the Taught: Inaugural Address," Pennsylvania State University, 1860.

²³⁵ Wayland Fuller Dunaway, *History Of The Pennsylvania State College* (Pennsylvania State College, 1946), 36.

The first version of the Morrill Act was proposed in 1857, passed by Congress in 1859, but vetoed by Buchanan. The only substantive difference between the failed bill and the version that would be ratified in 1862 was the inclusion of the mandate that agricultural colleges also teach “military tactics and strategy.”²³⁶ There is not much evidence that Pugh considered tactical training as an important feature of agricultural and industrial education, but, by 1861 it may have been unavoidable to consider, if for no other reason than because the students “organized themselves into a military company and drilled in such places on the campus as were not covered by stone piles or nursery trees.”²³⁷ Between 1861 and 1863, students and faculty periodically dropped out to enroll in the military, and the college was closed entirely from June to September of 1863. There is not enough evidence to determine a direct causal link between the military exercises at Farmers’ High School and the linking of agricultural education to militarism in the 1862 Morrill Act, but given Rosenberg’s theorization of the role of nationalisms in the development of scientific agriculture, I would be remiss to not point out the connection. Agriculture and militarism serve distinct functions in the project of state-building, but both represent a logic of territoriality and conquest that has never *not* been foundational to the national character of the United States. If scientific agriculture encompasses impulses to differentiate and exceptionalize the United States, militarism is understood as the necessary defensive corollary to that exceptionality.

The original charter of Farmers’ High School, which was approved by the Pennsylvania legislature in 1855, laid out two primary educational aims: to impart “a knowledge of the English language, grammar, geography, history, mathematics, chemistry and such other branches of the natural and exact sciences as will conduce to the proper

²³⁶ Act of July 2, 1862 (Morrill Act), Which Established Land Grant Colleges, General Records of the United States Government.

²³⁷ Wayland Fuller Dunaway, *History Of The Pennsylvania State College* (Pennsylvania State College, 1946), 39.

education of a farmer,” and to “perform all the labor necessary in the cultivation of the farm.”²³⁸ Departing from many of his contemporaries, Pugh was somewhat ambivalent about the inclusion of manual labor into the curriculum, advocating instead for an institution more specifically organized around professional scientific inquiry. In the 1862 annual report for the college, Pugh clarifies the mission: “to associate a high degree of intelligence with the practice of Agriculture and the industrial arts, and to seek to make use of this intelligence in developing the agricultural and industrial resources of the country, and protecting its interests.”²³⁹ For all his bloviating about the value of pure science, Pugh’s later writings on the reorganization of the curriculum reflect an undiluted nationalism that clearly and consistently links the pursuit of agricultural science to the prosperity of the nation itself. This entanglement would only become more pronounced through the passage of the Morrill Act (of particular note is the exclusion of the Southern states from the 1862 Morrill Act, a move which imposed the performance of particular nationalisms as a prerequisite for access to federal resources), the Granger movements of the second half of the nineteenth century, and the increasing disciplinary overlaps between technologies of agriculture and technologies of militarism (see, especially, the example of ammonium nitrate, which was initially used as a fertilizer to improve soil productivity and has since become one of the primary components of explosives manufactured by the US military).

Michigan Agricultural College usefully illustrates the role of the land-grant model in frontier-adjacent states, and Penn State emerged in a starkly different context. In the 1850s, Pennsylvania had been settled for significantly longer than Michigan, and the role of the land-grant university cohered more principally around the production of nationalism,

²³⁸ An Act to Incorporate the Farmers’ High School of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Legislature 46, No. 50 (1855).

²³⁹ Evan Pugh, *1862 Annual Report* (Farmers’ High School, 1862), Pugh Papers, Pennsylvania State University Special Collections.

indexing a different phase of the settler project. Pugh emphasizes the role of nationalism persistently in his writing on the institution, and, while there are echoes of this at Michigan, they do not carry the same fervor. The emphasis on great men in Penn State's history is illustrative in that it performs a tight association between individual achievement and the health of the nation; an individualism that is characteristic of American nationalism.

Conclusion

Justin Smith Morrill died in Washington DC on December 28, 1898, thirty-six years after the legislation that bore his name was signed into law. He had remained active in the land-grant movement until his death, maintaining active correspondences with land-grant presidents across the nation. At the time of his death, his forty-three years and two-hundred ninety-nine days of continuous Congressional service were the longest in the nation's history. Morrill lived long enough to see the passage of the Hatch Act and the establishment of agricultural experiment stations at land-grant colleges and universities, the completion of the transcontinental railroad, and the formalization of scientific agriculture into degree programs around the country. In the third session of the fifty-fifth Congress, January, 1899, a series of memorial addresses on the "life and character" of Justin Morrill were delivered and subsequently collected into a published volume. In the addresses, Morrill is characterized somewhat paradoxically. In the address of one Mr. Ross, Morrill is described as possessing "great strength in manhood" and "unusual ability,"²⁴⁰ yet was "not a born genius, nor possessed of abnormal intellectual faculties, nor of special grace of manners, nor of speech."²⁴¹ Morrill is, at the same time, one-in-a-generation, exceptional, and irreplaceable,

²⁴⁰ United States Congress, *Memorial Addresses on the Life and Character of Justin S. Morrill (Late a Senator from Vermont)* (Government Printing Office, 1899), <http://archive.org/details/memorialaddress01addrgoog>, 8.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 14.

and the common man, ordinary in his capacities and faculties, a figure the average American farmer could find readily legible. This dichotomy is mirrored in the histories of the land-grant system that I have surfaced in this chapter. The land-grant institutions are at once the inevitable outgrowth of industrial and capitalist progress, and ragged underdogs fighting tooth and nail for their existence through waves of crisis. This dual characterization can be understood as a feature of agnosia, the production of forgetting, and indicate the contingency of historical and narrative construction.

As objects of study, universities are tricky to pin down. As objects of attachment they are surprisingly stretchy and capacious: the university can be a family, can be a home, can be a father, can be a nation, can be a savior, can be a king, can be the people, can be a we. To study a university, then, these attachments—structures of desire—cannot be understood as representative of the totality of the institution, but they can neither be discounted. Underneath this tangle of attachments, convoluted mechanisms of self-formation, normative and hegemonic pressures—underneath all of that, there is land. The particular language around the parcels of land that would make up the grants is illustrative: grant, gift, and endowment all evoke a sense of not only benevolence but some structure of higher authority. Contemporary scholars refer to “*land-grab universities*”²⁴² as a move to refuse the recasting of theft as a gift. After all, it’s true that the federal government made grants of land, but the capacity of the federal government to grant land is contingent on its capacity to grab it first. Framing it as a “grant” conveniently crops out any past where the federal government did not have the right, military power, or administrative capacity to seize land.

The two types of objects I examine in this chapter—the archival and the commemorative, supplemented by secondary scholarship—are significant modes of the

²⁴² Robert Lee, Tristan Ahtone, “Land-Grab Universities.”

production of both institutional history and institutional commonsense, circulating both in the academic and in the public spheres. How a university tells a story about itself matters: the construction of every story requires leaving things out, and the “particular bundle of silences”²⁴³ that makes up the underbelly of every story tells us much about what a society would like to forget; what would be more convenient if it remained unnoticed. The discursive and affective analysis taken up in this chapter will be supplemented in the following chapters: Chapter Two offers a deeper consideration of the curriculum of the land-grant institutions and the development of the field of scientific agriculture, emphasizing the role of federal land policy, and Chapter Three considers the forms of militarism inherent in the land-grant system to more robustly theorize the land-grant institutions as sites of dispossessive accumulation.

²⁴³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing The Past: Power And The Production Of History* (Beacon Press, 1995), 23.

Chapter 2: Scientific Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts

Introduction

In the fall of 2025, I drive forty-five minutes south from where I live in Providence, RI to a small farm on Aquidneck Island to attend a workshop on flax processing. The workshop is led by a farmer and a fiber artist, and they introduce the participants to the quarter-acre of flax they seeded in the early spring. Flax, whose long fibers are processed to make linen, is an extraordinarily resilient plant. Unlike cotton, it thrives in dry, sandy soil, is unbothered by exposure and weather extremes, and is well adapted to a variety of climates. The farmers on Aquidneck Island are part of a coalition of flax farmers in the northeastern United States who are working to build and recover infrastructure for flax production, given its potential as a more climate change resistant crop than either cotton or hemp. There has never been industrial scale infrastructure for linen production in the United States, and the farmers tell us how in the early colonial period, the capacity of Southern states to grow cotton was understood as an indication of the richness of the soil, and, metonymically, an indication of the richness of the nation. They tell us about the long-term environmental impacts of industrial cotton production: that the amount of water needed to produce a cotton shirt from seed to garment is larger than the amount of water needed to produce a linen shirt by a factor of fourteen hundred. In active consultation and collaboration with Narragansett tribal leadership, the farmers are working to reanimate land-based practices that have been sidelined by capitalist and industrial forms of agriculture, deemed unproductive and impractical. During the workshop, we learn to use a hundred year old machine called a “scutcher” to break down the rigid outer layer of the plant to expose the longer “line” fibers and separate them from the shorter “tow” fibers in preparation for spinning. While we’re

trying to get a handle on the physically intensive process of scutching, the farmers tell us how they've spent years going to estate sales and old farms to try and track down the equipment. In the face of a rapidly shifting climate, these farmers are asking what infrastructure sustainable flax production would require.

Over the past three seasons, the farmers have experimented with different strategies of cultivation, drying, and processing. The absence of industrial scale linen-production infrastructure in the United States corresponds to an absence of systematic or scalable scientific literature on the subject. These farmers are working inside of a contradiction: their project could benefit immensely from scientific knowledge on flax cultivation, but they are committed to resisting the modes of scientific agricultural practice that would scale that knowledge. They see their work as modeling a set of land-based practices that oppose, rather than reproduce, the commodification of land and the alienation of labor. This chapter is animated through the paradoxes faced by these flax farmers: how and to what extent are the circulation of agricultural knowledge and agricultural science reliant on land theft? How is agricultural science and its attendant logics of coloniality represented as a “fix” for on-the-ground problems faced by farmers, and how does that supposed fix conscript working farmers into reproducing dispossession? In order to delve deeper into these questions, this chapter asks how and why the Morrill Act positioned scientific agriculture and the mechanic arts as the “leading object of study”²⁴⁴ of the land-grant institutions, and how scientific agriculture crowded out the mechanic arts in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In other words, what structural features of scientific agriculture as a discipline produced and

²⁴⁴ Act of July 2, 1862 (Morrill Act), Which Established Land Grant Colleges, Public Law 37-108, Congress of the United States of America, General Records of the United States Government Record Group 11 (1862).

maintained its centrality in the land-grant imaginary, and how is that centrality related to the mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession that undergird the land-grant institutions?

Scientific agriculture is consistently represented as a fix: for soil degradation, for declining crop yields, and for labor shortages. I suggest that scientific agriculture's ascendancy in the land-grant imaginary reflects its capacity for a different kind of fix, for a set of racial and governance problems that threatened the nineteenth century state; that scientific agriculture fixes settlers in place, and necessitates and rewards a deepening and universalizing of settler infrastructure. Agricultural science requires observation of crops across multiple growing seasons; requires laboratory equipment; requires conditions in which experiments can be replicated. Agricultural science requires a certain set of infrastructural conditions in place that allow for the isolation of variables and the plausibility of the assertion of epistemological claims. It requires, in short, that settlers stay in one place long enough to capture scientifically legitimate knowledge.

The story of the ascendancy of scientific agriculture might go something like this: in the early nineteenth century, the federal government considered unregulated westward expansion to be the greatest threat to the nation, and tightly regulated settler property claims on the frontier. The perception of limitless, uninhabited western land and the easy availability of cheap farmland rewarded a system of extractive agriculture that posed uninhabited western land as a viable solution for soil exhaustion. Despite the structural features of plantation agriculture that made it difficult and costly to actually move farms to different locations, the imaginary of terra nullius shaped underlying logics of American agriculture. Though the discipline would not cohere until the end of the nineteenth century, strategies of scientific cultivation intervened in this culture of disposability of land, offering concrete strategies to improve exhausted soil and restore productive yields. In the mid-nineteenth century, the

federal government reversed its previously restrictive position on settler preemption rights, incentivizing and encouraging a period of massive territorial acquisition. This reversal indicates a significant shift in the confidence of the federal government in its capacity to govern a wider geographic area while maintaining national coherence. The knowledge system of scientific agriculture was a critical piece of this shift in its promises of *scalable and non-site-specific* (i.e., generalizable across contexts) methods to enhance the productivity of land that, through the land-grant college system, are presumably available to all citizens.

The 1862 charge of the Morrill Act to take scientific agriculture and the mechanic arts as the leading object of study faced a series of implementation problems, the primary problem being that the discipline of scientific agriculture did not exist. Most historians of scientific agriculture date the origin of the discipline to 1887 and the passage of the Hatch Act, which established ongoing federal funding for agricultural experiment stations at land-grant institutions. That the institution precedes the discipline is peculiar, but represents an important structural feature of the land-grant institutions: their capacity to operate as sites of settler class struggle. The absence of a coherent discipline of scientific agriculture meant that the institutions rapidly became the site of collisions between competing agricultural interests. The history of the discipline of scientific agriculture is a dialectical history of struggle between white settlers of different class positions. I argue that the vibrancy of class struggle over the form and content of scientific agriculture in the first several decades of the land-grant system functions to obscure the mutual investments of distinct classes in settler colonial dispossession.

In this chapter, I aim to tell a story about what the land-grant system *wants* from its disciplinary darlings; what future it was trying to secure through a discipline that didn't yet exist. I bring farmer-led reform efforts into the frame to consider how scientific agriculture

functioned discursively to authorize and naturalize the land grabs underwriting the Morrill Act. I ask how the particular relationships between agricultural science and shifting agricultural labor regimes following the Civil War can be taken up toward a more robust theorization of the Morrill Act as a transformational moment, not only in the history of American higher education, but in the consolidation of a Lockean property regime that formalized dispossession as the condition of possibility of so-called “public” goods.

The economic, demographic, and political repercussions of the Civil War accelerated a series of crises in agricultural production, and science was posed as a “fix” for those crises. Working farmers and agricultural laborers had a real stake in the development and application of agricultural science, and populist and farmer-led reform efforts left an indelible mark on the objects and methods of the discipline. The backdrop of the crisis of soil exhaustion and racialized anxieties around the role of slavery in agricultural productivity led to a process of disciplinary formation that was somewhat uniquely responsive to pressures, agitation, and demands by non professional scientists. Scientific agriculture became a discipline in a utilitarian crucible, a period in American history when “practicality” was the highest aim and organizing principle of scientific knowledge production. This social and economic backdrop both facilitated the inclusion of poor white farmers into the land-grant university system, and positioned the field as a vehicle for the production and cohering of certain forms of nationalism that sutured morality and citizenship to the “improvement” of land.

This chapter examines distinct key sites of the development and elaboration of scientific agriculture: the circulation of knowledge of agricultural science and practices, soil exhaustion and degradation, shifting agricultural labor regimes surrounding the Civil War, and populist and farmer-led movements. Each of these sites represents a terrain of struggle—over the content, social role, and dissemination of agricultural sciences—and each

provides particular insight into the becoming-science and disciplinary formation of agriculture, and each offers a unique lens into the social, political, and economic backdrop of this process. In selecting these nodes, I aim to push back on commonsense narratives of scientific progress that frame progress as both inevitable and elevated or disconnected from the social or political, and to more fully situate the development of scientific agriculture as a key mechanism of the expansion and maintenance of the settler state. In this analysis I emphasize that scientific innovation typically follows, rather than precedes, shifting regimes of labor and accumulation. I argue that the discursive infrastructure surrounding scientific agriculture reproduces property relations, reifies the state form, and naturalizes Indigenous dispossession.

Crisis and Democracy: the Breeding Grounds of Scientific Agriculture

Much as the university generally and the land-grant institution specifically are understood as a “fix” for a broader set of social and political problems, the discipline of scientific agriculture is represented as a “fix” for the crises of soil exhaustion and racialized agricultural labor that structured much of the nineteenth century. I posit that the discipline of scientific agriculture figures as an imperfect synecdoche for the land-grant institution: it encompasses many of the same affects and optimisms as does the institution, and its official histories (and attendant silences) are instructive in considering the multi-scalar installations of settler lifeways. Eli Meyerhoff has argued that the production of forgetting is intimately related to the romance myth of education, a myth that upholds the inherent social value of education by trafficking in “an epistemology of educated ignorance that hinders study.”²⁴⁵ In Chapter One I argue that the land-grant system’s explicit project of incorporating poor white

²⁴⁵ Eli Meyerhoff, *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 5.

farmers into the university by representing it as a site of upward class mobility represents an early emergence of the romance myth, and most historical work on scientific agriculture and the land-grant system reproduces this formulation of the inherent goodness of education. The romance myth gestures toward two theories of education that were operational in this period: a reparative theory (in which education is posed as a fix for an array of social, political, and environmental problems), and a vanguardist theory (in which education is posed as a vehicle for upward class mobility and a site of the development of regimes of expertise). Here, I argue that though it takes different forms than in the history of universities more broadly, the framework of the crisis consensus and the romance myth are operational in particular key moments in the development of the discipline of scientific agriculture. A significant driver in the passage of the 1862 Morrill Act was the crisis of soil degradation that afflicted Northern farmers, and, in the decades surrounding the passage of the act, the more general sense that farmers had a problem, and that American agriculture was in crisis. Alan Marcus glosses the pervasiveness of the narrative of the agricultural crisis in the opening pages of *Agricultural Science and the Quest for Legitimacy*, writing,

[T]he condition of American agriculturalists and agriculture emerged as a distinct concern to farmers, state boards of agriculture, agricultural newspapers, and others, who constantly and publicly harped on the “farm problem,” often in dramatic or graphic terms. Some commentators pointed to the “scores of abandoned farms, hundreds of dilapidated houses, thousands of acres of once productive field and pasture now overgrown by weeds and bushes,” while others complained that farmhouses had become “too often nurseries of morbid thoughts and brooding, monotonous sentiment that distort and often madden the mind.” Critics also proclaimed “that the flaming headlines and the brilliant footlights, that the glare and clamour and pyrotechnics of our city life are enticing young men, and young women too, from their rural surroundings,” and worried that “the rural spirit of the country is dying out.” One demanded to know “why farmers’ sons are continually striving to quit their ancestral acres” and “why farmers’

daughters refuse to marry farmers' sons until they are utterly hopeless of finding anybody of a different occupation to marry them?²⁴⁶

The wide array of causes ascribed to this crisis calls into question somewhat the veracity of the claims of crisis. The problem with American farmers might be hopelessly degraded soil, or it might be spiritual rot, or it might be lack of material security and upward mobility, or it might be the abolition of slavery. In her meditation on crisis, Janet Roitman writes that “crisis is an omnipresent sign in almost all forms of narrative today; it is mobilized as the defining category of historical situations, past and present.”²⁴⁷ Following Roitman, we might consider what the *work* of crisis as a narrative mobilization does for the production of the land-grant system and imaginary. How might the crisis (whether perceived, produced, or natural) of American agriculture be understood in relation to the romance myth, to illuminate the narrative and discursive mechanisms of epistemological ignorance? What does crisis forget? Justin Morrill wrote in 1874 that “the very cheapness of our public lands, and the facility of purchase and transfer, tended to a system of bad-farming or strip and waste of the soil, by encouraging short occupancy and a speedy search for new homes, entailing upon the first and older settlements a rapid deterioration of the soil, which would not be likely to be arrested except by a more thorough and scientific knowledge of agriculture and by a higher education of those who were devoted to its pursuit.”²⁴⁸ This logic of crisis intimately structures the disciplinary formation of scientific agriculture, most obviously in rhetoric about soil exhaustion, but also in the context of the economic precarity of agricultural labor, the production of nationalisms following the Civil War, and a cluster of anxieties about rural depopulation and shifting demographic patterns in the nineteenth century.

²⁴⁶ Alan I. Marcus, *Agricultural Science and the Quest for Legitimacy* (Iowa State University Press, 1985), 1.

²⁴⁷ Janet L. Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, Social Theory (Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

²⁴⁸ William Belmont Parker, *The Life and Public Services of Justin Smith Morrill*, (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), 262.

Most historians of scientific agriculture date the formation of the field to the mid 1890s,²⁴⁹ which is significant given that the first Morrill Act—mandating institutions of scientific agriculture in every state—was passed in 1862. The charge in the Morrill Act was a speculative enterprise, an attempt to control the future through the legitimizing of settler modes of agriculture, and the passage of the Morrill Act was followed by several decades of fierce contestation over both the nature of the institutions and the nature of the discipline. The Morrill Act did not establish the discipline of scientific agriculture; rather, it created the spaces in which the field could be struggled over. There were fiery arguments over disparities in scientific training and philosophies of science, clashes between the professional class of scientists and farmers, struggles over resource allocation, and panic over how best to mitigate soil exhaustion. I posit that the forms of class struggle over the development of the discipline of scientific agriculture and the implementation of the Morrill Act function to legitimize the discipline and the institution through a narrowing of allowable grammars of critique: working class grievances over the failures of the land-grant institutions to live up to their stated missions presuppose the existence of the institution, positioning its conditions of possibility as either a self-evident good or an unfortunate footnote. The vibrancy of class struggle over the discipline of scientific agriculture and its instruction in the land-grant institutions indicates the emerging capacity of the university to absorb dissent.

Tensions between “pure” or “theoretical” and “applied” or “practical” science animated many of these working-class struggles, and land-grant reformers frequently articulated their critiques through the lens of institutional failures to produce useful knowledge for working farmers. Relative to Europe, the United States held utilitarian

²⁴⁹ See: Rossiter, *The Emergence of Agricultural Science*; Marcus, *Agricultural Science and the Quest for Legitimacy*; Oleson and Brown, *The Pursuit of Knowledge in the Early American Republic*; Oleson and Voss, *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860-1920*.

scientific knowledge as paramount. Alexandra Oleson traces this dynamic to the Enlightenment, writing that, “most scientists and scholars of the late eighteenth century saw no distinction between theoretical and applied knowledge; indeed, one of the tenets of the Enlightenment was the belief that scientific principles could be applied to, and would ultimately produce, utilitarian results.”²⁵⁰ By the nineteenth century, particularly in European universities, the distinction between theoretical and applied knowledge would harden somewhat, and most American universities would continue to hold practical scientific knowledge production in highest esteem. Laurence Veysey writes that “during the ten years after 1865, almost every visible change in the pattern of higher education lay in the direction of concessions to the utilitarian demand for reform.”²⁵¹ Alexis de Tocqueville considers this primacy of applied science in a short chapter in Volume II of *Democracy in America*, titled “Why the Americans are More Addicted to Practical Than to Theoretical Science,” published following his 1831 tour of the American prison system. For Tocqueville, theoretical science has a fundamental incompatibility with the social arrangements of a democratic society. He writes, “equality begets in man the desire of judging of everything for himself: it gives him, in all things, a taste for the tangible and the real, a contempt for tradition and for forms. [...] Those who cultivate the sciences amongst a democratic people are always afraid of losing their way in visionary speculation.”²⁵² In Tocqueville’s estimation, the pursuit of what he calls the “elevated” sciences requires sustained time for meditation, which can only be found in a society in which the aristocratic class “clings to a state of repose because it is well off.”²⁵³ In contrast, democratic societies are in a state of “universal tumult—this incessant conflict of

²⁵⁰ Oleson et al., *The Pursuit of Knowledge in the Early American Republic*, xv.

²⁵¹ Veysey, Laurence R. *The Emergence of the American University*. University of Chicago Press, 1965, 60.

²⁵² Alexis de Tocqueville and Henry Reeve, *Democracy in America*, A Bantam Classic (Bantam Books, 2000), 552.

²⁵³ Ibid.

jarring interests—this continual stride of men after fortune.”²⁵⁴ It seems plausible that what Tocqueville is describing here is capitalism, not democracy, but this conflation is a common one at the time—democracy is frequently understood as a project of broadening access to participation in capitalism. Regardless, the attachments to practical science that Tocqueville characterizes as a feature of democracy are more precisely understood as features of free-market capitalism as it is practiced in a nominally democratic political structure.

Democracy and market-based capitalism are inextricable, and Tocqueville identifies that a significant difference in the social arrangements in the United States from the aristocratic structure of European societies is the perception that class position is traversable and changeable; that through the democratization of opportunity, any given citizen has the capacity to move out of the class position he was born into. In this context of capitalist striving and the incentivization of upward class mobility, the pursuit of pure or theoretical science rarely offers the producer of that knowledge concrete or material gains. For Tocqueville, who retains an investment in the social hierarchies and practices of valuation that correspond to the pursuit of higher level knowledge, referring to it as “almost divine,”²⁵⁵ the American attachment to practical science represents a sort of base utilitarianism, rewarding efficiency and the reduction of friction over the pursuit of truth. In his most simple formulation, “in aristocratic ages, science is more particularly called upon to furnish gratification to the mind; in democracies, to the body.”²⁵⁶ The social conditions of capitalist democracy reward knowledge that can most immediately be commodified: put to use to increase capital or class position. In the context of a settler colony, the rhetoric of democracy is collapsed with the material interests of settler colonialism. This collapse is visible in the

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 556.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 557.

construction of the land-grant college system, which justified the massive and largely uncompensated seizure of Indigenous land by emphasizing the democratic character of the institutions that would be built from the spoils of dispossession.

The ideological underpinnings of the conception of democracy that was represented by the land-grant system rely on a Lockean theory of property that became increasingly predominant in the eighteenth century United States. During the seventeenth century, dispossession of Indigenous peoples was authorized, justified, and naturalized through particular conceptions of freedom elaborated by Edward Coke, the English jurist who in 1608 articulated a legal basis for colonial conquest in his decision in *Calvin's Case*, which argued that the conqueror had absolute rights over the conquered. Seventy years later, John Locke extended this conception of freedom and mapped it explicitly onto the American conquest in his *Second Treatise of Government*. Locke proceeds from a labor theory of property, in which mixing one's labor with land forms the basis of property claims, situating the formation of property as a natural and organic process. Locke elaborated this foundation in Chapter V, *On Property*, writing,

Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person; this nobody has any right to but himself. The labor of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature has provided and left it in, he has mixed his labor with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. It being by him removed from the common state nature has placed it in, it has by this labor something annexed to it that excludes the common right of other men. For this labor being the unquestionable property of the laborer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough and as good left in common for others.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (The Liberal Arts Press, 1952), 17.

Freedom, for Locke, is understood as the capacity to generate property through mixing one's labor with what has been held in common. Conveniently, Locke did not claim that consent was necessary for the enclosure of land held in common or for an individual to mix his labor with land, and in fact authorizes the dispossession of Indigenous peoples through a claim that since individual property rights were absent in their political and economic arrangements, they had no land rights that European settlers were bound to respect. Rana argues that "in essence, Locke's invocation of the civilized-savage dichotomy and its emphasis on sedentary agriculture as a basis for political recognition buttressed the feudal discourse of conquest."²⁵⁸ Locke and Coke share a conception of conquered peoples that sets the stage for forms of indentured and forced labor, as well as for the importation of African slaves. For Locke, slavery was viewed as the continuation of a state of war, and in the context of war, infidels had no rights that the conquerors were bound to respect. Importantly, Rana argues that the development of a slave economy and structures of indentured servitude in the seventeenth century were fluid in terms of race, and "owed more to questions of labor discipline than to race status."²⁵⁹ Racial categories harden as a justification for capitalist division of labor. With the expansion of the slave trade and the increasing proportion of enslaved labor in the colonies providing much of the agricultural output, colonies began to institute systematic forms of racial discrimination (such as prohibiting free blacks from owning slaves or indentured servants, the outlawing of intermarriage, and the restriction of private manumission. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, racialized divisions between Anglo settlers and native and black subjects were hardened, which, Rana argues, was not coincidental but rather "the conquest of native territory and the extension of African slavery were conditions by which Anglo settlers sought to strengthen their egalitarian internal

²⁵⁸ Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom*, 35.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

relationships.”²⁶⁰ American freedom was increasingly positioned as dependent on the unfreedom of others, namely Black and Indigenous subjects. This Lockean conception of freedom did not just reject Indigenous property claims, it undermined the basis from which those claims could be made, rendering Indigenous claims to land legally and politically unthinkable. Locke’s labor theory of private property rests on a narrow conception of labor, and Indigenous modes of land stewardship and agricultural science were illegible to Locke as labor, and thus had no legitimate basis for property claims.

The on-the-ground mechanics of the enforcement of settler property claims was, in reality, far more complex than Locke’s framework allowed for. Stuart Banner has demonstrated that despite repeated assertions that the seizure of Indigenous lands did not depend on or require the consent of Indigenous peoples, the predominant tendency among settlers was to acquire land through legal processes (private purchases and gifts) rather than through outright conquest.²⁶¹ These “softer” forms of dispossession were hardly less structurally violent,²⁶² though they are more easily absorbed into a hegemonic story about the moral and political legitimacy of American democracy. This hegemonic story—what Aziz Rana refers to as the “American creedal story”—pivots on a national identity that holds that “the United States has been committed to the principle that ‘all men are created equal’ from the time of its founding, and our history can be viewed as a steady fulfillment of this idea.”²⁶³ According to this creedal story, the American Revolution was anti-colonial in character, and thus the expansion of the resultant democratic society was endowed with the moral legitimacy of a liberation movement. This story conveniently forgets that the American push

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 48.

²⁶¹ Stuart Banner, *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier* (Harvard University Press, 2005).

²⁶² Scott Richard Lyons, *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent*, Indigenous Americas (University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

²⁶³ Aziz Rana, “Race and the American Creed,” *Politics, N+I*, Winter 2016.

for independence from Great Britain was, in large part, a response to limitations on territorial expansion put in place by the British monarchy. To put it somewhat crudely, Americans wanted the freedom to pursue a political economy of plunder, and the rhetoric of democracy authorized this pursuit.²⁶⁴ The production of crisis narratives around the state of American agriculture positions settler science as a solution to crises inherent to settler modes of land cultivation, which naturalizes and obscures the dispossessive originary conditions of American democracy.

Curriculum and Class

The figure of the American farmer has long been imbued with particular optimisms and spiritual weightiness, imagined as a manifestation of all the qualities that made the nation great. The contestations over the discipline of scientific agriculture in the late nineteenth century were class struggles that hit on powerful emotional registers of citizenship, belonging, and nationalism, and the challenges faced by the land-grant institutions in their first decades highlight powerful contradictions in the installation of settler democracy. Though the discipline of scientific agriculture is a site of class struggle in the latter half of the nineteenth century, I surface these struggles in part to point out that deep investments in Indigenous dispossession and the idea of America as a white nation yoked these disparate class interests together. The farmer-led movements that argued that the land-grant system was elitist and failing to meet the needs of farmers never questioned, for instance, the territorial source of the start-up capital of the land-grant institutions. The emergence of scientific agriculture as a coherent discipline is the result of a dialectical struggle between distinct class

²⁶⁴ Michael John Witgen, *Seeing Red: Indigenous Land, American Expansion, and the Political Economy of Plunder in North America* (Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and the University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

interests that share a common investment in settler colonialism, and the struggle itself functions to naturalize its conditions of possibility: the theft of Indigenous land.

In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson wrote “those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”²⁶⁵ Jefferson’s sentiment of the spiritual value of agricultural labor was widely shared at the time, and represents a complex entanglement between agricultural labor, spiritual development of the individual, and the spiritual character of the nation. For Jefferson and his contemporaries, the particularities of agricultural labor were intimately related to the production of citizen-subjects. Marcus argues that “farmers not only possessed the innate qualities required to make correct and virtuous decisions—decisions that would insure their own and their country’s success—but those same qualities manifested themselves in individual autonomy; farmers were beholden to no one.”²⁶⁶ In his gloss of the landscape of agricultural practices and social arrangements in the second half of the nineteenth century, Marcus emphasizes that scientific agriculture, though it ultimately won out as the vehicle through which the crisis of American agriculture could best be remedied, was only one of a range of reform efforts that also included political collectivism of farmers, most notably the Grange movement and the Farmers’ Alliance. Farmer-based reforms are characterized by a sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency, and each of these reform efforts “presumed that farmers required no assistance from outside their cohort to free themselves from their predicament.”²⁶⁷ Ultimately, the turn toward agricultural science as a mechanism of reform reflects these values of autonomy, or, as Marcus writes, “agricultural science appealed to many farmers precisely because its many aspects appeared

²⁶⁵ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Lilly and Wait, 1832), 175.

²⁶⁶ Marcus, *Agricultural Science and the Quest for Legitimacy*, 3.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

to mimic farmer-based reforms.”²⁶⁸ In other words, farmers were interested in agricultural science as a vehicle to minimize their dependence—on the state or other external forces. Their investments in scientific and technical solutions to the problems they faced reflected a desire to increase their own capacities for self-sufficiency, rather than a desire to outsource knowledge and authority to an “expert.” These mimics of farmer-led reform efforts included a move toward the rationalization of agricultural practices and the modernization of modes of land stewardship to keep step with industrialization. However, “the primary distinction between agricultural science and farmer-based reforms lay in the standardization and systematization mechanism; agricultural scientists contended that farmers could not effect the requisite transformation alone.”²⁶⁹ The distinction between agricultural science and farmer-led reforms has much to do with the role of institutional knowledge production and a faith in expertise/authority over faith in the capacity of ordinary people to solve the problems that most intimately affected them, but both represent the naturalization of settler modes of land stewardship.

Marcus poses an origin story of agricultural science that locates its beginnings in the 1887 passage of the Hatch Act, which provided federal funding to each state to establish an agricultural experiment station. Marcus argues that although land-grant institutions and professorships in scientific agriculture were on the rise between 1862 and 1887, it was not until the construction of experiment stations that agricultural science was consolidated into a discipline. Importantly, the establishment and expansion of cooperative extension resulted from compromises made between the old guard agricultural gentry and farmer-led movements and reform efforts. These compromises took shape through general farmer dissatisfaction with the operations of the land-grant schools in their first several decades, and

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 6.

a desire for these institutions to address anxieties of rural depopulation by educating students *toward* rather than *away from* the farm. The forms that this dissatisfaction took are organized around distribution: critiques that the land-grant institutions were failing to deliver the goods that they promised to the people they'd promised them to. Ultimately, the vibrancy of class-based institutional critique in the second half of the nineteenth century rendered deeper structural critiques of the university unthinkable, naturalizing the dispossessive originary conditions of the land-grant system.

Though it had emerged in a context of fierce and impassioned debates about the purposes of agricultural higher education, the Morrill Act and its passage did not resolve that struggle, but rather inaugurated a new phase of populist and farmer-led organizing that would powerfully shape both the development of the institutions and the development of the field of scientific agriculture. The impacts of the economic depression of the 1870s on farmers led to widespread skepticism toward the supposed universality of the land-grant institutions, and the second half of the nineteenth century saw burgeoning farmer-led populist movements agitating for a different kind of education. Land grant historian Nathan Sorber notes that “between 1887 and 1892, state legislatures withdrew the land-grant designation from Yale, Dartmouth, and Brown, and used the funds to establish three new land-grant colleges: Connecticut Agricultural College, Rhode Island Agricultural College, and the New Hampshire College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts.”²⁷⁰ The organizational body largely responsible for these changes was the Patrons of Husbandry, commonly referred to as “the grange.” The Patrons of Husbandry formed in 1867, were most active between 1873 and 1875, and were an outgrowth of earlier agricultural associations, but with a markedly different class character.

²⁷⁰ Nathan M. Sorber, *Land-Grant Colleges and Popular Revolt: The Origins of the Morrill Act and the Reform of Higher Education* (Cornell University Press, 2018), 3.

Agricultural associations for the majority of the eighteenth century were made up of “gentleman farmers,” and were primarily concerned with the needs of aristocratic farmers. It wasn’t until the end of the Civil War that white working-class farmers organized themselves into politically and economically significant blocs, and it was the destruction wrought by the war that stimulated much of this organization. In his 1913 history of the Granger Movement, Solon Justus Buck remarks that “the South was left by the war in a state of complete exhaustion in which agriculture shared to the fullest extent: farms had been devastated or neglected, often the owners had been killed in battle or rendered incapable of work, and worst of all the complete change in the industrial system made a return to normal agricultural conditions extremely slow.”²⁷¹ Furthermore, the crisis of soil exhaustion was reaching a head, particularly in the southern states, and between the material effects of the Civil War, the economic depression, and declining soil health, the conditions were ripe for farmer-led reform efforts that represented a broader swath of class positions. Racial anxieties further spurred these organizational efforts: working class reformers took pains to disidentify with formerly enslaved Black agricultural laborers, and to cast Indigenous modes of land stewardship as nonscientific, and thus illegitimate as the basis for property claims.

The Patrons of Husbandry was the brainchild of Oliver Hudson Kelley, a clerk in the government service in Washington. Originally from New England, Kelley had settled on a farm in Minnesota. In 1864 he became a clerk in the agricultural bureau, and in 1866 he was appointed to travel through southern states to gather information for the department. Importantly, Kelley was a Freemason, and he was struck in his travels by the lack of a progressive spirit among farmers in the southern states. He concluded that “a national secret order of farmers was needed for the furthering of the industrial reconstruction of the South

²⁷¹ Solon Justus Buck, *The Granger Movement* (Harvard University Press, 1913), 5.

and the advancement of the agricultural class throughout the country.”²⁷² Kelley’s niece, Carrie Hall, is to be credited for suggesting that women be admitted to full membership in the order, a suggestion which Kelley apparently took to heart.

In 1867 Kelley began a clerkship in the post-office department at Washington, and recruited another clerk, W.M. Ireland, and William Saunders, a clerk in the agricultural bureau, to the nascent order. Their first task was to organize an elaborate initiation ritual, which they considered to be an indispensable piece of their effort. By November of 1867, three hundred circulars had been printed and distributed to farmers. The full text of the circular reads:

A number of gentlemen engaged in Agriculture and its kindred branches in different States, are now perfecting a Ritual for an Order, to be composed wholly of persons, male and female, directly interested in Agricultural pursuits.

The Order will secure to its members all the advantages of Masonary, but while that is speculative, this will be operative; its main object being to encourage and advance education in all branches of Agriculture.

The Order will have its ‘Lodges,’ known as ‘Temples of Industry,’ or similar appellation. The work in a ‘Temple’ will be divided into four degrees.

The ceremonies of passing from one degree to the other are made pleasing and instructive. Every tool used in Agriculture has its appropriate lecture, the aim being to instruct practically and morally in every possible way, and also add an interest to the most noble of all occupations—the cultivation of the soil.

It is believed that by admission the young folks of both sexes at fourteen or sixteen years of age, it will have a tendency to instill in their minds a fondness for rural life, and prevent in a great measure so many of them flocking to the cities, where all occupations are now crowded, and at the same time depriving the country of that class of young men so much needed there.

The ceremonies in the degrees for the ladies are slightly different but of the same nature, and intended to lighten and render their household duties more pleasing.

²⁷² Ibid., 41.

The whole, it is believed, will do much towards elevating our occupation, as well as establishing a unity of sentiment among the farmers of the country, and materially increase the circulation of publications devoted to the interests of agriculture, and consequent increase of knowledge.

Politics and Religion are *not* subjects of discussion. Private work of the Order will occupy one evening each month. Public meetings for lectures and discussions are proposed to be held once a week.

Libraries and Museums (the latter to contain among other things samples of each year's crop of all career productions) are considered necessary appendages to each Temple.

It is designed to have at least one Temple in each county, with one delegate from each to the State Temple: these will send one delegate each to the National Temple, which is to be the head of the Order. Persons holding office under Government cannot be delegates to either the State or National Temple.

Should such an organization meet your approval, and you see fit to offer any suggestions to enable the originators to make further improvements, before it is introduced to the public, the same will be most cordially received and duly considered.

Please address.²⁷³

At first pass it might strike a reader as odd that the social form of the Masonry was adopted as the standard for farmer-led reform efforts, but it reflects a broader landscape of the reorganization of agricultural labor following the Civil War; a reorganization that I gloss as the “dignification” of agricultural labor, or the entanglement of agricultural labor with vaunted philosophical ideas of freedom, selfhood, and citizenship. This dignification was unavoidably racial in character: poor white farmers moved to collectively distinguish themselves as a class from formerly enslaved Black farmers and agriculturalists. Presenting the reified, fraternal organization as the site of the development of agricultural knowledge was a savvy move toward suturing agricultural labor to a particular form of racialized citizenship that could stabilize the precarious economy of the post-war nation. By adopting a social organization that mirrored the Freemasons, the Grange movement effectively

²⁷³ O. H. Kelley, *Origin and Progress of the Order of the Patrons of Husbandry in the United States; a History From 1866-1873* (J.A. Wagenseller, 1875), 38-40.

contributed to the reclassification of agricultural labor from “the labor that enslaved people do” to “the labor that educated, progressive citizens do.”

The hierarchical membership structure that was adopted by the Grange reflects distinct relations to modes of production. The Grange had seven degrees, four of which could be conferred by the local grange, one that could be conferred by the state grange, and the two highest that could be conferred by the National Grange. For men, the four subordinate degrees were Laborer, Cultivator, Harvester, and Husbandsman,²⁷⁴ and the corresponding degrees for women were Maid, Shepherdess, Gleaner, and Matron. The state grange could confer the fifth degree, Pomona (Hope), and the National Grange could confer the sixth degree, Flora (Charity). After serving for a year in the National Council, members of the sixth degree could take the seventh degree, Demeter or Ceres (Faith) and become members of the Senate.²⁷⁵ The seventh degree was charged with the secret work of the order. Buck notes that though “there was considerable agitation for the abolition of the higher degrees among the rank and file of the Grangers when the organization was at the height of its prosperity in the seventies,”²⁷⁶ that agitation never materialized into substantive organizational change. Buck makes numerous mentions of the “ritual” as a primary task of early organizers, but does not offer any substantive account of what this ritual included or what its purpose was, in keeping with the values of secrecy that the organization espoused. The degree structure of the organization was formalized in 1868, and another circular was distributed following the establishment of the National Grange in that year. The 1868 circular²⁷⁷ is more flowery in tone, emphasizes the seriousness of their pursuit and discusses the educational pursuits of the

²⁷⁴ These degrees overlap, imperfectly, with Reingold’s characterization of *researchers*, *practitioners*, and *cultivators*.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 43.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ For a complete text of the circular see Appendix A.

Grange in more depth, writing that “the wealth of the country will depend altogether upon the general intelligence and mental culture of the producing classes.”²⁷⁸ On the point of secrecy, the circular remarks that while associations and clubs tend to come and go, they have scanned and studied “all existing popular modes of creating an interest in agriculture,”²⁷⁹ and come to the conclusion that secrecy is the key driver of longevity. “If then, this [secrecy] is the great element of eminent success, why not embrace it in associations for the spread and increase of knowledge, and for the noble purpose of adding to national wealth and power?”²⁸⁰

By 1871 there were state Granges in sixteen states, and the order experienced its most rapid period of growth between 1872 and 1873. The founders had envisioned an association that would primarily benefit its members intellectually and socially, but it soon became clear that the desire for financial advantages was a primary inducement for farmers to join. As such, by 1871 the National Grange had taken an anti-monopoly, pro-cooperation position. Buck articulates two forms of activity that emerged as priorities for the Grange: “efforts to secure cheaper transportation,” and “the introduction of all sorts of schemes for cooperation in the purchase of supplies, the marketing of farm products, insurance, and even in the manufacture of agricultural implements.”²⁸¹ The grange aimed to intervene in capitalist circulation. These two efforts crystallized the Grange as a populist movement that offered clear material benefits to members, thus leading to a period of rapid growth beginning in 1872, when 1,150 granges were organized, a meteoric jump from the 113 organized the previous year. The Grange would see its peak in 1875, with a total of 21,697 granges in the United States.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 68.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 69.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 51.

Following this peak, distrust of the National Grange began to spread among the state granges. There were criticisms of lavish spending by the national body, and condemnations of the misuse of funds that were inflamed and reproduced in many newspaper articles, likely funded by opponents of the Grange. 1875 saw widespread agitation for “the reduction of dues, the division of the surplus among the state granges, and the reformation of the National Grange on more democratic lines.”²⁸² Alongside the Grange, the latter half of the nineteenth century saw a proliferation of farmer-led organizing and reform efforts, including the Farmers’ Alliance (founded in Texas in 1876), the Agricultural Wheel (founded in Arkansas in 1882), and the Knights of Labor. Although each of these organizations had a distinct structure and particular aims, state-level groups “focused their attention on privileged entities in their midst: banks, wholesalers, railroads, and land-grant colleges,”²⁸³ reflecting a consistent and widespread populist sentiment. These farmer-led reform efforts did not proceed through a critique of capitalism or colonialism, rather, they demanded more equitable participation in capitalist agriculture. The Panic of 1873 and the subsequent depression that lasted until the end of the century drove more and more working class white citizens toward populist political formations, and facilitated the rapid growth in membership to the Grange and similar organizations. Membership in the Grange jumped nationally from 200,000 in 1873 to 850,000 in 1875.

Growing populist sentiment across the country led to a series of land-grant college reforms that, apparently, took many of the old guard agricultural gentry by surprise. Populists secured a majority on the governing board of Kansas State Agricultural College in 1896, and instituted an array of policies aimed to broaden access to the institution and resist intellectual elitism. Sorber notes that at Kansas State, “antimonopolist and cooperative production

²⁸² Ibid., 68.

²⁸³ Sorber, *Land-Grant Colleges and Popular Revolt*, 85.

theories formed the core of new political economy courses, and the science of agriculture (chemistry, botany, etc.) was deemphasized in favor of applied agricultural studies with a manual training pedagogy.”²⁸⁴ In the northeast, the granges successfully lobbied for the land-grant designation and funds to be transferred from Brown to Rhode Island Agricultural College, from Yale to Connecticut Agricultural College, and from Dartmouth to New Hampshire College of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts. Though the architects of the 1862 Morrill Act carried lofty visions of democratizing agricultural education and broadening access to poor white farmers, by 1875 there was growing unrest over the perceived failures to deliver on those promises. The depression only heightened these concerns, and grangers became increasingly focused on the problem of rural depopulation, warning that rural areas were losing their economic and political power to cities. Sorber writes that “grange leaders argued that the scientific and liberal arts curricula of regional land-grant colleges were exacerbating rural outmigration, enticing students away from farming and into middle-class careers in business, engineering, and government.”²⁸⁵ The platform adopted by the National Grange in its 1874 annual meeting states, “we especially advocate for our agricultural and industrial colleges that practical agriculture, domestic science, and all the arts which adorn the home, be taught in their courses of study.”²⁸⁶ There was a general sentiment amongst both membership and leadership that the field of scientific agriculture had strayed too far into pure science, and was failing to meet the needs of ordinary farmers who were materially struggling. One of the loudest of these voices was Herbert Myrick, who graduated from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (a land-grant institution) in 1882 and shortly thereafter became the editor of *New England Homestead*—one of the largest agricultural publications in

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 86.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 88.

²⁸⁶ National Grange, *Proceedings of the Seventh Session of the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry* (S.W. Green, 1874), 58.

the country, which boasted some 50,000 subscribers—and became deeply entangled in the land-grant reform efforts in Connecticut.

The struggle over the dispersal of land-grant funds in Connecticut potently illustrates the class character of the struggle over both the field of scientific agriculture and its institutional articulations. The original recipient of the Connecticut land-grant was the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale, which had been founded in 1847 as a school of science and engineering. The grange had been operational in Connecticut since 1875, but was reorganized in 1886 by the newly appointed master, J.H. Hale, who informed the state grange convention in 1886 that land-grant reform was at the top of his agenda. Up to this point, the Connecticut state agricultural board had been made up of a class of agricultural gentry, but populists and grange members like Myrick and Hale were quickly ascending the ranks and reconstituting the organization. The reformers advocated fiercely for Morrill Act funds to be withdrawn from Sheffield and transferred to Storrs Agricultural School, founded in 1881. In the vision that was posed by reformers, the mission of Storrs would not be to train scientists or agricultural leaders, as Sheffield was already doing, but rather to “provide broad access to aspiring farmers and combine scientific understanding with vocational instruction in modern farm practice.”²⁸⁷ The state grange advocated for Storrs to retain its model of open access and manual training, and also for that model to become the paradigm for land-grant institutions across the country. Defenders of Sheffield argued that it had in fact been perfectly serving the land-grant mission by offering rigorous scientific education at no cost to taxpayers, brushing off concerns about how few Sheffield graduates went into farming. Advocates for the transfer of the land-grant to Storrs tapped into prevailing populist sentiments of the day, claiming that

²⁸⁷ Sorber, *Land-Grant Colleges and Popular Revolt*, 90.

the Morrill Act had been designed to serve the industrial classes who were severely underrepresented at Sheffield.

In Connecticut, farmer-led reformers won out over the old guard of agricultural gentry, and on April 21, 1893 a bill was signed making the Storrs Agricultural College the recipient of all land-grant funds for the state. Despite a protracted legal conflict that ultimately resulted in the state paying over \$154,604 in damages to Yale,²⁸⁸ the Connecticut grange had set an important precedent in convincingly demonstrating the need and popular desire for a different form of agricultural education; a form that would incentivize students to return to the farm rather than leave it for other more lucrative pursuits. The tension between the agricultural gentry and the agricultural reformers was largely organized around the stated, perceived, and actual purposes of education: reformers took the position that agricultural education should educate students toward the farm, and critiqued the paradigm of the Sheffield School and comparable institutions for educating students *away* from the farm and into other fields and careers. The tension was also articulated through the curriculum and content of education that students were exposed to. Among the reformers, there was widespread skepticism of the utility of pure or theoretical science, and this skepticism was a significant feature in the disciplinary formation of scientific agriculture. The charge laid out in the text of the Morrill Act was broad enough to be taken up by a wide variety of scientists, educators, and farmers, each of whom had particular investments in the direction and shape the field would take. Though tensions between theoretical and practical science structured a range of scientific disciplines, the fact that through the nineteenth century the majority of Americans were employed in agriculture lent a particular valence of significance to these debates.

²⁸⁸ Michael Rodriguez, “The Yale-Storrs Controversy - Connecticut History | a CTHumanities Project,” May 12, 2021, <https://connecticuthistory.org/the-yale-storrs-controversy/>.

The wave of land-grant reforms that swept New England in the last quarter of the nineteenth century reached Vermont, the home of Justin Morrill, in 1872, with the rise of the Vermont state grange. Morrill had enjoyed a modestly successful political career, but the rise of populist politics directed toward the land-grant institutions threatened his position as a statesman. During the congressional election of 1878, Morrill was challenged by a former U.S. senator, Luke Poland, who had aligned himself with the grange and ran a campaign that claimed that “the University of Vermont had not upheld its responsibilities to the agricultural class and had misused land-grant funds, and that Justin Morrill and his fellow trustees were in breach of trust.”²⁸⁹ Although Morrill defeated Poland in the election, the campaign had amplified the grange’s critiques of the University of Vermont. The University of Vermont had remained, functionally, a classical college. Though it had formally established an agricultural department in 1869, by 1886 approximately ninety percent of full time students were enrolled in the traditional BA program. In response to pressures from the grange, UVM hired its first professor of agriculture, W.W. Cooke, in 1886. Nonetheless, “between 1886 and 1891, none of the graduates in any course of study declared their occupation to be farmer.”²⁹⁰

Sorber articulates the primary tension in this period as the relationship between the curriculum and social mobility. He writes that “the countryside was losing its brightest children to middle-class careers in the city, and grangers came to believe that land-grant colleges steeped in science and collegiate culture were exacerbating the problem. Instead, grange leaders contended that vocational land-grant schools with manual labor requirements would fit students *only* for industrial class work, and graduates would be funneled back home to strengthen the class, the community, and the grange.”²⁹¹ By 1890, the grange movement

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 112.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 115.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 116.

had successfully reassigned the land-grants in Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island. Other schools in the region responded differently to pressure from the grange. The land-grant institution in Maine, the University of Maine, had a model farm and a manual labor requirement, which signaled to the grange that even though fewer than five percent of graduates became practicing farmers, the institution was for working people. While neighboring institutions entered into a protracted struggle with the grange, Maine embraced the populist sentiment. Maine governor Frederick Robb was savvy in mobilizing the prevailing populist sentiment for his own ends, and was able to secure federal and state funding for the institution that would carry it through the remainder of the century.

The Massachusetts Agricultural College, in contrast, faced profound financial precarity due to the depression of the 1870s. In 1872 the state legislature moved to make the college more financially self-sustaining by increasing the land-grant endowment, discharging the college's debt, and introducing tuition. The introduction of tuition proved to be prohibitive for a great many students, and in the 1880s Massachusetts governor Thomas Talbot advocated for the closure of the school. In response, Herbert Myrick published a series of pieces in the *New England Homestead* that called for grangers to lobby the legislature to save the college. His campaign led to a \$10,000 annual apportionment from the legislature to defray tuition costs, and enrollment swelled in the following years.

Pennsylvania State University also found success in working closely with the grange movement. Under the leadership of Evan Pugh and later George Atherton, the school had developed a robust scientific curriculum that emphasized the liberal arts, but despite its attachments to the production of "pure" scientific knowledge, retained the favor of the grange by developing an outreach program explicitly tasked with disseminating agricultural knowledge to the farmers in the state. Cornell also resolved the tension between scientists and

grangers by developing a cooperative extension program, a model that would be taken up by land-grant institutions throughout the twentieth century.

In the fierce struggles over the nature of the land-grant institutions and the discipline of scientific agriculture in the later nineteenth century, we see the mechanisms of agnosia hard at work. Populist and farmer-led movements perform a circumscribed grammar of criticality, an institutional critique that legitimizes the dispossessive conditions of possibility of the university through a claim that the goods that it provides ought to be distributed differently. Indigenous land relations are swept away in the fervor of a frenetic struggle over which white settlers should benefit from dispossession, and how.

Shifting Agricultural Labor Regimes

In *Agricultural Science and the Quest for Legitimacy*, Alan Marcus articulates a protracted but significant shift in the role of farmers in American society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, writing that for statesmen like Adams and Jefferson, “farmers were the bedrock of civilization, the foundation on which the republic rested and the wellspring from which its future institutions would arise.”²⁹² This vaunted conception of the farmer hinged on a particular form of autonomy that would degrade significantly in the hundred years after the time of Adams and Jefferson: farmers were dependent on and beholden to no one. By 1895 Harvey W. Wiley, the chief chemist of the United States Department of Agriculture, would express the predominant view at the time: that farmers were a dependent class who needed others to survive. According to Marcus, farmers themselves recognized this dependency early, as evidenced by repeated and protracted efforts of self-organization to build purchasing power, oppose monopolies, and generally identify themselves as a class with distinct political and economic interests. The Patrons of Husbandry (which maintained an

²⁹² Marcus, *Agricultural Science and the Quest for Legitimacy*, 3.

explicit position of political and religious neutrality) and The Farmers' Alliance (which engaged directly in the political sphere through the Populist Party) were two notable examples of far reaching and historically significant farmworker-led organizing efforts.

These organizing efforts found common cause with the diagnosis made by the older agricultural gentry that the era of the autonomous American farmer had ended, but diverged in their respective proposed solutions. Farmer-led reform efforts operated using a theory of change that relied on the formation of a class of farmers who could exert power and influence collectively. Wiley and his contemporaries called instead for a technical solution: farmers ought to rely on chemists and other agricultural scientists, experts who were external to the labor of farming. This tension between agricultural science and farmer-led reforms was hardly new; it had shaped much of the policies around the land-grant colleges since the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862, and the last quarter of the nineteenth century saw particularly fierce conflicts between the grange movement and the agricultural gentry in New England. By 1895, however, membership in both the Patrons of Husbandry and the Farmers' Alliance had declined significantly from its height in 1875, and the protracted depression that began with the Banking Panic of 1873 had left farmers across the country in precarious material positions with little hope for relief. As such, support for scientific agriculture was growing—Marcus notes that the publication of Wiley's pronouncement in the *Rural New Yorker*, an agricultural paper, indicated growing interest among farmers in the promises of scientific agriculture.²⁹³ In Marcus's periodization, the passage of the Hatch Act in 1887 marked the "agricultural scientists' ascendancy," over farmer-led reform efforts. The Hatch Act, which granted each state and territory \$15,000 to fund an agricultural experiment station,

²⁹³ Ibid., 6.

closed the book on a debate that had been brought onto the national stage by the Morrill Act in 1862.

The Morrill Act had left much open to the interpretation of the states in its charge to form an agricultural college, and the rocky period between 1862 and 1887 was, in part, a function of the openness of the legislative charge, which left room for competing agricultural interests to struggle over the character of the fledgling institutions. The work of institution building took place against a backdrop of profound social, economic, and political reorganization following the Civil War, and the land-grant colleges became sites where competing visions of not only agricultural education, but citizenship, the function of the state, and capital interests were being actively worked out. By 1870, the crisis of soil exhaustion that had concerned farmers for more than a century collided with an economic depression and rapid industrialization, leading to widespread concern among agriculturalists about rural depopulation, and how best to educate farmers toward the farm, instead of toward more secure career opportunities that higher education opened up. If the Hatch Act represents a point of origin of the discipline of scientific agriculture, it also represents the culmination of more than a century of contestation over the relationship between science and agricultural labor. While this contestation positioned the university as a site of class struggle, it also constrained the form of allowable critique: the tensions that animate it are tensions *between* white settlers of distinct social classes, and the emphasis on competing class interests in the historical record functionally obscures their mutual investment in the settler colonial project.

The story of the ascendancy of scientific agriculture in the land-grant system begins long before the passage of the Hatch Act, and reflects particular arrangements of American capitalism and class formation. The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the dramatic reorganization of American class stratification as a result of both the Civil War and

industrialization. According to C. Wright Mills, this period is a transitional one from the “old middle class” to the “new middle class.” The social arrangement of farmers in the first two centuries of the United States was not a feudal or peasant structure, as existed in Europe, but rather a geographically dispersed arrangement of capitalist farmers, a large proportion of which owned the property that they worked. Mills poses a useful distinction between the social arrangements of agricultural labor in Europe and the United States, writing that “in American society neither peasants nor aristocracy have ever existed in the European sense. The land was occupied by men whose absolute individualism involved an absence of traditional fetters, and who, unhampered by the heirlooms of feudal Europe, were ready and eager to realize the drive toward capitalism. They did not cluster together in villages but scattered into an open country. Even in the South men who held large acreages were usually of yeoman stock, and bore the economic and political marks of rural capitalists.”²⁹⁴ In other words, American agriculture never went through the transition from feudalism to capitalism that occurred in Europe. Or, as Michel Chevalier put it in 1835, “every body is speculating, and every thing has become an object of speculation.”²⁹⁵ For Mills, the transition from the old middle classes to the formation of the new middle classes was a shift from democratic property, in which the owner himself works, to class property, in which the owner hires others to work and manage. This transition of the predominant form of property mirrors the decline of autonomy and the rise of dependency that Marcus articulates as a key driver of both scientific and technical development and farmer-led reform efforts.

However, neither Mills nor Marcus discuss this transitional period through the lens of land policy and territorial acquisition, and I posit that the imaginary of the frontier and the

²⁹⁴ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, (Oxford University Press, 2002), 23-24.

²⁹⁵ Michel Chevalier, *Society, Manners and Politics in the United States: Being a Series of Letters on North America* (Weeks, Jordan, and Company, 1839), 305.

fantasy of limitless westward land lie at the heart of the material and social reorganizations of this period. As the frontier closed, the disposability of land became a problem for, rather than a presupposition of, the settler state. Settler society was faced with the real geographic limits of its logic of exhausting soil through extractive agriculture and rapidly moving on to “uncultivated” land, and the ascendancy of scientific agriculture in the late nineteenth century indexes, in important ways, the deepening of the installation of settler infrastructure through an increasing emphasis on “improvement” of land over its easy disposability.

The perception of limitless western land prior to the closing of the frontier left an indelible mark on practices of American agriculture, and might offer a useful explanation for the difficulties that advocates for organized improvement faced in the United States before the 1850s. After all, “it was certainly more advantageous for a New England farmer in his period [1790-1830] to give up his poor and rocky farm and move West rather than to try to improve it as the reformers kept urging him to do.”²⁹⁶ It was difficult for reformers to make a compelling case for improvement of worn out and unproductive farmland when faced with the pull of westward expansion and the fantasies of what the frontier might offer. It is no accident, then, that agricultural improvement gained a greater hold as settler colonialism transitioned from a primarily acquisitive mode, to orient more substantially around the project of improvement in the second half of the nineteenth century. Agricultural societies represent another site of class struggle between working farmers and the agricultural gentry, and, prior to the passage of the Morrill Act, served as the primary mechanism for the dissemination of agricultural knowledge.

There is general consensus among historians that the learned and agricultural societies pre-1840 were largely ineffective in developing the field of scientific agriculture,

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 287.

with three notable exceptions: the New York Society for Promoting Agriculture, Arts and Manufactures, the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of Agriculture and Agricultural Reform, and the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture. By 1830, most agricultural societies had either collapsed or turned away from their lofty goals of national agricultural reform toward efforts for more local improvement. As such, the period between 1830 and 1887 (when the Hatch Act was passed and agricultural experiment stations were established in connection to the land-grant colleges) represented a lull in the development of agricultural science. Of this period, Rossiter writes that “much of agricultural science was in the doldrums. Agricultural scientists were floundering intellectually in what was essentially a transitional period between the excitement over agricultural chemistry in the 1840s and 1850s and the bacteriological triumphs of the 1890s.”²⁹⁷ Importantly, this lull coincides, though not precisely, with the expansion of populist and farmer-led reform efforts, most notably the Farmers’ Alliance and the Patrons of Husbandry, which saw their height of membership in 1882 and 1875, respectively.

A key exception to the lull in the development of scientific agriculture was Albany, the home of the New York Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, Arts and Manufactures. By 1830, most of the learned societies had collapsed or moved away from agricultural reform, but Albany boasted a unique arrangement of well-organized and well-funded agricultural societies on the state and county levels, and robust agricultural presses with broad circulation. Between 1835 and 1855, Albany became “the primary center for agricultural reform in the East, the home of the most active journal, the strongest lobby, the best organized society, and the seat of the most generous legislature.”²⁹⁸ In Rossiter’s analysis, the

²⁹⁷ Margaret Rossiter, “Organization of the Agricultural Sciences,” in *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860-1920*, 2. pr, ed. Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), 213-14

²⁹⁸ Rossiter, “The Organization of Agricultural Improvement in the United States, 1785-1865,” 288.

ascendancy of Albany can be ascribed to three general causes: geographic and economic factors (namely, the opening of the Erie Canal in 1820, competition from Ohio and Michigan, and the prevalence of a middle class of farmers), psychological and sociological factors (the presence of strong and resourceful agriculturalists who were effective leaders and were invested in agricultural improvement), and political and financial factors (by 1841, New York agriculturalists had succeeded in securing an annual appropriation from the state legislature, some twenty years in advance of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania).

The publication and widespread circulation of two agricultural periodicals in New York was an important factor in the widespread investment in agricultural improvement. In 1831 Luther Tucker began publishing the *Genesee Farmer* out of Rochester, and in 1832 Jesse Beal founded the *Cultivator* in Albany. These two publications would become the most widely read agricultural publications in the country, indicating that “by the 1830s upstate New York had a population with the social structure, mental attitude, and income distribution able and willing to support such journals.”²⁹⁹ Through the publication of the journals, agriculturalists in upstate New York organized themselves around the project of securing an annual appropriation from the state legislature to support an agricultural society. They were successful in 1841, when they obtained an annual sum of \$8,000. According to Rossiter, the project of agricultural improvement was thus organized under a tripartite system of a state agricultural society located in the capital with effective lobbying power, multiple county agricultural societies to collect data and run local fairs, and a popular journal to disseminate best practices and muster up support for legislative action. This pattern would spread to other states in the subsequent decades, and would be adopted as an aspirational model by a number of farmer-led reform efforts.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 290.

In broad strokes, the era of the primacy of the agricultural association lasted for just under a hundred years, from 1768 to 1830. The development of agricultural science experienced a lull from roughly 1830 to 1880, which corresponded to a rise in populist, agrarian, and farmer-led reform efforts that took some structural inspiration from the earlier associations, but were marked by more explicit values of working-class collectivism. The passage of the Morrill Act in 1862 created the financial and legislative basis for the institutionalization of scientific agriculture, and the land-grant colleges between 1862 and 1890 were sites of ferocious contestation over the nascent discipline and its broader social and economic impacts. This contestation, rather than calling into question the dispossessive originary conditions of the land-grant system, authorized and naturalized it, effectively legitimizing the institution through articulating the limits of allowable critique. To struggle over the institution is democratic—a reflection of the revolutionary ideals of the nation—but to call its conditions of possibility into question is unthinkable.

Soil and its Discontents

In 1895, thirty-eight years after Michigan Agricultural College opened its doors in May of 1857, William Chandler Bagley graduated from the institution. He would go on to complete a doctorate at Cornell and become a well-known educator, who opposed progressive and pragmatist philosophies of education. His most well-known publication, *Education and Emergent Man*, printed in 1934, lays out an approach to public education that decries the popular moves at the time toward practicality. His reactionary ideals were rejected by his son, William Chandler Bagley Jr., who took a sharp turn away from his father and began researching the social dimensions of soil exhaustion.

Bagley Jr. conducted his graduate work in Political Science at Columbia University, which culminated in the 1942 publication of his doctoral thesis, *Soil Exhaustion and the Civil War* by the American Council of Public Affairs. Bagley Jr. was interested in taking seriously the role of soil exhaustion in the social, political, and economic upheavals that would lead to the Civil War, writing that “the purpose of the present study is to weigh the development of soil exhaustion in the Southern area of the United States during the years before 1860 and to point out how the pressure of the resulting economic forces may have helped to shape the attitudes and habits of thought prevalent in that area prior to the Civil War.”³⁰⁰ In Bagley Jr.’s characterization, soil exhaustion was both a symptom and a cause of broader political and economic dynamics. He writes that the particular agricultural practices that dominated in the South, practices that were a specific function of a slave economy, contributed to the rapid degradation of Southern soil and the crises of plantation-style agriculture. In a survey of historians of the Civil War, Bagley Jr. notes three distinct theoretical approaches: narrating the conflict through primarily economic terms, narrating the conflict through primarily racial terms, and narrating the conflict through affective or emotional terms. He takes a slightly different approach, articulating each of these sites of conflict as emergent from particular material conditions and positing soil exhaustion as a key factor in the development and heightening of these tensions. He writes that “the importance of soil exhaustion in an analysis of the causes of the Civil War derives from the fact that it provides the key to an understanding of the economic significance of the territorial limitation of slavery.”³⁰¹ For Bagley Jr., soil exhaustion functions as a keystone and undertheorized concept that meaningfully brings together distinct approaches to the history of the Civil War.

³⁰⁰ William Chandler Bagley, Jr., *Soil Exhaustion and the Civil War* (American Council on Public Affairs, 1942), 3.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

Anxieties about soil were hardly new by 1860. They appear in the historical record as early as 1619, when a group of planters in Virginia reportedly made a request to move their fields due to declining productivity.³⁰² In his 1925 study of soil exhaustion in Virginia and Maryland, Avery Craven documents the expansion of soil exhaustion in the early colonial period. “Expansion because of exhaustion had begun early and in 1626 the inhabitants at Paspasheigh, whose soils Governor Dale had pronounced only fifteen years earlier to be excellent for grain, were complaining of the barren condition of their lands and asking the court of the colony for permission to move elsewhere. In the same period the tenants on the public lands declared that they were unable to make a living because they had been assigned to exhausted soils.”³⁰³ Writing to Arthur Young in 1786, Washington notes that “the system of agriculture, if the epithet of system can be applied to it, which is in use in this part of the United States, is as unproductive to the practitioners as it is ruinous to the land-holders.”³⁰⁴ More dramatically, agriculturalist John Taylor wrote in 1814 that “the terrible facts, that the strongest chord with vibrates on the heart of man, cannot tie our people to the natal spot, that they view it with horror, and flee from it to new climes with joy, determine our agricultural progress, to be a progress of emigration, and not of improvement; and lead to an ultimate recoil from this exhausted resource, to an exhausted country.”³⁰⁵ This anxiety articulates itself through distinct grammars and objects in various points in history, but the presence of anxiety does not correspond always or even most of the time to precarious material conditions.

The inefficiency of agricultural methods pre-1860 are well-documented, and the phenomenon of soil exhaustion was pervasive and significant enough to be considered by

³⁰² Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Little, Brown, and Company, 1929).

³⁰³ Avery Odelle Craven, *Soil Exhaustion as a Factor in the Agricultural History of Virginia and Maryland, 1606-1860* (University of Illinois, 1925), 57.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁰⁵ John Taylor, *Arator: Being a Series of Agricultural Essays, Practical and Political* (J.M. Carter, 1814), 10.

historians as a structuring force of the era, but, as Bagley Jr. notes, “it has always been considered a factor of secondary importance; nowhere do we find it stressed as a major influence in southern history, an omission which is particularly striking in connection to the Civil War.”³⁰⁶ In investigating the causes of southern soil exhaustion, Bagley Jr. takes the frontier, and its perception of limitless cheap land, as a central motivating factor in systematic soil degradation. Thomas Jefferson considered this peculiarity of American agriculture in his 1782 *Notes on Virginia*, writing that “the indifferent state of that [agriculture] among us does not proceed from a want of knowledge merely; it is from our having such quantities of land to waste as we please. In Europe the object is to make the most of their land, labor being abundant; here it is to make the most of our labor, land being abundant.”³⁰⁷ Soil exhaustion, then, was not simply a result of particular agricultural practices, but also emergent from a uniquely American relationship to the abundance and disposability of land. The sense of freely available, limitless western land that so captured the imaginations of early settlers would, by the mid-nineteenth century, falter; which would filter anxieties about soil degradation through a valence of urgency that took shape, in part, through the movement for the land-grant college system. For early agriculturalists, despite nascent concerns about soil degradation, the ready availability of new land forestalled the deleterious effects of white settler agricultural practices, and it wasn’t until the combined pressures of soil degradation along the eastern seaboard collided with the political, economic, and social pressures of the Civil War that improvement, rather than disposability, became the structuring logic of the time. The causes and effects of soil exhaustion must be understood in relation to a broader matrix of social and economic forces, and the mobilization of this crisis was a driving factor in the development, consolidation, and institutionalization of scientific agriculture.

³⁰⁶ Bagley, Jr., *Soil Exhaustion and the Civil War*, 10.

³⁰⁷ Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 3 (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904), 489.

The Mechanic Arts

Justin Morrill imagined the land-grant institutions as primarily serving what he referred to as the “industrial classes,” the “sons of toil” who are “willing and expecting to work their way through the world by the sweat of their brow.”³⁰⁸ The text of the Morrill Act situated scientific agriculture and the mechanic arts as equally important priorities for land-grant institutions, but most historians of the land-grant system classify the institutions as “agricultural colleges,” and the charge of instruction in the mechanic arts falls somewhat by the wayside. This is in part due to the relationship between the legislation and agricultural societies, which had long been agitating for federal support for agricultural colleges, and found the Morrill Act’s general terms to be a viable pathway to achieving their aims. Geiger writes that “agricultural interests in every state at one time or another would claim ownership over the “agricultural colleges,” with varying results.”³⁰⁹ Under the terms of the Morrill Act, states could either award the land-grants to existing institutions that could fulfill the charge of the legislation, or create new ones. In states like Michigan and Pennsylvania, which had fledgling agricultural colleges, “agricultural societies played a positive role by insisting that this resource be concentrated in a single institution.”³¹⁰ Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, collisions between land-grant universities and agricultural interests would shape the character of the institution. Land-grant institutions faced no comparable pressure from industrialists or organized industrial workers. The persistent narrative that collapses land-grant institutions with agricultural colleges indicates the ultimate success of agricultural interests in claiming the land-grant institutions as their own, a move that marginalizes the mechanic arts and foregrounds scientific agriculture as the core purpose of the land-grant

³⁰⁸ *Speech of Hon. Justin S. Morrill, of Vermont in the House of Representatives* (1862).

³⁰⁹ Roger L. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 284.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 285.

system. This becomes particularly clear in the successes of populist and granger movements in transferring the land-grants from private to public institutions in the northeast in the late nineteenth century, a success that the old guard did not expect. Speaking at the 1871 Convention of the Friends of Agriculture, Professor Gilman of the Sheffield Scientific School confidently claimed that “In New England [...] we are going forward not in the Agricultural way, but in the general direction of applied science.”³¹¹ As it turned out, Gilman and his contemporaries underestimated the political power of populist movements, and in the next two decades many land-grant institutions in New England would indeed go forward “in the Agricultural way.”

Historian Norman Pollack writes that the character of American populism diverges from populist movements in other industrial contexts, in that American agrarian movements were frequently aligned industrialists, writing that “accounts of post-Civil War agricultural practices are at one in demonstrating that farmers, far from opposing technology, were receptive to mechanization, scientific procedures, and the dissemination of technical information.”³¹² Predominant narratives of populist movements tend to position populism as a retrogressive movement that opposes technological and scientific development: John D. Hicks writes that the populist movement was “the last phase of a long and perhaps a losing struggle—the struggle to save agricultural America from the devouring jaws of industrial America,”³¹³ a claim that misses the general openness of American agriculturalists to industrial development. The linking of scientific agriculture to the mechanic arts in the text of

³¹¹ Committee on the Centennial of the University of Illinois, *An Early View of the Land-Grant Colleges: Convention of Friends of Agriculture in 1871* (University of Illinois Press, 1967), 47.

³¹² Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (Harvard University Press, 1962), 3.

³¹³ Hicks, John D. *Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party*. University of Minnesota Press, 1931, 237.

the Morrill Act is an important insight into the nature of American industrialization, which frequently found common cause with agrarian and farmer-led reform movements.

Many architects of the land-grant system considered the importance of education in the mechanic arts as of equal importance as education in scientific agriculture. Evan Pugh of Penn State was concerned that the majority of civil engineers in the United States learned their profession through apprenticeship and on-the-job-training, and would argue that “colleges must be equipped to provide the technological training that America required to maintain its economic growth and geographic expansion.”³¹⁴ Pugh posed a “sophisticated utilitarian interpretation of the Morrill Act”³¹⁵ that would involve a robust course of study in scientific agriculture, practical agriculture, and industry. Pugh died before he could fully realize this vision, and Penn State barely survived until George W. Atherton assumed the presidency in 1882. Michigan Agricultural College, in contrast, resisted the inclusion of the mechanic arts until 1885, retaining its character as an agricultural college whose purpose was to educate students toward, not away from the farm. In its first thirty years, Michigan Agricultural College graduated 400 students, about half of whom became farmers.

States interpreted the charges of the Morrill Act in distinct ways that reflected local and regional patterns of agriculture and industry, and the phrasing of the act was broad enough to allow for this range of interpretations. Notably, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology used its Morrill Act funds to build what Geiger describes as “a complete and effective embodiment of technological education,”³¹⁶ which much more closely resembled contemporary engineering programs than it did the forms of industrial education adopted by other land-grant institutions. What Morrill actually meant by education in the mechanic arts is

³¹⁴ John D. Hicks, *Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (University of Minnesota Press, 1931), 3.

³¹⁵ Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*, 300.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 309.

uncertain, though his personal background offers some clues. He wrote in 1974 that “being myself the son of a hard-handed blacksmith, the most truly honest man I ever knew, who felt his own deprivation of schools (never having spent but six weeks inside of a schoolhouse), I could not overlook mechanics in any measure intended to aid the industrial classes in the procurement of an education that might exalt their usefulness.”³¹⁷ It is unlikely that Morrill was discussing engineering when he raised the importance of the mechanic arts, though several states would interpret it in this way. Morrill isn’t certain what kind of education would have most benefitted his father, though he has no doubt that it could have. The romance myth of education is at play here, and Morrill’s evocation of his father reflects a deep commitment to the belief in education as a vehicle of improvement. The class of people Morrill is referring to were workers “associated with the machine shops that complemented the proliferation of textile mills and factories, especially in the Northeast.”³¹⁸ Although there was some overlap between the mechanic arts and the work of civil engineering, by 1860 civil engineering as a discipline had been firmly established in American colleges. By the Civil War, “two thirds of prominent civil engineers were college graduates,”³¹⁹ and the institutional mechanisms for training civil engineers were well-developed.

Industrial education in the mechanic arts has a distinct history from that of engineering, though contemporary land-grant institutions place great stake in the discipline of engineering. Eddy notes that “if Morrill had used the term ‘engineering’ rather than ‘mechanic arts,’ he would have intended largely military engineering,” and that because “Morrill’s intentions were agricultural and his later speeches dealt with agricultural education,

³¹⁷ William Belmont Parker, *The Life and Public Services of Justin Smith Morrill* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), 262.

³¹⁸ Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education*, 307.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

we have little on which to base a conclusion regarding his mechanic arts intentions.”³²⁰ In the behemoth *Survey of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities* undertaken by Arthur J. Klein and published in 1930, he writes that “the term ‘mechanic arts’ as used when the land-grant act was being considered by Congress was commonly employed synonymously with the terms ‘useful arts’ and ‘industrial arts,’ and that “Webster’s dictionary of 1855 states that an engineer is one who constructs or manages engines or cannons.”³²¹ This does not offer much clarity in terms of Morrill’s meaning of the mechanic arts, but does support the contention that Morrill was not referring to engineering.

Near the end of his life, Morrill grew frustrated with many of the state’s interpretations of the legislation, and firmly opposed what he considered to be the hostile takeovers of land-grant institutions by the grange movements. He insisted that the land-grant ideal had always been about more than simply training farmers to return to the farm, and was exasperated by the demands for practical and applicable education that working farmers made of the institutions. Ultimately, his was a bourgeois vision of agricultural and industrial education, and he was frustrated that his lofty ideals of spiritual and moral development through agriculture collided with the actual desires of farmers. In 1888, in an address to the Vermont legislature, he tersely argued that “it was a liberal education that was proposed. Classical studies were not to be excluded, and, therefore, must be included. The Act of 1862 proposed a system of broad education by colleges, not limited to a superficial or dwarfed training, such as might be had at an industrial school, nor a mere manual training, such as might be supplied by a foreman of a workshop, or by a foreman of an experimental farm. If

³²⁰ Edward Danforth Eddy, *Colleges for Our Land and Time; the Land-Grant Idea in American Education* (Greenwood Press, 1973), 40.

³²¹ Arthur J. Klein, *Survey of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities* (United States Government Printing Office, 1930), 797.

any would have only a school with equal scraps of labor and of instruction, or something other than a college, they would not obey the national law.”³²²

Although it was never fully realized, Evan Pugh’s proposal for Penn State is perhaps the closest to Morrill’s ideal. In his 1834 *Report Upon a Plan for the Organization of Colleges for Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts with Especial Reference to the Organization of the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania*, Pugh lays out in painstaking detail how the college and the curriculum would be organized. On the composition of the faculty, he proposes

- 1st.—A Professor of pure Mathematics and the higher Mechanics and Astronomy
 - 2d. Professor of Civil Engineering and Applied Mathematics
 - 3d. A Professor of Natural Philosophy and Astronomy, Mechanics, and Physics
 - 4th. A Professor of Pure Chemistry
 - 5th. A Professor of Agricultural Chemistry and Geology
 - 6th. A Professor of Metallurgy, Mining and Mineralogy
 - 7th. A Professor of Anatomy, Physiology and Veterinary
 - 8th. A Professor of Natural History, more particularly of Zoology, Comparative Anatomy and Entomology
 - 9th. A Professor of Botany, Horticulture and Entomology
 - 10th. A Professor of Practical Agriculture
 - 11th. A Professor of the English Language and Literature
 - 12th. A suitable Professor to take charge of a Commercial Department, embracing book-keeping, farm accounts, banking business, together with the science of commercial intercourse and domestic trade, as developed in domestic, political and National Economy
 - 13th. A Professor of Modern Languages
- To the foregoing Professors the following should be added, though not indispensable to a system of industrial education.
- 14th. A Professor of the Latin and Greek Languages and Literature
 - 15th. A Professor of Military Art, and Science and Teacher of Military Tactics

³²² Justin Morrill, *State Aid to Land-Grant Colleges* (Argus and Patriot Printing House, 1888), 6-7.

16th. A Treasurer, Book-Keeper and Librarian³²³

The wide range of fields and specialties that Pugh imagined the Penn State faculty bringing to the university closely mirror the structure that Morrill had called for, and would have cohered into an institution that, while retaining fidelity to the ideal of practical education, would offer a richer course of study than professional or industrial schools. The tensions that arose between the old guard agricultural gentry and the grange movements in the northeast in the latter part of the nineteenth century can be understood as resulting, in part, from an absence of consensus over the meaning of “practical” education. For the old guard, which included Morrill, a practical education was adapted to the particular context of the United States, but remained largely continuous with forms of classical education inherited from the European enlightenment, and held the yeoman farmer as the ideal produced subject of the institution. Grange movements and other farmer-led reform efforts found this orientation pretentious and out of touch with the real needs of farmers, and interpreted the charge for practical education in very concrete terms: a practical education was the kind of education that would help them solve the present problems that arose on their farms and in the agricultural economy.

The mechanic arts as imagined by Morrill were more consistent with the old guard vision, and the agricultural reform efforts and advocacy by farmer-led organizations succeeded—though not uniformly across the country—in retaining a primary focus on scientific agriculture, consigning Morrill and Pugh’s vision of an institution that married scientific agriculture and the mechanic arts to a footnote in history. The absence of what Pugh and Morrill imagined as the mechanic arts was not an institutional vacuum, however, as it

³²³ Evan Pugh, *A Report Upon a Plan for the Organization of Colleges for Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts with Especial Reference to the Organization of the Agricultural College of Pennsylvania* (Agricultural College of Pennsylvania, 1834), <https://www.loc.gov/item/15023873/>, 15-17.

was quickly filled by engineering. At the 1909 convention of the American Association of Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations, the following resolution was adopted:

That it is the sense of this association that the national laws which constitute the charter of the land-grant colleges distinctly prescribe work of collegiate grade in agriculture and mechanic arts, including engineering in all its branches and the science related to industries, irrespective of whether the colleges or as parts of universities.³²⁴

The claiming of engineering by the land-grant institutions as central to their charge would turn out to be a savvy strategic move, providing the basis for ongoing entanglements between the land-grant system and the U.S. military. Though it may not have been part of the original intention as articulated by Morrill and his contemporaries, the initial disaggregation of engineering and the mechanic arts had collapsed by the early twentieth century. In 1914, the executive committee of the Association of Land-Grant Colleges (formerly the American Association of Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations) articulated the following definition of the mechanic arts:

Mechanic arts is a broad educational term, which includes engineering education as its higher or professional phase, trade-school and short-course instruction as its collateral and extension phase, and experimental and other technical investigation as its research phase.³²⁵

In many ways, this was a far cry from the program that Morrill had envisioned, and was significantly less idealistic than his lofty ideals. He had argued against trade schools and short-course instruction as models for the land-grant institutions, and this capacious 1914 definition of the mechanic arts reflects the capacity of land-grant institutions to respond to a complex landscape of social, political, and economic pressures around curriculum and its relationship to national identity. Engineering supplanted the mechanic arts in the land-grant

³²⁴ Klein, *Survey of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities*, 797.

³²⁵ Ibid., 798.

curriculum in a period of rapid industrialization and resultant need for trained civil engineers. The easy incorporation of engineering into the land-grant mission, despite earlier incompatibilities, indicates the institutional capacity to adapt itself to shifting national agendas and demands for particular forms of knowledge production.

Conclusion

On March 2, 1887, Congress passed the Hatch Act, which granted \$15,000 to land-grant colleges to establish agricultural experiment stations, which, alongside the 1914 Smith-Lever Act and its establishment of cooperative extension programs, is generally considered to be the mechanism that facilitated the consolidation and formalization of the discipline of scientific agriculture. This disciplinary origin story nods to the contributions of working class farmer-led reform efforts in the formation of the field, as cooperative extension and experiment stations were two key demands of land-grant reformers. The emergence of the land-grant university as a site of class struggle resulted in a dialectical process of disciplinary formation that indexes a series of compromises made between the old-guard agricultural gentry (the fathers of the land-grant system), and working-class agricultural reform efforts. The disciplinary history of scientific agriculture and its overlapping histories with the land-grant institutions indicate that the land-grant system *could be reformed* at the same time that the boundaries around acceptable reform are hardened. These histories then, further obscure the originary conditions of the land-grant system. Most mainstream histories of the land-grant system represent the first five decades of its existence as a rocky and challenging period that was characterized by fierce collisions between agricultural interests. Historians emphasize the different subject positions and stakes of these different agricultural

interests, but tend to gloss over what they held in common—a shared structural position as white settlers—thus constraining the horizon of critique.

Emphasizing the democratic character of the land-grant system, presenting its goods and promises as universally available, universalizes the figure of the white settler as “the people.” The disciplinary formation of scientific agriculture reveals particular valences of the deepening and expansion of settler society: in the ways that settler science displaces nonwhite and noncapitalist modes of land stewardship, in the processes that converted land into experimental farms, and in the presence of settler class struggle in and through these institutions. Approached through the lens of countersovereignty, the development of scientific agriculture becomes legible as a possible grammar through which settlers could articulate and enforce property claims; scientific agriculture promised improvement, and, via the 1862 Homestead Act, improvement and continuous occupation were the legal standards for granting settler title claims. Though it lurks in the margins of official histories, the development of scientific agriculture is shot through with settler moves toward self-indigenization: science becomes operational as a mechanism through which settlers could “deepen” their relationship to land and further justify their claims to it.

The agricultural reform efforts that I have surfaced in this chapter indicate particular structural features of the land-grant university: its capacity to be reformed, the assumptions that the university is an a priori good, and the limits of allowable critique. This period of institutional and disciplinary history formations points to the emergent capacities of land-grant universities to strategically manage difference while retaining an unquestioned investment in Indigenous dispossession. The aim is, as Stuart Hall puts it, “to recognize and absorb these differences within the larger, overarching framework of what is essentially an

American conception of the world.”³²⁶ Critical University Studies scholars have written at length about the capacities of the university to absorb difference and dissent, but much of this research has focused on the post-WWII university.³²⁷ I suggest that the absorptive capacities of the institution, which were fully developed by time the GI Bill was passed, found some of their earliest articulations in the responses of land-grant universities to farmer-led reform efforts in the second half of the nineteenth century, and that the institutional inclusion won by the land-grant reformers would become a template for how universities would respond to dissent through nominal compromise while retaining their fundamental structure of dispossessive accumulation. The absorptive character of universities comes into particular focus around the student movements of the 1960s and institutional responses to the demands of minoritized students, but the periodization I have offered in this chapter demonstrates that this absorptive capacity has been an institutional mainstay since its inception.

There were a number of factors that led to the United States federal government reversing its previously held restrictive position on western settlement and settler title claims on the frontier: the expansion of railroad infrastructure lessened anxieties about how to retain national coherence across vast swaths of land, squatter settlements began to overwhelm the military’s capacity to police them, and the establishment of the legal category of the public domain positioned the state as the necessary arbiter of settler property claims. Alongside these structural transformations, the systematic construction of land-grant universities

³²⁶ Stuart Hall, “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” in *Culture, Globalization, and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 28.

³²⁷ See: Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*, Difference Incorporated (University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Todd McCardle, “A Promise Deferred: Black Veterans’ Access to Higher Education Through the GI Bill at the University of Florida, 1944–1962,” *Educational Studies* 53, no. 2 (2017): 122–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2017.1283504>; Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Harvard University Press, 2008); Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, 1st ed., Difference Incorporated (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

functioned to deepen settler infrastructure and position the university as a system with the capacity to manage difference. Roderick Ferguson writes that “the U.S. constitutional project would give birth to twins—the modern idea of empire and the modern idea of difference; under that ideological foundation, the management of the international would coextend with the management of diversity.”³²⁸ The presence of class struggle directed toward the land-grant institutions not only stress tested its capacities to absorb difference, but also positioned the university as the possible site of recourse for grievances, a move that further legitimized the institution.

Building on this theorization of the absorptive capacities of the land-grant institutions, the following chapter takes up the mandate that land-grant colleges teach military tactics and strategy to further elaborate the role of the land-grant system in the American project of continental imperialism. The story of working-class and farmer-led reform efforts of the land-grant system and the discipline of scientific agriculture fits neatly into the land-grant imaginary in its performance of progressivism and social responsibility. The success that northeast granges found in transferring the land-grants away from Ivy League institutions tidily supports the story that the university likes to tell about itself and its benevolence, generosity, and responsiveness to (the right form of) critique. At the same time that settlers are fiercely arguing over who among them ought to benefit from the spoils of settler colonial plunder, there is another story under the surface: the story of the land-grant system as a weapon to secure territorial dominance through the democratization of military capacities. The following chapter examines the structural role of the land-grant system in territorial acquisition, management, and governance, inquires into the slippages between

³²⁸ Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*, Difference Incorporated (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 24.

agricultural knowledge and military/defense knowledge, and attempts to uncover the occluded underbelly of the democratic project as it took shape through the land-grant system.

Chapter 3: Military Tactics and Strategy

Introduction

In August of 2020 the sky in Santa Cruz, California turned an apocalyptic orange. Thick, heavy wildfire smoke blanketed the area, and we'd spent days watching the fire inch closer to the University of California, Santa Cruz campus on the Cal Fire digital tracker. By the time the evacuation order hit Santa Cruz County, the fire was brushing up against Highway 17. We loaded up a carful of graduate workers and undergraduate students and took the long way to Oakland to avoid the flames that were jumping across the highway. For the next few days, seventeen of us crammed into a tiny three-bedroom apartment, not far from the Oakland Marina, where my uncle has lived on a houseboat for my entire life. Outside, riotous movements against racialized police violence swept the streets, COVID-19 cases were rising across the country, and the sky remained orange. It was a period when breathing was infinitely complex. Months earlier, during the peak of the graduate wildcat strike, Susanna and I wrote a manifesto about the university burning down. Half-kidding, we submitted it for peer review. She texted me a photo of the fire tracker with the caption, "did we do this?" We began to root for the fire as it rapidly approached the Lockheed Martin Santa Cruz Facility, which bumps up against the campus. The Lockheed Martin Santa Cruz Facility tests and develops the UGM-133A Trident II, a submarine-launched ballistic missile system, and in 2020, the facility did not burn down.

The entanglements between universities and military infrastructure go far deeper than just the physical proximity of the Lockheed Martin facility to the campus. It is difficult to calculate, exactly, how much money the University of California receives from the Department of Defense: a complex web of shell LLCs, investment funds, and real estate

portfolios obscures the extent of their material entanglement, but one can find clues in university budget documents and appropriations requests. According to the University of California Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations Priorities report, which documents the UC's requests for federal funding, "UC supports \$2.785 billion for Defense 6.1 Basic Research within a total request of \$22.817 billion for the Defense Science and Technology (6.1-6.3) research and development portfolio."³²⁹ This number far outpaces other appropriations requests—in comparison, UC supported an \$840 million request to support oceanic and atmospheric research, \$105 million to support the USGS program on earthquake research, and \$20 million for the Joint Fire Science program.³³⁰ The report makes it clear that the research priorities of the university are primarily organized around the production of knowledge that can benefit defense and national security. In addition to the \$2.785 billion request from the Department of Defense, many of the other appropriations requests mobilize the rhetoric of national security, including two separate requests to the Department of Homeland Security (\$750 million and \$55 million, respectively) that will support "collaborative, multi-disciplinary research at universities across the country that contribute to the prevention and response to homeland security threats."³³¹ There is a running joke at the University of California that the UC is an [x] that sells degrees. The particular construction changes, but the two most common articulations are that the UC is a defense contractor that sells degrees, and that the UC is a landlord that sells degrees. Although tongue-in-cheek, this joke is hardly a joke—the funding and budgetary patterns of the institution reveal a clear priority of knowledge production that can be mobilized in service of "defense," and the form that university-based capital accumulation most commonly takes is through extensive real

³²⁹ University of California Office of the President. *University of California Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations Priorities*. University of California, 2025, 10.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid., 13.

estate portfolios. In an illustrative typo, the public accountability initiative Little Sis lists the owner of the University of California as Blackstone Real Estate Income Trust.³³²

This chapter examines the charge in the Morrill Act that land-grant colleges and universities teach military tactics and strategy alongside scientific agriculture and the mechanic arts. I pose an analysis of the university that takes militarism and its attendant infrastructures of knowledge as central, rather than peripheral, to the function of the university in a settler colony. Building on the history of federal and state land policy that I pose in the introduction, I ask how the construction of universities following the passage of the Morrill Act can be understood as a consolidation of state and military power, which functioned to stabilize a comparatively weak federal government following the Civil War. Furthermore, I narrate the entanglement of military capacities with higher education as a speculative move that endows universities with the *capacity* to be readily militarized, should the need arise. This hedging is consistent with the logic of tightly regulated expansion that constituted the policies of the federal government prior to the mid-nineteenth century: the state had to balance the management of vast swaths of territory with a federal government that was financially unstable and lacked a centralized standing army. I articulate the charge of military education in the Morrill Act as a crucial instantiation of the militarization of citizens: a relatively weak federal government found it more effective and efficient to conscript settlers and citizens into the project of border enforcement than it did to build up more centralized military capabilities. I pay particular attention to the affect of anxiety and the rhetoric of crisis that is mobilized to justify the expansion of military capacities, and explore how rhetoric of democracy and liberalism offers cover to racialized settler violence.

³³² “LittleSis: University of California.” Accessed June 29, 2026.
https://littlesis.org/entities/33958-University_of_California.

This chapter proceeds with an attention to the materiality of knowledge production, and through that lens it becomes abundantly clear that settler colonial and authoritarian forms of governance go to great pains to make certain forms of knowledge not matter, to recast them as not-knowledge, to minimize them through the heft of state-sanctioned and institutional knowledge production, and, every once in a while, to engage in acts of physical destruction. The question of the relationship between the university and histories of American militarism, then, can be understood as a question about the mechanics of making knowledge matter and unmatter, a question about the social processes that shape the materiality of knowledge production, and the complicated ways the institutions themselves function as sites of racialized population management that are, fundamentally, inextricable from forms of violence that would come to be consolidated under “the military,” “the police,” and “landlords.”

I then take a somewhat winding detour through federal and state land policy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to situate the charge of military education at the land-grant institutions in a broader analysis of racialized public and private property formation in order to examine the impossibility of drawing a hard and fast distinction between the university and the military. I pose a revisionist history of the “weak” antebellum state that foregrounds land policy and land acquisition as an accumulation process which because it was dispersed rather than centralized, nuances normative understandings of state power and state formation. In this view, settler colonialism’s tendency to “render unintelligible the entanglements of racialization and colonization, occluding the mutable historicity of colonial structures and attributing finality to events of conquest and

dispossession"³³³ is held as central. The settler-colonial nation state employs distinct modes of production and reproduction, modes that are obscured in the process of reproduction.

Examining the foundations of the relationship between universities and militarism also offers a powerful lens into the history of American policing. Following important scholarship that traces the origins of policing to slave patrols,³³⁴ I ask how the pattern of the deployment of the U.S. Army to frontier land between the Revolutionary War and the Civil War for the purpose of removing “illegal” American settlements might usefully complicate origin stories of American policing. At the same time that southern slave patrols were enforcing a property regime of chattel slavery through a regional monopoly on violence, the U.S. military was interrupting the establishment of private property by settlers in contested frontier land. Through the passage of the Northwest Ordinance, the federal government formalized a sequence of property formation in which the state was the necessary mediator between Indigenous land claims and settler private property claims, through the creation of the legal category of the “public domain.” I ask how the narrative of a straight line between southern slave patrols and modern police functions to obscure the policing functions of civil institutions like universities. This analysis does not detract from the significance of slave patrols, and does not attempt to minimize their violences; rather, it is an attempt to refuse the post-Emancipation categorization of the northern states as racially innocent and to emphasize that the belief in the United States as a white nation was more or less universally held among both the northern and southern states.

In the wake of the American revolutionary war, there was a widespread and persistent allergy to centralization. This manifested in resistances to a standing army, anxieties about

³³³ Manu Vimalassery et al., “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory & Event* (Baltimore, Maryland) 19, no. 4 (2016), 2.

³³⁴ See: Ben Brucato, “Policing Race and Racing Police: The Origin of US Police in Slave Patrols.,” *Social Justice* 47, no. 3/4 (2020): 115–36.

federal overreach, and pushback against federal taxation. Against the backdrop of this widespread mistrust of centralization, the federal government in the nineteenth century took a different approach in building state power. Rather than centralizing and funding institutions like the military, the federal government's legislative agenda in the nineteenth century reflects a logic of the *democratization* of the capacities for dispossession, property formation, and the enforcement of property claims. As Paul Frymer argues, the nineteenth century state took great pains to establish white demographic majorities in territories in advance of their incorporation into statehood, and the land-grant system can be usefully understood as a mechanism of demographic management, independent of its curricular charges. In his 1959 pamphlet *Federal Support for Education: The Situation Today*, F.J. Seidner quotes Robert M. Hutchins, who said that "history will smile sardonically at the spectacle of this great country getting interested, slightly and temporarily, in education only because of the technical achievements of Russia, and then being able to act as a nation only by assimilating education to the cold war and calling it a defense act."³³⁵ Though the land-grant system emerged in a dramatically different context of federal power and imperial agendas, the Morrill Act might best be understood as a defense act masqueraded as an educational act. Somewhat paradoxically, the decentralized and underresourced state of the nineteenth century was able to transition into a global imperial power, not through the centralization of military power, but through its democratization; a process that sutured public goods like education to the militarized enforcement of property regimes that relied on a political economy of plunder.³³⁶

³³⁵ F. J. Seidner, *Federal Support for Education: The Situation Today* (The Public Affairs Institute, 1959). i.

³³⁶ Witgen, Michael John. *Seeing Red: Indigenous Land, American Expansion, and the Political Economy of Plunder in North America*. Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and the University of North Carolina Press, 2022.

This story begins with one phrase from the Morrill Act: *military tactics and strategy*. There are questions about this phrase: what does education in military tactics and strategies mean? Why was the only difference between the version of the bill that failed in 1859 and the version that passed in 1862 the inclusion of that one small phrase? In a June 6, 1862 address to the House of Representatives, Justin Morrill made nod to this inclusion, writing that “something of military instruction has been incorporated in the bill in consequence of the new conviction of its necessity forced upon the attention of the loyal States by the history of the past year.”³³⁷ What future threat was the federal government speculating on? What does it matter? Does it matter? What form does that mattering take?

Universities, Homesteads, and Railroads: Accumulation by Dispossession

1862 was a big year. For decades, a tenuous balance between the southern vision of a white nation reliant on a slave economy, and the northern vision of a white nation reliant on territorial expansion, had functioned to keep both territorial acquisition and the expansion of slavery in check. Following the secession of the southern states in 1861, the federal government was left with almost no opposition to much more aggressive policies of expansion, settlement, and state building. In quick succession, Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railway Act, and the Morrill Act into law, indexing a new articulation of federal power and significantly expanded mechanisms of accumulation.

Fifty one years later, in 1913, Rosa Luxemburg published *The Accumulation of Capital*, in which she developed the thesis that capitalist reproduction could not be explained by features innate to capitalism, but was capitalism’s constant confrontation with noncapitalist modes of production, which lent it structural stability and the capacity for reproduction. Luxemburg articulates a dual character of capitalist accumulation, one aspect of

³³⁷ *Speech of Hon. Justin S. Morrill, of Vermont in the House of Representatives*. 1862.

which can be found in the “commodity market and the place where surplus value is produced—the factory, the mine, the agricultural estate.” In this aspect, “accumulation is a purely economic process, with its most important phase a transaction between the capitalist and the wage labourer.”³³⁸ The other aspect of capitalist accumulation lies in the collisions between capitalist and noncapitalist modes of production. Luxemburg writes that this aspect

concerns the relations between capitalism and the non-capitalist modes of production which start making their appearance on the international stage. Its predominant methods are colonial policy, an international loan system—a policy of spheres of interest—and war. Force, fraud, oppression, looting are openly displayed without any attempt at concealment, and it requires an effort to discover within this tangle of political violence and contests of power the stern laws of the economic process.³³⁹

Luxemburg, following Arendt, posits that Marx’s primitive or original accumulation is in fact a continuous force in the geography of capitalist accumulation that takes the form of imperialism. In this section I suggest that whether U.S.-Native relations in the nineteenth century are classified as imperial relations or otherwise, the tripartite slate of legislation in 1862 shares critical features with Luxemburg’s theorization of capitalist accumulation and, more specifically, with David Harvey’s elaboration of *accumulation by dispossession*. I consider university construction via the Morrill Act through the lens of accumulation by dispossession, to theorize the land-grant university system as an expansion of the reproductive capacities of settler colonial capitalism, which functioned to stabilize the state in the absence of more well-developed military capacities. In this way, land-grant universities operate as sites of not only financial but political speculation: establishing a university in newly incorporated territory is a method of producing white demographic majorities and thus hedging against the possibility of future military conflict. Furthermore, the process of

³³⁸ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, 2nd ed, Routledge Classics (Routledge, 2003), 432.

³³⁹ Ibid.

surveying and distributing the land that would be parceled out through the Morrill Act would, under the cover of public education, rapidly scale up the mechanisms of the conversion of federal land into capital, which could be mobilized to fund war. In 1862, after all, the Civil War was dragging on, soldiers increasingly complained that they were not getting paid, and the precarity of the national project can hardly be overstated. Although from the present moment it is difficult to fully apprehend the entanglements of universities and militarism, that is partly a function of settler colonialism's drive toward the occlusion of its mechanisms of reproduction. From Washington in 1862, faced with dwindling cash reserves and bleak economic prospects, the construction of universities was necessarily a military consideration, in the sense that all policy decisions were shaped by the question of whether or not the government had the military capacity to enforce particular policy in particular territory, and what other strategies it might use toward the stabilization of the state.

According to David Harvey, "what accumulation by dispossession does is to release a set of assets (including labour power) at very low (and in some cases zero) cost.

Overaccumulated capital can immediately seize hold of such assets and immediately turn them to profitable use."³⁴⁰ The Homestead Act, the Pacific Railway Act, and the Morrill Act all demonstrate this logic of accumulation by dispossession, but in slightly distinct vectors. I am not arguing here that this legislative slate was the first instance of this mode of accumulation—as we have seen, the long histories of assertions of settler sovereignty all proceed by the logic of accumulation by dispossession—but rather that the 1862 legislation indicated a maturation and expansion of those modes of accumulation. The Homestead Act intervened in capitalist reproduction in two important ways: by legally reifying a nuclear family structure, which, as Marxist feminists have long argued, is the fundamental unit of

³⁴⁰ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 149.

capitalist reproduction, and by privatizing an enormous amount of land, releasing surveyed state property into private property interests for only the cost of a filing fee. In legalizing the “homestead” as the state-sanctioned and state-incentivized form of private property, the state would set itself up to profit from another mass theft of land through the Dawes Act, which required Indigenous people to parcel out collective landholdings into individual allotments as a condition of U.S. citizenship and immediately reduced Cherokee land by two-thirds.

The Pacific Railway Act functioned as a mechanism of accumulation in the same general sense as the Homestead Act: through the release of assets (land) into the private market. In total, railroad companies received upwards of 175 million acres of public land. In contrast to the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railway Act made land grants directly to corporations (the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads), not to individual settlers, and “the use of Chinese labor was integral to the business plans of the Central Pacific Directors,”³⁴¹ indicating the inherently racial character of American capitalism in its divisions of labor. The Pacific Railway Act is an instantiation of what Karuka terms “railroad colonialism:”

North American railroads linked with railroads elsewhere in the colonized world. Imperialists across the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia built railroads as infrastructures of reaction, as attempts to control the future. Infrastructure, in other words, played a police function, materializing not through liberal universalism, but proliferating distinctions and comparison along the lines of community, nation, race, gender, caste, and respectability. Railways enabled the circulation of colonial commodities throughout the imperial core, and even more importantly, they made the large-scale export of financial and industrial capital to the colonies a central feature of global capitalism.³⁴²

³⁴¹ Karuka, *Empire's Tracks*, 9.

³⁴² Ibid., 40.

While the land grants themselves were a flashpoint of accumulation by dispossession, the infrastructural and military purpose of those grants would ricochet into waves of ongoing and intensifying accumulation. The surveys undertaken for railroad construction would be used to further parcel up Indigenous land, arms and soldiers alongside commodities moved in much more rapid circulation, and the promise of increased national coherence through greater connectivity eased the centuries-long fears of unrestrained settlement as a national security threat, authorizing a whole host of subsequent forms of dispossession. Importantly, in Karuka's formulation of railroad colonialism, railroads function both speculatively and militarily, a dual character that is shared by the property formation resultant from the Morrill Act and the Homestead Act.

Viewed through the lens of accumulation by dispossession, there are three distinct spheres that the land-grant university acts in: the infrastructural, the curricular, and the content of research. As a key piece of infrastructure in the geography of racial capitalism/settler colonialism, the Morrill Act facilitated a massive land transfer through the consolidation of state property and the suturing of education to accumulation by dispossession. Beyond the American context, the construction of universities had long been understood as a tool of imperialism. Craig Steven Wilder writes that the establishment of universities was a favored strategy by the Spanish Empire in the Americas, and that "universities catalyzed cultural shifts in the capitals and hinterlands of the defeated Taino, Carib, Aztec, Mayan, and Incan empires."³⁴³ In the early colonial period in the United States, education and military action were frequently understood as the two possible strategies that colonists could take in relation to Indigenous people. The incomprehensibly brutal practices that underwrote Native boarding schools demonstrates with disturbing clarity that settler

³⁴³ Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, First U.S. edition (Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 18.

colonialism has an educative character—or, from another angle, that education is a tool of colonialism. As Wilder puts it, “colleges were imperial instruments akin to armories and forts, a part of the colonial garrison with the specific responsibilities to train ministers and missionaries, convert indigenous peoples and soften cultural resistance, and extend European rule over foreign nations.”³⁴⁴ Given the explicit connection that colonists drew out between education and the elimination of Indigenous peoples, it can rightly be said that the idea that the university as something *other* than a wing of the military is a relatively recent conception. In fact, there are myriad examples of campuses or student bodies becoming militarized through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (to say nothing of the militarized responses to student movements of the sixties, and the most recent hyper-militarized response to Gaza solidarity encampments on college campuses in the spring of 2023). Campus tours of Brown University point to a cannonball embedded in the brick of University Hall, which was lodged at the building while it housed American troops during the Civil War; Pennsylvania State University considered shutting down in 1861 when the majority of its students enrolled in the Union army; and West Point was a military fort long before it was a university.

During the mid-nineteenth century, questions of curriculum and pedagogy were tightly bound up in questions of citizenship and subject-formation. Alongside its implicit and explicit infrastructures of militarism, land-grant universities operated to stabilize the state by producing certain forms of citizen-subjecthood through education, organizing curriculum around particular social and political aims. The question of how to produce a citizenry that was capable of stewarding the American project was operational through much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and took on a particular spike of urgency in context of Southern secession. The production of American citizen-subjecthood through education was

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 33.

not an abstract question in the middle of the Civil War, as “Americanness” was being actively contested, reorganized, and reconstituted. Expanding access to higher education to poor white farmers was another way the Morrill Act hedged against national crises and attempted to control the future; instilling democratic values through education as a guardrail against social unrest and upheaval.

The third sphere of influence, the content of research, involves the incentivization of production of knowledge that can be readily taken up by infrastructures of militarism. For example, the process of artificially fixing nitrogen that was developed by German chemist Fritz Haber in 1909 was foundational to both the development of industrial-scale fertilizer, and the industrialization of munitions in the United States and Europe during World War I.³⁴⁵ Much of the production of agricultural knowledge represents a logic of interest convergence: the industrialization of agriculture and the industrialization of war frequently share methods, scientific frameworks, and institutional origin points. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the discipline of engineering was not initially included in what Morrill referred to as the “mechanic arts,” but by the early twentieth century, the land-grant system had formally absorbed engineering into its institutional charge. In 1914, the Association of Land-Grant Colleges adopted a definition of the mechanic arts that included engineering,³⁴⁶ indexing a deeper entanglement between the military and the land-grant institutions. Given that the discipline of engineering was inseparable from militarism—owing its disciplinary legitimacy to its institutional location in military academies and its practical utility to the U.S. military—the slippage between the mechanic arts and engineering, and the ease with which

³⁴⁵ Tom Philpott, “A Brief History of Our Deadly Addiction to Nitrogen Fertilizer,” *Food, Mother Jones*, n.d., accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.motherjones.com/food/2013/04/history-nitrogen-fertilizer-ammonium-nitrate/>.

³⁴⁶ Arthur J. Klein, *Survey of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities* (United States Government Printing Office, 1930), 797.

engineering was folded into the land-grant mission, represents important structural overlaps between the institution of the university and the institution of the military.

Engineering and Military Education

Efforts to fund and systematize military education have been present since the earliest days of the colonial occupation of what would become the United States of America, and have been entangled with the field of engineering for at least as long. In this section I will explore the interrelated origins of agricultural and military education, to put forth a theorization of the land-grant college system that holds that while agricultural education has not always been explicitly militarized, it has been endowed with the capacity for militarization from its beginnings . Federally-supported military education significantly preceded federally-supported agricultural education, and, in structurally significant ways, federally-funded agricultural colleges found widespread success in part as a function of their willingness to mold themselves after military colleges. I probe this periodization for causal relation through examining the history of the United States Military Academy—more commonly known as West Point—which was officially incorporated in 1802, though it had been the site of military and engineering education since 1794. For instance, how might we consider the implications of the overrepresentation of West Point graduates in the industry of civil engineering during the era of massive territorial expansion in the nineteenth century? The overlapping and entangled histories of military education, engineering education, and agricultural education reveal that, historically and epistemologically, agriculture is “post” (as in downstream of) militarization, not just as a land accumulation project, as I demonstrated in the previous section, but also as a subject formation project.

Edward C. Boynton was born in Windsor, Vermont in 1824, fourteen years after and thirty-four miles south of Justin Morrill's birthplace. Boynton is best remembered as the author of a behemoth tome with a correspondingly long name: *History of West Point and its Military Importance During the American Revolution and the Origin and Progress of the United States Military Academy*, which was first published in 1864. Boynton had a varied and geographically far reaching career. He graduated from West Point in 1846, fought for two years in the Mexican-American War, returned to teach at West Point from 1848 to 1855, and fought in the Seminole Wars in Florida before somewhat abruptly leaving the military in 1856 and joining the faculty of the University of Mississippi as a chemistry professor, where he remained until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, when he was reappointed as a captain in the U.S. Army and assigned to serve at West Point in a military, rather than instructional, capacity.³⁴⁷ Boynton's circuit from university to military to university to military is illustrative, though not uncommon in his time period. As we have seen, there is a porosity to the relationship between the military and the university.

Boynton's *History of West Point* begins with a chain of property. West Point is strategically located fifty miles north of New York City, overlooking the Hudson River, and was first occupied by the U.S. Army in 1780, making it the oldest continuously operated army post in the United States. Boynton's chain of property begins as follows:

The United States tract at West Point includes 2,105 acres of land, the title to which was secured by purchase, as herein described.

West Point proper was originally granted to Captain John Evans; but, having been vacated by him, it was afterwards resumed and held by the English Crown.

On May 17, 1723, by Royal Letters-Patent, a tract, including the northern portion of the Point, and embracing 1,463 acres of land, was granted

³⁴⁷ "Edward C. Boynton Collection | University Archives | University of Mississippi," accessed July 5, 2026, <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/boynton/index.2.html>.

to Charles Congreve, upon the condition that, within three years, he or his heirs or assigns should settle and cultivate at least three acres for every fifty acres of land described in the grant. The first settlement at West Point may therefore date from this period.³⁴⁸

The chain of custody goes on, but I want to draw attention to two features of these opening paragraphs. First, Boynton emphasizes that the title was secured by purchase, though who is purchasing it from whom is unclear, and there is an implicit assumption of the preemptive rights of the English Crown as it operates as an intermediary between successive title claims. Second, the 1723 grant was conditioned on cultivation, which, as we have seen, was variously employed as a basis for a property claim before being formalized through the Homestead Act in 1962. It's worth noting that although cultivation or improvement was not generally or formally the standard for a legitimate property claim, it was periodically and strategically employed throughout the early colonial period.

In exhaustive detail, Boynton traces a series of transfers and transactions between the federal government, New York State, and private landowners, before detouring into a dense analysis of Revolutionary War military decisions for the next several hundred pages. A reader would be forgiven for thinking that West Point was only ever a military base, not an educational institution, as Boynton does not mention military education until the tenth chapter. When he does get around to it, he remarks that “the idea of establishing a National Military Academy dates back to an early period in our history; indeed, at the very outset of the struggle for independence, it forced its claims upon the attention of those invested with the control and direction of public authority.”³⁴⁹ Proposals for a national military academy were entertained by Congress as early as October of 1776, and on the same day that Congress

³⁴⁸ Edward C. Boynton, *History of West Point, and Its Military Importance During the American Revolution: And the Origin and Progress of the United States Military Academy* (1863; Books For Libraries Press, 1970), 9.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

formally ended the war, April 11, 1783, Alexander Hamilton submitted an extensive proposal for “a proper peace establishment,”³⁵⁰ which included a call for a national military academy. Boynton’s analysis of the motivations for creating such an institution are instructive: rather than simply producing a more highly trained military, a national military academy would additionally produce a militarily educated citizenry. He writes that the principal design of the institution was “to diffuse and disseminate among the people a class of military educated citizens, whose services might be relied on, when encroachments upon or non-fulfilment of treaty stipulations rendered resistance necessary by an appeal to arms.”³⁵¹ This purpose—to increase the capacity and effectiveness of the spontaneous taking up of arms by American citizens—sharpens and clarifies the Morrill Act mandate for education in military tactics and strategy. The architects of the legislation may have wondered: if formal institutions of military education could increase the military capacity of the citizenry in general, why couldn’t other educational institutions do the same? The answer was: they could. For instance, Massachusetts Institute of Technology was founded on April 10, 1861, a mere two months after the formation of the Confederacy and two days before the attack on Fort Sumter. The stakes of how to proliferate military education were particularly high in 1862, when the beleaguered federal government was struggling to pay its soldiers and constantly receiving complaints from military officials about the insufficiency of their resources.

Jefferson formally chartered the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1802. In its early years, cadets were officially part of the Corps of Engineers. As was not uncommon, the institution was beset by administrative turmoil and funding challenges for the first decade and a half of its operation until Sylvanus Thayer—officially recognized as the “Father of the Military Academy”—took the position of superintendent in 1817, and successfully reformed

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 178.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 184-5.

the institution into the nation's first and most vaunted school of engineering. In 1824, civil engineering was introduced, and West Point "quickly became the nation's principal source of civil engineers, who were badly needed to assist the transportation revolution."³⁵² This point adds another valence to the militaristic function of railroad infrastructure: not only would the railroad greatly enrich the nation's military capacities, the engineering knowledges that were necessary for its construction emerged primarily from a military institution. Economist John Rae remarks that West Point graduates' "obvious value in nonmilitary work may well have saved the Military Academy from extinction at the hands of egalitarian enthusiasts during the Jacksonian period."³⁵³ Engineering schools were proliferating in the 1850s, a growth which indicates that on-the-job training for railroad engineers was becoming increasingly insufficient in meeting the demands of rapid industrialization.

Military historian Arthur T. Coumbe writes that "from independence until World War II, the army was more active in domestic operations than in national defense."³⁵⁴ While I understand the utility of this distinction—Coumbe is signalling that the pre-war United States generally took an isolationist approach to foreign policy, I would argue that the distinction between domestic operations and national defense in the context of the nineteenth century is anachronistic; westward expansion, relations with Indigenous nations, and frontier management fell somewhere in between foreign and domestic operations, given that the borders of the nation were shifting and in flux. In particular, recasting military conflicts with Indigenous nations and confederacies as "domestic operations," instead of as nation-to-nation military efforts and negotiations, naturalizes the violence of settlement and positions it as

³⁵² Roger L. Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 176-7.

³⁵³ John Rae, "Application of Science to Industry," in *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860-1920*, 2. pr, ed. Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), 252.

³⁵⁴ Arthur T. Coumbe, *Soldiers in the Schoolhouse: A Military History of the Junior ROTC* (University Press of Kentucky, 2025), 3.

outside the scope of military action. Coumbe goes on to write that “the lack of compelling external threats, the wide ocean barriers, the budgetary stringency, and an isolationist worldview militated against an exclusive focus on foreign foes and pushed the military into civilian roles. On occasion, there was no viable alternative to the military taking up a civic task. It alone had the organization, resources, and reach to accomplish what had to be done.”³⁵⁵ The deployment of the military in the civic realm is the other side of the coin of the endowment of citizens with military capacities. In short, the formal and functional distinctions between the military and civilians was relatively porous in the nineteenth century, and this porosity facilitated both the military management of certain civic projects, and the incorporation of logics of militarism into civic institutions like the land-grant system.

West Point was not the only institution of military education: just the most well-known. West Point established the paradigm for engineering education as centrally important to the military, but other institutions took slightly different approaches. The American Scientific, Literary, and Military Academy (later Norwich University) founded in 1819 in Norwich, Vermont by Captain Alden Partridge, offered a different blueprint for military education that featured a broader range of curricular offerings. Norwich warrants some attention as the philosophical origin point of the Reserve Officer Training Corps, a wing of the military that gained a powerful stronghold in the land-grant institutions in the twentieth century. Historians of Norwich adopt a familiar laudatory and bombastic language in describing the institution and its founder. William Ellis wrote in 1898 that “when the foundation stone was laid, upon which has been erected the great superstructure, a new era was begun in the educational work of the country. It was regarded by many as a doubtful experiment, but the great founder, with a clearer vision, read the pages of the future. His faith

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

never wavered.”³⁵⁶ To be sure, Norwich did not face the same kinds of problems attracting and retaining students than did other institutions at the time. Between 1825 and 1828, upwards of twelve hundred students representing every state and territory in the union enrolled in the institution. Ellis notes that “this attendance shows conclusively that the military and scientific element, together with an optional course of study, and a term of residence limited by the ability of the student to complete the course, met a want not provided for in existing colleges.”³⁵⁷ Given that military institutions were generally less affected by the downturn in college enrollments in the early nineteenth century, and that Norwich University in particular boasted sustained and growing enrollments through the early nineteenth century, the architects of the land-grant system adopted some features of military education beyond the curricular in the establishment of land-grant institutions.

In founding Norwich University, Partridge tapped into a prevailing sentiment of the time that West Point was a bastion of elitism and positioned his institution as a counterbalance that rested on the conception of the citizen-soldier. Michael S. Neiberg writes that “from the early nineteenth century to the present, the administrators of American higher education have believed firmly that the national defense requires skilled young officers, but that these young men should not be prepared exclusively by the military itself.”³⁵⁸ The figure of the citizen-soldier represents American skepticism toward a centralized standing army, and the logic of building military power and capacity through the democratization, rather than the centralization, of military capacities. As such, Norwich University, with its broader curriculum and explicitly anti-elitist position in comparison to West Point, offers a useful

³⁵⁶ William A. Ellis, *Norwich University: Her History, Her Graduates, Her Roll of Honor* (The Rumford Press, 1898), vi.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁵⁸ Michael S. Neiberg, *Making Citizen-Soldiers: ROTC and the Ideology of American Military Service* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 2.

example of the kind of military education that the architects of the land-grant system were imagining, and the kinds of subjects that these institutions were intended to produce.

Reframing the “Weak” Antebellum and Post-Emancipation State

In 1784, Americans were worried. They were worried about the role, scope, and character of the federal government. They were worried about slave uprisings. They were worried about Indigenous resistance to colonization. They were worried about money. They were worried about land. They were worried about labor. They were worried about the soil. They were worried about industrialization. They were worried about democracy. Americans were worried about how to access and retain material security in the context of a fledgling capitalist democracy and its necessary social and economic hierarchies. The persistence of these worries and the distinct objects that worry attached to is perhaps an unavoidable feature of the vision of freedom that was articulated by the framers of the Constitution—if American freedom relies on the unfreedom of others, one’s position as a beneficiary of that freedom is contingent and not guaranteed. Many of these worries would sharpen and come to the fore in the decades leading up to the Civil War, and I argue that federal policies around land and migration of this period were attempts to hedge against anxieties that functioned, in part, through the consolidation of whiteness and the hardening of racial classification that more tightly associated whiteness with property ownership. This association tamed these material anxieties through promises of particular forms of stability and security.

The antebellum American state is generally understood by historians to have been weak, and to have been further weakened by the Civil War. This classification is somewhat curious: the supposedly “weak” state, after all, facilitated unprecedented territorial acquisition and management in the nineteenth century. In classifying the nineteenth century state as

weak, historians are generally implying two things. First, the nineteenth century state is relatively weak when compared to the post World War II global hegemon that the United States would become. Second, the nineteenth century state lacked centralized military, administrative, and taxation capacities. I argue that the categorization of the state as weak, though reflecting important structural features of the federal government, functions rhetorically to obscure the mechanisms and strategies of territorial expansion and population management; an obfuscation that naturalizes settler colonial acquisition of territory by ascribing it to forces independent of federal policy. Historian Paul Frymer argues that “at times, the government’s primary contribution to the project of expansion was restraining itself from overreaching, mobilizing resources but waiting to use them until it felt it had the capacity to accomplish its goals.”³⁵⁹ To put it another way, though the state may have appeared to be weak, it organized itself around a long-term project of building up the material, economic, and infrastructural capacities to act with strength or force when it needed to, and the primary mechanism through which it hedged against future insecurity was land policy.

How a state that is generally understood to have been weak managed to pursue and enact ambitious projects of territorial expansion is somewhat puzzling, and the key to understanding the puzzle may lie in a more capacious theorization of the state’s mechanisms of power—one that takes into account the democratization of a monopoly on violence furnished through an array of land policies that both incentivized and tightly regulated settlement. One of the primary things that Americans worried about was the frontier, and contesting diagnoses and proposed solutions to the problems associated with the frontier

³⁵⁹ Frymer, Paul. *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion*. Princeton Studies in American Politics Historical, International, and Comparative Perspectives. Princeton University Press, 2019, 13.

made up the bulk of federal activities in the antebellum and post-Emancipation period. Importantly, federal land policy through the nineteenth century was restrained, and the prospect of settler unrest, civil war, and a fracturing of the fledgling state was operational in policy agendas that largely restricted settlement in unincorporated western land. Frymer writes that federal officials “feared both the settlers who might separate themselves from the nation and the populations of non-Americans who threatened to disrupt and resist the process of settlement and force the nation into war and instability.”³⁶⁰ Though Frederick Jackson Turner’s conception of the frontier as an incubator of democracy looms large in the historical record and is frequently recast as the dominant sentiment of the time,³⁶¹ federal land policy reflects a significantly more ambivalent relationship to settlement, shot through with anxieties about the state of the nation and the vulnerabilities of rapid and uncoordinated territorial expansion. To put it another way: the frontier was an incubator of democracy only to the extent that it was also an incubator of policing and military power, and the expansion of democracy was contingent on the expansion and reconstitution of policing power, though that expansion frequently took the form of investment in public goods and services such as education and railroads.

Rather than a consolidation of power through a centralized military and more well-developed administrative and bureaucratic apparatus, the nineteenth century state accumulated power through the democratization of military capacities and the endowment of citizens and settlers with the charge of enacting and enforcing the territorial aims of the nation. In an 1806 address to Indigenous leaders of the Missouri territory that rhetorically positions Indigenous nations as the “children” of the settler government, Jefferson asserts a

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 20-21.

³⁶¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” paper presented at American Historical Association Annual Meeting, July 12, 1893.

desire for “bonds of peace and friendship” between Native nations and the U.S. government.³⁶² This desire, however, comes always with the threat of force and an assertion of the supremacy of the federal government. Jefferson goes on to say, of the American people, that “we are strong, we are as numerous as the stars in the heavens, and we are all gun-men.”³⁶³ This is a warning: do not underestimate the United States, for it has armed and deputized its citizenry, and its military capacities may exceed what is immediately visible or apprehendable. Jefferson’s address reflects a key operative logic of the nineteenth century American state: the accumulation of power through the democratization, rather than the centralization, of force.

The early nineteenth century policies of restrained and tightly regulated settlement were emergent from a series of crushing military defeats for the American army in the Northwest Territory in the last part of the eighteenth century. With a severely depleted military capacity following the Revolutionary War, one of the primary tasks at hand was the management of western migration in a manner that would not further destabilize or fracture the fledgling nation-state. The first step of this management was the assertion of the sole authority of the federal government over the amalgam of unincorporated western land. Asserting and enforcing this authority would require a stronger, more centralized federal government, which ran counter to many of the values and ideals of the American Revolution. Frymer argues that through land policies designed to secure and maintain white majorities in unincorporated territories in advance of endowing those territories with statehood, the state circumvented the thorny problem of the consolidation of federal power. This process effectively built state and military power through the racialized management of public land.

³⁶² Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents 1783-1854* (University of Illinois Press, 1962), 281.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 282.

Frymer writes that “the most critical consequence of land and settlement policies was how frequently the federal government attempted to manufacture racially specific outcomes—namely, the establishment of a white demographic stronghold, often with striking success and sometimes with equally notable failures—so as to enable the government to expand.”³⁶⁴ From this view, the historical consensus of the weakness of the nineteenth century state reveals more about the success of the ideological work of recasting the territorial expansion of the United States as an organic process than it does about the actual scope or power of the federal government. This obfuscation is a foundational logic of settler colonialism: as Veracini writes, settler colonialism “covers its tracks and operates toward its self-supersession.”³⁶⁵ If anything, the consensus that the nineteenth century state is weak functions to naturalize the process of Indigenous dispossession, lending credence to notions of determinism and the inevitability of the territorial dominance of the United States, and, consequently, a revisionist analysis of the nineteenth century state as an activist body in the context of land policy undercuts the rhetorical weight of determinism that authorizes settler colonialism.

This is not to say, however, that the nineteenth century state already contained typical elements of state authority. Traditionally, military and bureaucratic capacities are understood as reliable measures of state power, and the nineteenth century federal government had neither. These capacities would develop over the twentieth century, but absent these typical trappings of state power, the federal government pursued an agenda of racialized population management that “enabled the nation to simultaneously claim fidelity to democratic principles while maintaining racial hierarchies that promoted white supremacy.”³⁶⁶ This was a

³⁶⁴ Frymer, *Building an American Empire*, 23.

³⁶⁵ Lorenzo Veracini, “Introducing Settler Colonial Studies,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011), 3.

³⁶⁶ Frymer, *Building an American Empire*, 10.

circumscribed strategy of nation-building that supports the logic of manifest destiny, framing a set of jurisdictional and military actions as divinely ordained. At play here is what Mark Rifkin terms “settler common sense,” defined as the process through which “institutionalized relations of settlement, such as law and policy, help generate forms of affect through which they become imbued with a sensation of everyday certainty.”³⁶⁷ Instead of taking for granted that the nineteenth century American state was weak, we might ask how its power has been rendered illegible; recast as something other than power; hidden in plain sight.

One of the key features of settler colonialism is its capacity to obfuscate its conditions of possibility and replication. In contrast to franchise colonialism, which reproduces itself, settler colonialism “extinguishes itself,” and “justifies its operation on the basis of the expectation of its future demise.”³⁶⁸ Other scholars have characterized this tendency as “agnosia,” or the production of forgetting,³⁶⁹ theorizing it as a constitutive, rather than incidental, feature of settler colonialism. As I explored in depth in Chapter One, the forms of memorialization and institutionally-produced history surrounding the land-grant college system are rife with this logic of forgetting, and while the university is a particular clear site of this logic, given its stated mission of knowledge production, there are echoes of this occlusion throughout all forms of settler institutions. Patrick Wolfe famously insisted that settler colonialism is a “structure not an event,”³⁷⁰ and this structure is one that is consistently driven toward the negation of its conditions of possibility. Veracini notes that if franchise colonialism is characterized in part by the reinforcing of the distinction between colony and metropole, settler colonialism, in contrast, erases it. This erasure takes particular forms and

³⁶⁷ Mark Rifkin, *Settler Common Sense: Queerness and Everyday Colonialism in the American Renaissance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xv.

³⁶⁸ Veracini, “Introducing Settler Colonial Studies,” 3.

³⁶⁹ Manu Vimalassery et al., “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory & Event* (Baltimore, Maryland) 19, no. 4 (2016).

³⁷⁰ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.

targets particular objects at different moments, but, crucially, always involves an assertion of indigeneity by the settler. Philip J. Deloria examines this tendency in an expansive historical frame, writing that “Americans wanted to feel a natural affinity with the continent, and it was Indians who could teach them such aboriginal closeness. Yet, in order to control the landscape they had to destroy the original inhabitants.”³⁷¹ Deloria theorizes the ideology of noble savagery as a constant negotiation between seemingly mutually exclusive positions: the idealization and eradication of the Native. This ideology is flexible and historically contingent, and the material processes of settler colonialism proceed through a selective deployment of identification and disidentification with the Native that ultimately serves to naturalize settler presence and governance. In this way, assertions of settler sovereignty are always assertions of what Manu Karuka terms “countersovereignty,” or, the sense that “settler invocations of sovereignty require recognition of Indigenous modes of relationship, however muted or displaced, in order to maintain any semblance of stability or coherence.”³⁷² Settler colonialism is slippery, taking pains to obscure its aims and investments, and paying attention to its sleights of hand might lead one to ask what else power might have been up to in the nineteenth century if not articulating itself through the military and federal bureaucracy.

Taking a revisionist approach to the nineteenth century state, then, involves recognizing that it articulated force through the grammar of land management rather than the grammar of outright military power, and that this circumspect form of state-building was a speculative enterprise hedging against future insecurity. This enterprise took an array of forms: restricting settlement in order to maintain white demographic majorities, incentivizing armed occupation of the frontier through preemption policies for veterans, the expansion of

³⁷¹ Philip Joseph Deloria, ed., *Playing Indian*, Yale Historical Publications (Yale University Press, 1998), 5.

³⁷² Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad*, American Crossroads 52 (University of California Press, 2019), 2.

railroad infrastructure and the regulation of interstate commerce, and the construction of public institutions like universities through the logic of democratizing military power.

In July of 1787 Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance. This was the first territorial acquisition by the brand new federal government, and is significant in indexing the transition in governance from a colonial structure to a settler colonial structure. The legislation also marked the beginning of what would come to be a persistent pattern of the United States: asserting a legal claim to land in advance of settlement, through the classification of all unincorporated western land as under the jurisdiction of the federal government. Salmon P. Chase, a New Hampshire born emigree to Ohio, would argue in 1833 that the Northwest Ordinance was at least as significant a document as the Constitution in establishing a uniquely American social contract, writing that “these articles contain what they profess to contain, the true theory of American liberty.”³⁷³ This true theory of American liberty was intimately and inextricably related to the social process through which Indigenous title to land is extinguished: the federal government lays claim to that land first, classifies it as the “public domain,” and makes it available for speculation and settlement. Though the antebellum state was cash poor and militarily weak, it was rich in land, and the period of the “weak” nineteenth century state might be better understood as the period in which the conversion of land to a site of capital accumulation was honed, streamlined, and made the *law* of the land.

This property regime contains a particular sequence of and relationship between *public* and *private* property formation—namely that the production of public property

³⁷³ Salmon P. Chase, ed., *The Statutes of Ohio and of the Northwestern Territory, Adopted or Enacted From 1788 to 1833 Inclusive: Together With The Ordinance of 1787; The Constitution of Ohio and of the United States, and Various Public Instruments and Acts of Congress: Illustrated by a Preliminary Sketch of the History of Ohio; Numerous References and Notes, and Copious Indexes* (Corey & Fairbank, 1833), 17.

precedes the production of private property. Though in many ways it lacked the political strength and military power to enforce such a claim, the Northwest Ordinance “provided the legal means for taking Indigenous land and transferring it to the public domain of the United States.”³⁷⁴ The public nature of this process is critical; for much of the eighteenth century the U.S. Army’s primary task had been removing “squatters” and illegal settlements from unincorporated frontier territory. The United States considered this extralegal formation of private property a threat to its interests. Politicians at the time wrote extensively of the threat that underregulated settlement posed to the nation, fearing settler uprisings and the splintering of the union, and that settler incursions into Indigenous territory would further inflame political and military conflicts with Indigenous nations, who, at the time, far outstripped the United States in terms of military power. Importantly, the status of unincorporated territory as the public domain of the United States was a temporary condition (indicating, again, settler colonialism’s “persistent drive to ultimately supersede the conditions of its operation”³⁷⁵). The intent behind the public status of the land was always to open it up to private property claims and land speculation, but in establishing the supremacy of federal jurisdictional claims over private property claims made by settlers on the frontier, the United States moved to limit the “freedoms” of the individual and strengthen the power of the federal government, though in such a circumspect way that it seems to have not caught the attention of the fiercest defenders of the liberal individual and his god-given property rights.

To put it simply, though the nineteenth century state was in actuality limited in its political and military power, the commonsense narrative of its weakness indicates the extent to which it has effectively concealed its real operations of power and accumulation; namely, the racialized management of land and population. From this frame, the larger purposes of the

³⁷⁴ Witgen, *Seeing Red*, 62.

³⁷⁵ Veracini, “Introducing Settler Colonial Studies,” 3.

Morrill Act and the land-grant college system come into sharper focus. Universities are like prisons and factories in that they are concentrated sites of highly managed populations. Parallel to how Ruth Wilson Gilmore has theorized the expansion of the prison system in California since 1982 as the “prison fix”—the tendency to pose systematic incarceration as a solution for a whole host of political, economic, and social problems³⁷⁶—we might ask about the “education fix.” Or, in other words, we might ask how the massive injection of federal support into higher education through land grants by a financially and militarily weak state might support its agenda of territorial domination through population management. This is a circumspect, unassuming process of accumulation of both population and land, and, ultimately, capital. Rather than questioning how universities have become militarized, though a valuable line of inquiry, I want to foreground a different set of questions. In asking, instead, what is the military function of the construction of universities? I push back against the tendency of universities to resist studying themselves (drive toward their own self-supercession) by asking what militarized logics and particular aims of racialized territorial expansion were at play in the construction of American higher education. It’s not so much about the Army recruiters on campus, though we’ll get to them, too. It’s about education as a convenient cover for dispossession, about the stories of land, labor, and Americanness that are produced and reproduced through and by universities.

It’s a story that, in many ways, could begin anywhere. In examining infrastructure, you begin to learn how many entry points there are into any given system. For the purposes of this paper, I begin the story in the late eighteenth century with the passage of the Northwest Ordinance. Keep in mind that this is a moment of profound precarity for the United States. Freshly independent, it immediately faced economic pressures and military threats from

³⁷⁶ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, American Crossroads 21 (University of California Press, 2007).

Indigenous nations and other European powers, and nations globally began to abolish and limit slavery and the slave trade. Half a world away, questions of Indigenous title and property formation were shaping the development of the Australian settler colony. The American Industrial Revolution, which had been delayed by the British crown during colonial rule out of the fear of economic competition, began to reshape American industry in the late eighteenth century. The industrial production of coal, iron ore, steel, and textiles in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley had begun to ramp up by 1790, and in 1789 industrialists Moses Brown and Samuel Slater collaborated to open the nation's first water-powered cotton spinning mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. This story begins in upheaval—global, economic, racial, industrial, labor—and it is against this backdrop of upheaval that the presumed “weak” federal government honed its strategy of building power through dispersed accumulation rather than centralization.

Preparing for Preemption: Territorial Expansion and Property Formation

The passage of the Northwest Ordinance was the first foray of the newly established federal government into territorial expansion, and the process of surveying and incorporating the territory was in many ways a stress test of the modes of power and domination that would characterize the state through the nineteenth century. Specifically, it modeled and legalized the order of operations of American property formation: the federal government is endowed with rights of absolute preemption, which it can invoke to seize Indigenous lands and claim jurisdiction. Following the establishment of public property (the public domain), land is opened up to speculators, settlers, and private owners. As Witgen writes, “the law used the power of the federal government to extinguish title to land and then enabled the development of that land as private property.”³⁷⁷ The same month that the ordinance was passed, July of

³⁷⁷ Witgen, *Seeing Red*, 20.

1787, a confederacy of Iroquois, Wyandot, Delaware, Shawnee, Odawa, Ojibwe, Bodewaadamii, Miami, Cherokee, and Wabash demanded a treaty negotiation with the federal government. Indigenous peoples in the Northwest Territory had long resisted expansion by the federal government, and the military strength of the confederacy posed a significant threat. Witgen writes that “the warriors of the confederacy proved to be formidable fighters, superior to conscript soldiers and equal to the professional army fielded by the United States.”³⁷⁸ A series of crushing military defeats in the Northwest Territory forced Congress to reevaluate its strategies of settlement, the limits of its own military force, and, fundamentally, the relationship between the federal government and Indigenous nations. Furthermore, Congress began to reconsider its previous aversion to a standing army.

Given that the antebellum federal government did not have the power to levy income tax, was rife with corruption, and possessed a relatively weak military in contrast to other regional powers, the most readily available tool at its disposal was its capacity to control public land and manage migration. Additionally, land was frequently granted to military veterans as “bounties,” instead of paying them wages. Through granting these bounties, the federal government contradicted its own position on settler activism and preemption rights, as it did periodically and “quite often related to security issues, particularly when legislators saw the settlers as a bulwark against Indian attacks.”³⁷⁹ In the wake of military defeats around the enforcement of the Northwest Ordinance, the federal government began to more seriously reckon with what Peter Silver has termed the “essential fact” about European-Indigenous warfare: “the Europeans almost always did very badly.”³⁸⁰ The Northwest Ordinance provided a legal mechanism for jurisdictional claims by the United States, but it came to realize quite

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 67.

³⁷⁹ Frymer, *Building an American Empire*, 80.

³⁸⁰ Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (W. W. Norton and Company, 2009), 53.

quickly in the years following 1787 that “claiming possession of Indian country was not the same as exercising dominion over the territory.”³⁸¹ As a result, the policies of the antebellum federal government can be understood as a strategy of territorial dominance through demographic manipulation, a manipulation that involved distinct processes of jurisdiction, property formation, and governance. The tripartite legislation passed in 1862 of the Morrill Act, the Homestead Act, and the Pacific Railway Act in some ways marked the formal adoption of a theory of property formation that had been tested out in various sites since the passage of the Northwest Ordinance. In short, the 1862 slate of legislation indexes the transition from a federal agenda that aimed to limit and tightly regulate settlement to an agenda that supported, legalized, and incentivized settlement.

In the antebellum period, the federal government took a restrained position toward settlement that was frequently undermined by the activities of state courts. Frymer writes that “whereas federal officials took a strong stance in these early decades against squatters, courts, interpreting common law rights of preemption, often granted land to the settlers as long as they remained occupants and had not been removed from the land by the previous owner.”³⁸² The legal concept of preemption, or the right of first refusal, was operational in many state courts and settler property claims, but did not become the law of the land until the 1841 Preemption Act. The Preemption Act was a significant departure by the federal government from its earlier stance against squatters and extralegal settlement, and this shift occurred gradually as policing illegal settlement became too costly and inefficient for the overtaxed army.

This shift in federal policy overlaps in important ways with shifting attitudes toward both Indigenous people and toward property formation between 1790 and 1820. Stuart

³⁸¹ Witgen, *Seeing Red*, 42.

³⁸² Frymer, *Building an American Empire*, 104.

Banner writes that “in the early 1790s the land not yet purchased from the Indians was thought to be owned by the Indians; by the early 1820s that land was thought to be owned by the state and federal governments.”³⁸³ In other words, before the 1820s, territorial acquisition by the federal government involved purchasing land that Indigenous people had ownership rights to—a contractual exchange of property. Of course, this exchange involved the threat of violence and outright coercion of Native peoples, but it was not until the 1823 Supreme Court decision in *Johnson v. M’Intosh* that the federal government officially adopted the position that Natives were not the *owners* of their land, but that they had a right of occupancy. *Johnson v. M’Intosh* is most well known for establishing the doctrine of discovery, and remains a cornerstone of American property law. The case held that the right of preemption of the federal government superseded the rights of individuals to purchase land from Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, it established cultivation as the necessary precondition of property formation. In his opinion, Chief Justice Marshall wrote,

According to every theory of property, the Indians had no individual rights to land; nor had they any collectively, or in their national capacity; for the lands occupied by each tribe were not used by them in such a manner as to prevent their being appropriated by a people of cultivators. All the proprietary rights of civilized nations on this continent are founded on this principle. The right derived from discovery and conquest, can rest on no other basis; and all existing titles depend on the fundamental title of the crown by discovery.³⁸⁴

Marshall’s logic in this passage is a disturbingly neat example of the settler colonial drive to paper over its mechanisms of reproduction; not only does the discovery doctrine establish the legal basis for the absolute supremacy of property claims by the federal government, it denies that Native people *ever* had legitimate claim or title to their lands. In this way the case is not only precedent-setting, it also refracts backward, producing a revisionist historical narrative

³⁸³ Stuart Banner, ed., *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 150.

³⁸⁴ *Johnson and Graham’s Lessee v. William M’Intosh*, 21 U.S. 543 (1823), 570.

that naturalizes settler property claims by positioning them as always already legitimate. Marshall's argument flattens out the complexity of early colonial property formation, asserting a continuous settler supremacy that, in actuality, was far more precarious and contested. In his opinion, Marshall employs a rhetorical strategy of selective identification with Indigeneity that was a common move at the time to legitimate settler governance through particular claims to Indigeneity. We can see this rhetorical strategy in Jefferson's 1806 address to Native leaders in Missouri, in which he writes, "My friends & children. We are descended from the old nations which live beyond the great water: but we & our forefathers have been so long here that we seem like you to have grown out of this land: we consider ourselves no longer as of the old nations beyond the great water, but as united in one family with our red brethren here."³⁸⁵ Beyond fundamentally missing the point of what constitutes Indigeneity, Jefferson is participating in a well-developed rhetorical strategy of identifying the United States with Indigeneity when that identification will support the aims of the nation. American history has been shot through with this selective identification, from colonists donning Indigenous headdresses during the Boston Tea Party to Senator Elizabeth Warren claiming Cherokee ancestry, a phenomenon that Philip K. Deloria has termed "playing Indian."³⁸⁶ The selectivity of this identification is important. In declaring independence from Great Britain, the United States began a decades long process of the construction of a national identity, a discursive balancing act that required at turns distancing itself from the British Crown, invoking the authority of the Crown to bolster its own identity, identifying with Indigeneity, and disavowing it. This is a process of countersovereignty in which assertions of settler sovereignty and national identity can never be fully divorced from the assertions of Indigenous sovereignty that it positions itself against.

³⁸⁵ Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents 1783-1854*, 281.

³⁸⁶ Deloria, *Playing Indian*.

One peculiarity of Marshall's opinion is his invocation of the British Crown as the ultimate bestower of the authority to make property claims. In 1823, this identification with Great Britain had largely fallen out of fashion in favor of more particularly "American" forms of nationalism and national identity. Marshall writes, "the power possessed by the government of the United States to grant lands, resided, while we were colonies, in the crown."³⁸⁷ In Marshall's estimation, though the American Revolution freed the United States from its position of dependency to the crown, it did not, in the process of that severance, forego the absolute capacity of the crown to authorize the discovery doctrine and establish the federal government as the sole arbiter of property formation. According to the Marshall opinion, the discovery doctrine is legitimate because it is the way it has always been done. He painstakingly elucidates a series of examples of European conquest in the Americas, describing how each ultimately relied on the discovery doctrine as the basis for European property claims. This "as it has always been done" logic is peculiar. It is culturally out of step with the enthusiasm most Americans had at the time for the construction of a uniquely American, uniquely democratic experiment. The invocation of the British Crown as the bestower of authority onto the United States is a somewhat *de passe* position, and many Americans would likely have taken issue with Marshall's assertion that "our whole country has been granted by the crown, in occupation of the Indians."³⁸⁸ I linger on this example because it usefully illustrates the tendencies of the nineteenth century federal government to slip between positions and identifications when convenient and useful, at turns establishing absolute jurisdictional authority over Indigenous people through the formation of property claims and alleging that Americans were themselves Indigenous to this land.

³⁸⁷ *Johnson and Graham's Lessee v. William M'Intosh*, 587.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 579.

During the era of territorial expansion, then, *Johnson v. M'Intosh* and a series of subsequent policy moves by the federal government marked both a significant shift in U.S. land policy and also a break from earlier English policy that considered Native people the owners of their land. In contrast, the legal framework that would come to be the law of the land in the nineteenth century not only negated Native property claims, it rendered those claims entirely illegible, and, perhaps most egregiously, denied that they had *ever* had a valid legal basis. Beginning with *Johnson v. M'Intosh*, the United States began to move toward formalizing a conception of property that situated property formation as organically emergent from two factors: occupation and cultivation. Federal territorial acquisition in the early nineteenth century was explicit in its aim of extinguishing Indigenous titles to land, and one of the ways it went about that eradication was through recasting Indigenous people as incapable of agriculture, cultivation, and organized improvement of land. Banner argues that this shift was cultural as well as legal, writing that “English colonists knew very well that the Indians were farmers. By the early nineteenth century, in the popular American imagination, the Indians had become nomadic hunters.”³⁸⁹ Casting Indigenous people as constantly in motion, rather than settled in place, framed Native people as inherently or constitutionally unable to engage in the particular relations to land and production that the state had decided was the condition of possibility for a legally-valid title claim. The shift in perception from Indigenous people as farmers to Indigenous people as hunters always involves a certain amount of historical revisionism.

In a behemoth 1801 text titled “The History of Land Titles in Massachusetts,” (a truly staggeringly racist text that premises its argument on a conception of intractable, divinely ordained racial hierarchies), then-Attorney General of the Massachusetts Commonwealth

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 153.

James Sullivan writes that upon the arrival of European settlements “there were no traces of agriculture, in this part of North America.”³⁹⁰ Almost too convenient of an observation if one has already committed oneself to an understanding of property that relies on cultivation, it is particularly convenient given that Sullivan was hardly interested in theorizing title in a manner that would undercut his own landholdings. Regardless, it was an incorrect observation. To be clear: American settlers never believed that Native people could practice agriculture *as well as* white people, but the notion that Indigenous people had never been agriculturalists was not a dominant view until the early nineteenth century. By 1831, *Georgia v. Cherokee Nation* would firmly classify the Cherokee as “hunters,” which provided one of the justifications for their forced removal (more rightly understood as genocide) by the federal government. In his opinion, Justice William Johnson dismissed the Cherokee title claim, writing that “it is clear that it was intended to give them no other rights over the territory than what were needed by a race of hunters,” before going on to note that if the Cherokee demonstrated any agricultural acumen, it was simply because “we have extended to them the means and the inducement to become agricultural and civilized.”³⁹¹ In Banner’s estimation, this shift in perception toward Indigenous people as hunters can partly be explained practically: if cultivation and agriculture form the basis of property claims, and you want to make a property claim, it’s the easiest option to argue that a competing claim has both never existed and could never exist. This popular conception of Natives as hunters was widespread enough that there were other factors at play beyond simple political expedience.

The absence of visible Indigenous agriculture to most Americans in the nineteenth century was due, in no small part, to the wake of destruction that the settler empire had already wrought on Indigenous agricultural economies. Forced migration, enormous

³⁹⁰ James Sullivan, *The History of Land Titles in Massachusetts* (I. Thomas & E.T. Andrews, 1801), 23.

³⁹¹ *Cherokee Nation vs. the State of Georgia*, 30 U.S. 1 (1831), 23.

population loss due to disease and warfare, and assimilationist policies had so transformed Native peoples' modes of production that what might have been entirely legible as settled agriculture to an American in the sixteenth century was no longer recognizable as such by the nineteenth. Musing on documents and journals from a Spanish expedition to North America in 1543, Ezekiel Sanford, who had served as a corporal in the French and Indian War, paints a far different picture of Indigenous life than the "savage" trope that would come to dominate the popular imagination by the nineteenth century.

This country was occupied by extensive communities of people; separated from each other by belts of hunting forests; living in comparative peace; and given chiefly to agricultural pursuits. They planted extensive fields of corn; and cultivated such other vegetables as were necessary to their subsistence, or conducive to their gratification. The bow and the trap, easily supplied them with the requisite animal food; and, in the midst of peace and abundance, they found both the disposition and the time to improve the circumstances of their domestic economy. They erected walls about their towns; made their houses more commodious, and of better materials; became more refined in their ideas of government, law, and morality; more luxurious in their dress and equipage; more tasteful in their ornaments; more cleanly in their persons, and more dignified in their manners.³⁹²

This is a far cry from the figure of the "savage" that haunts Chief Justice Marshall, and, importantly, contains many of the features of land cultivation that would go on to be the legal basis for property ownership in the United States: namely, continuous presence on land and "improvement" of said land. Astutely, Sanford goes on to argue that the absence of Native agriculture is a function of war, and though he is not entirely free of racist conceptions about Indigenous people, he largely avoids the trap of many of his contemporaries of operating from the assumption that the absence of settled Native agriculture reflects a fundamental inferiority of Natives to white settlers. Instead, Sanford takes the unusual position that what is

³⁹² Ezekial Sanford, *A History of the United States Before the Revolution : With Some Account of the Aborigines* (Anthony Finley, 1819), cxiv-cxv.

understood by settler society as “savagery” (transience, war, hunting over agriculture) is in fact a direct product of the forms of violence and dispossession that Indigenous peoples had been subjected to by the settler state. He begins with a recognition that early colonists failed to secure the conditions of their own reproduction, and hunger and scarcity led to a logic of “pious violence.” His potent formulation reads:

If the aborigines refused to part with their corn, in an amicable manner, the colonists devastated their fields, and despoiled their granaries. War was the consequence: the Indians would no longer plant fields, which they could scarcely expect to reap; and they were, therefore, driven to the necessity of looking, for future subsistence, to the rivers and the forests.

But the animals upon their own hunting grounds, would be insufficient to support so numerous a population, as had been created by almost inexhaustible stores of vegetable food. Hunger would induce them to encroach upon the grounds of their neighbors; another war ensues: insecurity compels the second tribe to neglect their agriculture: the process of encroachment is repeated; and thus, one string being snapped, the discord runs through the whole Indian commonwealth. The red men were, at the same time, plunged into hostilities with the whites, with their own brethren, and with the wild beasts. Their old habits would no longer suit their circumstances. Their houses must be mere temporary abodes; their government, submission to the strongest of the stronger sex; their apparel, such as they could rob from the beasts; their fetes, the dance of war; their ceremonies, the bloody ritual of the stake and the hatchet. How is a people to help becoming savage, when thus at war with the whole living creation?³⁹³

More presciently than nearly any of his contemporaries, Sanford apprehended the constructedness of the category of the “savage” and correctly traced its genealogy to the dispossessive character of settler society. Sanford’s assessment puts the nineteenth century common attitudes toward Indigenous people then, in an important context: if “savagery” is a product of, not incidental to, settler society, then the prevalence of the conception of Natives as nomadic, uncivilized hunters that dominated much of the nineteenth century is an

³⁹³ Ibid., cxx-cxxi.

indication that settler colonial modes of production had proceeded to the point where the production of “savagery” becomes inextricable from indigeneity in the national imaginary. The constructedness of savagery matters, profoundly, for the formation of both public and private property in the United States. Seventeenth century reports of sustained and well-organized Indigenous agricultural practices are elided by the discursive heft of the figure of the “noble savage.” To put it simply, settler colonialism produced savagery through dispossession, then invoked savagery as a justification for ongoing dispossession. The cultural transformation from the conception of Native peoples as farmers to Native peoples as hunters corresponds, albeit unevenly, with a transformation of the valuation of the labor of settlement, or, more specifically, a recognition that the labor of settlement could be manipulated in service of particular national aims. Whereas for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries extralegal European settlement had been conceived as a *threat* to the security of the nation, by the time the Jackson administration took power, the state had expanded and streamlined its infrastructures of property formation such that expansive and rapid western settlement was understood as a strength, resource, and weapon that could function both defensively and offensively. Running counter to the commonsense story of the weak antebellum state, the fact remains that in 1787 unrestrained westward settlement was widely considered to be one of the foremost threats to the nation’s security, and less than a hundred years later that same nation would cheerfully encourage a series of unprecedented land grabs, indicating that power had accumulated, somewhere. The threat model had changed.

The production of property regimes through the territorial expansion of the United States contains within it a series of distinct and sequential processes. In its simplest formulation, it goes something like this: not long after declaring independence from Great

Britain, the United States embarked on its first effort of territorial expansion through the passage of the Northwest Ordinance in 1787. The state discovered—after, and perhaps due to, a series of devastating military defeats in the region—that establishing jurisdiction was not the same thing as exercising dominion, asserting sovereignty, or governance over territory. Without the capital or military strength to rely on conquest as the mechanism for exercising dominion and enforcing property and jurisdictional claims, the state went about building power in other ways, primarily through the selective regulation of immigration, so as to advance westward while ensuring white demographic majorities in territories in advance of formal incorporation into the United States. The federal government limited and tightly regulated western settlement, dispatched its military to remove illegal American squatters from unincorporated frontier land, and, somewhat contrary to the vaunted ideals of individualism espoused in the Declaration of Independence, established a legal mechanism through *Johnson v. M'Intosh* that would ensure the perpetual preemption rights of the federal government, effectively positioning the formation of public property as a precondition for the formation of private property. *Johnson v. M'Intosh* held that individual Americans could not purchase land from Natives; that only the federal government was endowed with that power. Stuart Banner has argued that “perhaps the most important blow to Indian landownership may have been the growing practice on the part of state governments of granting identifiable parcels of land to settlers before the land had been purchased from the Indians.”³⁹⁴ This practice was formalized and nationalized through *Johnson v. M'Intosh*. Thus, having adopted a legal definition of property that hinged on cultivation and continuous occupation, armed with new jurisdictional authority, and the explicit charge to extinguish Indigenous title, the state moved into a new era of territorial expansion that would see the nearly total reversal of

³⁹⁴ Banner, *How the Indians Lost Their Land*, 190.

the restrained policies of settlement that marked much of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Formalization of Property Regimes

As I demonstrated in the previous sections, the classification of the nineteenth century state as “weak” functions to obscure and naturalize its mechanisms of territorial expansion. This process allowed for the expansion of the settler state while maintaining nominal fidelity to the ideals of individualism and allergies to the centralization of power that emerged through the Revolutionary War. In this analysis, faithfulness to Enlightenment and Revolutionary War-era values is one of the strategies that settler colonialism uses to cover its tracks: suturing the liberal, enlightened, individual citizen-subject to the reproduction and democratization of violence. In the decades following the Civil War, the state mobilized the territorial resources it had been accumulating to take up much more ambitious projects of nation-building than had been possible in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In this section, I argue that the incentivization of homesteading alongside the construction of railroads and universities offers powerful insight into public processes of accumulation and their mechanisms of occlusion. Importantly, I frame the regional conflict between North and South that culminated in the Civil War not as primarily organized around either states’ rights or slavery, but as competing and ultimately mutually exclusive visions for how, exactly, to build a white nation: through the maintenance of a slave economy, on the one hand, or through white territorial expansion, on the other. In this way, the outcome of the Civil War and the policies of the Reconstruction era can be understood as the triumph of a particular articulation of white supremacy that has reproduced itself, in part, through disidentification with the southern grammar of anti-Blackness while retaining its own investments in white

supremacy. To put a finer point on it: each side was willing to wage war to defend its respective vision of a white nation. Positioning the conflict in this way lends clarity to seemingly strange moments of overlap that historians sometimes narrate as solidarity, but can be better understood as interest convergence: erstwhile support for Indigenous territorial rights by southern legislators, for instance, or the wing of the northern anti-slavery movement that advocated for Black colonization.³⁹⁵

The southern vision of a white nation has received significant historical attention, and while there is general recognition that anti-Black attitudes were common among both southern and northern white Americans, the northern (and, following the Civil War, the national) strategy of territorial expansion is not typically framed in racial terms. However, the evolution of federal policies of preemption cannot be understood without first recognizing the inherently and inevitably racial character of westward expansion and the role of land in the production of whiteness. The federal position of restrained settlement prior to 1840 belies and nuances prevalent popular narratives of settler colonialism as consistently and voraciously land hungry; the desire for land (or, more specifically, the willingness of the federal government to incorporate land into the United States) in this period is contingent on the production of white demographic majorities. Frymer writes that “decisions about expansion were consistently calculated in light of the ability of the nation to settle land with a sufficient number of white settlers.”³⁹⁶ The more expansionist and overtly genocidal land policies that mark the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indicate the maturation of the logics of white supremacy that were secured and stress tested through earlier policies of restraint. Seen in this light, the reversal of the federal position on preemption is not a break in logic but a

³⁹⁵ Derrick A. Bell, “Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review* 93, no. 3 (1980): 518–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1340546>.

³⁹⁶ Frymer, *Building an American Empire*, 28.

continuity of white supremacy that remains flexible enough to take seemingly distinct forms in particular moments. As such, histories like the expansion of the Morrill Land Grant Act to Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the 1890s, and then to tribal colleges and universities in 1994, can be usefully understood as rearticulations of white supremacy rather than racially progressive, indicating the capacity of the settler state to cover its tracks.

The 1862 legislative slate of the Morrill Act, Homestead Act, and Pacific Railway Act alongside the 1841 Preemption Act and the 1830 Indian Removal Act represent moments of the formalization and legalization of the practices, relations, and contractual logics that comprise a property regime. The materialization of this property regime was not merely a function of state policy; rather, it emerged and cohered as a set of experiments that had been tested out by settlers, speculators, industrialists, and state courts in the previous century. By the time the Jackson administration took the position in 1834 that “the alternative to preemption was settler unrest, and efforts to expel squatters was less efficient than simply signing off on what settlers wanted,”³⁹⁷ racialized mechanisms of property formation were well developed enough for this reversal in position to function materially as a continuity rather than a rupture. Title and property claims were not made or enforced uniformly across the country and its territories; in practice state courts frequently upheld settler preemption rights in property disputes despite the federal government’s stance on this matter. The particular forms that these asymmetries took is instructive: prior to the passage of the Preemption Act in 1841, most legislation that upheld the preemption rights of settlers conditioned property claims on either having already borne arms (through military service) or the willingness to bear arms in contested territory. According to Frymer, “national leaders discussed giving land bounties to military veterans as a way of both paying current soldiers

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 133-4.

for their service and settling unincorporated lands securely so as to hopefully avoid the need of formal military support in the future.”³⁹⁸ At play here is a speculative logic that would come to characterize much of foreign and domestic security policy over the next two centuries: accumulation through democratization rather than centralization. In the late eighteenth century, the federal government could not afford the cost of maintaining a standing army on the frontier, and so secured its borders through the *potential* rather than *actual* use of force.

Questions around how to assert jurisdiction, practice dominion, and bureaucratically manage vast swaths of territory without sacrificing national security and cohesion were hotly debated in the period between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, and not just in Congress. Indigenous nations, enslaved Africans, and other European powers all had a stake in land policy and in shifting formal and functional understandings of property and contract law. One of the most common grammars of contestation over and rearticulation of land policy and property claims was that of military strategy, and the following sections will explore how the arrangement of violence at the heart of territorial dispossession periodically took the form of military action and direct conquest, but in other moments took the form of investments in speculative non-military accumulation projects (such as universities and railroads); investments that functioned as a kind of subterranean apparatus of potential energy that could be readily militarized should the need arise. I argue that settler colonialism reproduces itself through the proliferation, naturalization, and democratization of modes of dispossession and, importantly, that the different sites and logics of these modes of dispossession are not always or necessarily functioning in step with one another. There are moments of conflicting and self-defeating ideological collision, there are mutually exclusive investments in white

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 57.

worldmaking strategies, and there are powerful resistant actors who meaningfully shape the terrain of struggle.

As preemption-based property claims became more frequent and more standardized the question of how to enforce those claims grew increasingly salient. In broad strokes, between 1820 and 1840, generally understood to be the bloodiest years in U.S.-Native relations, the state experimented with extraordinarily militarized and self-evidently genocidal policies that stretched the moral, financial, military, and administrative limits of the federal government to a breaking point. These policies culminated in the forced internment and relocation of approximately 16,000 Cherokees by the U.S. Army in 1838-39, a quarter of whom would die before arriving in what is now Oklahoma. By the Reconstruction era, the federal government had moved away from its tendency to enforce dominion with the barrel of a gun (due, primarily, to a series of stunning military defeats, not due to any moral commitment) and began to hone a less visibly frictive (but no less dispossessive) regime of settler supremacy that leashed populist enthusiasm for democracy to the ongoing financialization of land. Against prevailing narratives of conquest and contract as two mutually exclusive modes of land transfer, one consensual and one nonconsensual, Banner argues for a “spectrum bounded by poles of conquest and contract,” following from the recognition that “there is no sharp distinction between voluntariness and involuntariness. The difference between them is one of degree, not kind.”³⁹⁹ Approaching land transfer as always occurring somewhere on the spectrum of contract and conquest is useful in resisting the inadvertent racial essentialism that can follow from the assertion that Native nations had different conceptions of property than settlers. A refusal to recognize the legitimacy of a

³⁹⁹ Banner, *How the Indians Lost Their Land*, 3-4.

system or making complex and constrained choices from within its clutches are both different from the inability to understand said system.

Keeping in mind that seventeenth century colonists generally recognized that Indigenous people owned their land, and that by the eighteenth century Indigenous people were legally and in the popular imagination reclassified as occupants subject to the right of first refusal (preemption) by the federal government, the passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830 comes into focus as a continuation of the long process of building white nationhood through converting jurisdiction into dominion and managing demography. Critically, the rise in preemption rights in the decades before it would be adopted as federal policy corresponds with a rise in land speculation as a mode of extracting value from land, though speculation was hardly a new feature of the American economy. Preemption and speculation share important features that would both accelerate and bloody land transfer, among them a rhetorical performativity that would resonate both forward and backward in time. Banner describes preemption rights as they were understood in the seventeenth century as “contingent future interests in land still owned by the Indians.”⁴⁰⁰ The contingency, of course, was the extinguishment of Indigenous title, wherever that extinguishment fell on the spectrum of contract to conquest, but under this formulation that recognized Indigenous ownership, purchase was the predominant mechanism of land transfer. The ideological foundation of preemption—the idea that Indigenous people had never had ownership rights to their land—“seems to have become commonplace in the 1810s and early 1820s, even among nonlawyers.”⁴⁰¹ It’s worth differentiating here between the array of positions on Indigenous title and property, and predominant anti-Indigenous racism that was a mainstay of the white American imagination. Even the fiercest defenders of the principle of Native land ownership

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 163.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 177.

trafficked in a patronizing discourse of the “civilizing mission” of settlement. The consequences of this transformation in legal thought and practice—from ownership to occupancy—would be unimaginably far reaching.

Policing the Frontier

The mandate that land-grant colleges teach military tactics and strategy is a charge that emerges from a complex web of racialized land policy, and the relationship between the military and the university cannot be fully apprehended without contextualizing this charge in a broader context of the development of infrastructures of policing and particular property regimes. In this section I argue that the role of the U.S. Army in policing “illegal” European settlements on the frontier is an under-emphasized factor in the history of American policing, which might be usefully understood as a dialectical relationship between the enforcement of a property regime of chattel slavery, and a property regime of land dispossession. I aim to nuance a lineage of American policing that draws a straight line from slave patrols to the modern police, and instead ask what might be gained by reframing the tensions that resulted in the Civil War as tensions between competing property regimes and visions of white hierarchy and white nationhood. This theorization opens up a richer analysis of the entanglement between universities, militarism, and modes of policing, and, building on the previous sections, asks how we might reposition Reconstruction-era infrastructure projects (namely universities and railroads) as serving a military function while retaining a formal separation from the military. Furthermore, the questions that animate this section circulate around a broader theme of the relationship between “internal” and “external” imperial projects—the American state developed and tested out methods of violence and particular military strategies in its domestic project of extinguishing Indigenous title that it would go on

to employ transnationally. The circulation of weapons, training resources, and philosophies between the U.S. military abroad and American police domestically is well-documented,⁴⁰² and I argue that the construction of the land-grant university system in particular—and publicly funded infrastructure projects in general—plays a critical role in creating and reproducing the circuits of exchange that have facilitated the rise of the United States as a global military hegemon. As Harsha Walia puts it, “US border rule reveals seamless relations between the carceral administration of genocide and slavery at home and imperial counterinsurgency abroad, domestic neoliberal policies of welfare retrenchment and foreign policies of capitalist trade, and local and global regimes of race.”⁴⁰³ The rise of preemption rights as an operative mechanism of property formation is key, offering a critical genealogy of the logic of preemptive warfare that has long been privileged by the U.S. military and saw a significant moment of expansion with the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

One consequence of settler colonialism’s capacity to cover its tracks is the recasting of the territorial expansion of the United States as something other than an imperial project; conceptually and politically disaggregated from “foreign policy.” The (correct) insistence by some scholars that domestic policy toward Native people constitutes genocide,⁴⁰⁴ and the parallel assertion that particular racialized regions in the United States function as internal colonies⁴⁰⁵ contribute, when taken together, to a more robust analysis of the relationship between the military and the police, positioning each as a variably distinct wing of the state’s

⁴⁰² See: Stuart Schrader, *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing*, American Crossroads 56 (University of California Press, 2019).

⁴⁰³ Harsha Walia, *Border & Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Haymarket Books, 2021), 3.

⁴⁰⁴ Michael A. McDonnell and A. Dirk Moses, “Raphael Lemkin as Historian of Genocide in the Americas,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 7, no. 4 (2005): 501–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520500349951>.

⁴⁰⁵ The theorization of the internal colony has been a consistent feature of the Black radical tradition. For one of its earliest articulations see: W. E. B. du Bois, “A Negro Nation Within the Nation,” *Current History* 42, no. 3 (1935): 265–70, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.1935.42.3.265>.

monopoly on violence. This theorization traces a history of the division of labor/violence of property enforcement, posing a heuristic in which the presence of strongly differentiated agencies tasked with enforcement through violence or its threat indicates a maturation of a property regime. These property regimes are never *not* racialized, and their enforcement is tangled up in the construction of the American citizen, the formation of whiteness, and the production of *agnosia*, or unknowing. As Walia writes, “the normalization of settler colonialism evades settler occupation as a method of imperialism and, instead, tries to produce Indigenous people as domesticated citizens of the US.”⁴⁰⁶ In other words, military conflicts between the United States government and Indigenous nations and confederacies should rightfully be understood as constituting foreign imperial policy, and the recasting of U.S.-Indigenous relations as a matter of “domestic policy” rhetorically delegitimizes Indigenous claims to nationhood. The division of labor between the police and the military can be operationalized to position Indigenous people as dependent domestic subjects (the subjects of policing) rather than as members of nations engaged in a military conflict with the United States. Or, as Karuka writes, “claims to land as private property are enforced by the military and the police, and mercenaries operating with state sanction. This includes the declaration of “public lands” by state authorities.”⁴⁰⁷ In other words, the categorical distinction between “domestic minorities” and “foreign subjects” is substantially more porous than the contemporary grammar of U.S. militarism might have one believe, and the complexities around eighteenth and nineteenth century property enforcement further blur those lines.

Beginning from the understanding that the conception of the United States as a white nation was a more or less universal sentiment shared by white American citizens across

⁴⁰⁶ Walia, *Border & Rule*, 25.

⁴⁰⁷ Karuka, *Empire's Tracks*, 34.

regions, classes, and ideologies, we can usefully frame tensions between abolitionists and slave owners, and speculators and settlers, as sites of a dialectical struggle over the particular form that white nationhood would take. In this way, it becomes possible to situate slave patrols and the policing of squatters as two articulations of the consolidation of violence in the interest of enforcing property regimes. Importantly, both rest on a logic of controlling population and migration that is inextricable from anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity, and while this enforcement periodically takes the form of overt militaristic or genocidal violence, it just as frequently takes the form of infrastructure building and land-management policies that “engineer the demography of a region in a manner that both secure[s] and consolidate[s] territorial control.”⁴⁰⁸ Following the passage of the Northwest Ordinance in 1787, the task of translating jurisdiction to dominion and the work of enforcing territorial boundaries became a behemoth task. As I articulated in previous sections, “illegal” or extralegal settlement was understood at the time to be a profound threat to national security, and so the work of border enforcement was a simultaneous project of asserting American jurisdiction in lands occupied by Indigenous people, and removing American settlements whose property claims undercut the preemption rights of the federal government. Witgen writes that following the Northwest Ordinance, “policing and dismantling these illegal settlements became the exclusive focus of the First American Regiment. Rather than soldiering, the armed forces of the Republic served as some combination of law enforcement and landlord.”⁴⁰⁹ As American society developed into a global military power in the twentieth century, categorical distinctions between law enforcement, the military, and other agencies tasked with the enforcement of property claims would harden, but in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the backdrop of a

⁴⁰⁸ Frymer, *Building an American Empire*, 9.

⁴⁰⁹ Witgen, *Seeing Red*, 49.

constantly shifting frontier and immature mechanisms of property formation made it difficult to draw hard and fast distinctions between the work of soldiering, landlording, and policing.

The restrained position of the federal government on westward migration prior to the 1820s, taken together with its penchant for dispatching its military forces to the frontier to remove illegal European settlements, reveals an important sequencing of the formation of property in the United States: the formation of private property necessarily followed the formation of public property, and attempts by settlers to form private property through purchasing land directly from Native people were some of the primary objects of organized enforcement. This indicates that the formulation that “police protect property” is not sufficiently nuanced: eighteenth and nineteenth century military/policing labor in the context of the frontier was directed *against* the formation of private property, in service *for* retaining the federal government’s capacity for absolute preemption rights. The Proclamation of 1763, which ended the Revolutionary War, also formally ended the practice of private land purchasing from Natives. Banner notes that the Proclamation of 1763 ended private land purchasing in theory, but not in practice, writing that “underground private purchasing nonetheless continued, because the areas where Indians owned the most land were also the most difficult to police because they were so far away from the centers of government.”⁴¹⁰ Private land purchases were understood to be a threat to national security by the federal government, and though it worried loudly and publicly about the threat and dispensed significant military labor to the frontier to attempt to mitigate it, the overtaxed military and cash-poor government ultimately failed to stem the tide of private purchasing by settlers. The state attempted to criminalize illegal settlement with the passage of the Indian Trade and Intercourse Act of 1793, which held that “no person shall be permitted to carry on any trade

⁴¹⁰ Banner, *How the Indians Lost Their Land*, 137.

or intercourse with the Indian tribes, without a license under the hand and seal of the superintendent of the department, or of such other person, as the President of the United States shall authorize to grant licenses for the purpose,” and went on to establish a penalty of surrendering any claimed property to the Natives he had purchased it from, and “a fine not exceeding one hundred dollars and imprisonment not exceeding thirty days.”⁴¹¹ This is peculiar: the state moves to target the formation of private property with the carceral apparatus, running counter to both predominant free market ideals and profound skepticism toward centralized government or authority. In effect, the state is positioning itself as the patriarch of the free market: the state, and the state alone, can facilitate the free market production of private property, and only on the condition that territory be first made into public (ie state) property. Significantly, the framing of state property as public property obfuscates the operations of power at play. The concept of “public land” rhetorically evokes the commons, a sense of land that everyone has a stake in and right to. In actuality, the designation of “public land” simply means land that the government owns; land on which it can do what it wishes. These tensions between settler conceptions of public land and state conceptions of public land continue to play out today through controversies over the construction of extractive infrastructure in national parks.

The Jackson administration marked a hardening and militarizing of the frontier, and inaugurated an era of overtly genocidal policies toward Native Americans that culminated in the Trail of Tears. There are two features of the Jackson administration that are worth foregrounding: its adjusted risk assessment around the threat of unrestrained settlement, and a character of mask-off anti-Indigeneity that authorized a series of unprecedentedly destructive legal and military moves. The 1803 Louisiana Purchase would become instrumental for the

⁴¹¹ U.S. Congress, *An Act to Regulate Trade and Intercourse with the Indian Tribes*, (1793).

agenda of the Jackson administration. The territory that comprised the Louisiana Purchase remained largely unsurveyed and unsettled for the first two decades of the nineteenth century, but nonetheless “changed the calculus of the young nation with regard to the position of Native Americans on the land.”⁴¹² Under the Jefferson administration’s policies of restrained and carefully regulated settlement, the federal government had primarily expanded into the Northwest Territory. But the Louisiana Purchase marked the ascendancy of proposals to physically remove Native people from their land east of the Mississippi to the west, outside the reach of American territorial expansion. With the acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase, the prospect of removal began to be more seriously considered in Congress. Removal gained ground in part due to the inability of the U.S. Army to effectively police the frontier—“between 1820 and 1830, the size of the federal military remained relatively small, hovering around 10,000, and officials continued to fear its overextension in defending expansive borders and territories.”⁴¹³ In light of this military weakness, the Jackson administration adopted the position that it would be more effective to legalize and incentivize “squatter” settlements than it would be to continue to police them, concluding that the possibility of more rapid and less centralized expansion was not the threat to national security it had been merely decades before.

There is an oft-repeated line in abolitionist organizing and scholarship that “the police are an outgrowth of slave patrols.” In many ways this is a useful shorthand: it gestures toward the inextricability of policing and anti-Blackness, and is positioned to support strong conclusions about the purposes of policing and the protection of private property. But, like all shorthands, it doesn’t tell the whole story. Between the Revolutionary War and the 1830 Indian Removal Act, there were many experiments in violence and military force; many sites

⁴¹² Frymer, *Building an American Empire*, 74.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 78.

of the elaboration of distinct logics of violence and dispossession. I pose a history of American policing that retains the centrality of anti-Blackness while also bringing land and land policy to the fore. There can be no doubt that slave patrols as a mode of violence and strategy of enforcement of a property regime left an indelible mark on the organized violence that is currently understood as police, nor that anti-Blackness is a structuring feature of the organization of violence and incarceration. And also, the enforcement of property regimes on the frontier and in contested territorial contexts took a different form, and is no less central in the process of organizing violence. I posit that the division of enforcement labor that has resulted in police, military, and landlords operating within distinct agencies and with particular jurisdictions is a division of labor that occurs through the maturation of a property regime. Furthermore, narratives that draw a straight line from slave patrols to modern institutions of policing paper over the reality that the United States, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was characterized by the repeated collisions and power struggles between distinct property regimes, each of which necessitated the organization of violence for the purpose of enforcement in particular arrangements. None of these arrangements can convincingly be positioned as the “origin point” of American policing, which can be instead understood as the result of a dialectical process; and the contemporary structure of sharp divisions between soldiering, policing, and landlording was never predetermined. Rather, we can invert Frederick Jackson Turner’s assertion that the frontier was a laboratory for democracy to point out that the frontier was a laboratory for the organization of violence. It is important, for example, that the enforcement of the Indian Removal Act was and continues to be understood as a military action: this rhetorically positions Native Americans as, functionally, enemy combatants. This is a significant shift from the patronizing, pitying

rhetoric of dependency that characterized much of U.S.-Native relations in the eighteenth century.

There are several necessary conditions for the organized division of labor in the violent enforcement industry.⁴¹⁴ The most important, perhaps, is a stage of social organization that has developed to the point where mechanisms for the production and reproduction of property are fairly standardized and readily available. This, of course, relies on a generally shared understanding of the legal basis through which property claims are made. It is necessary for land to be surveyed and divvied up into parcels that can comprise sites of speculation, and for there to be a more or less systematic process of making and enforcing property claims on those parcels. Furthermore, national borders must be stabilized enough to construct legible categories of “foreign” and “domestic,” a condition that wasn’t present in the United States until at least 1890, though territorial borders would continue to shift through the twentieth century. The role that the First American regiment played in policing illegal settlements in the Northwest Territory (combination of landlord and cop) indicates that the violence of enforcement had not yet been organized into discrete agencies or entities. As I will explore in the following section, the construction and expansion of land-grant universities served as stabilization mechanisms for the state: through demographic manipulation and through the accumulation of both capital and territory. In this way, the unprecedented federal investments into the production of “public” land (for the purposes of universities and railroads) in the 1860s can be understood as both resultant from and contributive to the maturation of the property regime that had been formalized through the Preemption Act of 1841. In its contributive sense, the transfer of just under 11 million acres

⁴¹⁴ To be clear: framing violent enforcement of property claims as labor is not an endorsement of that labor as socially useful. Abolish all police unions. The point is to describe different sites, jurisdictions, resources, and tactics of particular arrangements of enforcement.

of land from Indigenous ownership to federal ownership in over 80,000 parcels⁴¹⁵ through the Morrill Act was a massive expansion of the federal assertion of preemption rights and a rapid enrichment of capital capacity for the state.

Conclusion

In April of 1996, the faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology voted to restructure the campus's Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program in response to student protest that argued that the U.S. Military's policy of "don't ask, don't tell" was in conflict with the university's anti-discrimination policy. The conflict began in 1990 when MIT faculty adopted a resolution that would require significant changes to the military's policy on homosexuality, and threatened that MIT would sever its formal affiliation with the ROTC by 1998 should the military fail to adjust its policies. A task force convened in 1995 to assess the military's progress proposed an alternative: instead of severing ties with the ROTC, MIT would guarantee funding to students who were dismissed from the ROTC due to their sexuality. Advocates for this more deferential and conciliatory approach claimed that it would still put pressure on the military to adopt a less discriminatory position, though it is difficult to see how this pressure would be exerted. The likely explanation for this adjustment is a provision in the 1996 Defense Authorization Act, which reads, "No funds appropriated or otherwise available to the Department of Defense may be made obligated by contract or by grant (including a grant of funds to be available for student aid) to any institution of higher education that, as determined by the Secretary of Defense, has an anti-ROTC policy."⁴¹⁶ In 1996, MIT received \$73 million in DOD-backed research and development and other

⁴¹⁵ Tristan Ahtone and Robert Lee, "Land-Grab Universities," *High Country News*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52-4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities/>.

⁴¹⁶ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1996, Pub. L. Nos. 104–106 (1996).

contracts,⁴¹⁷ making the DOD its third largest donor. MIT was the home of the first ROTC program, established in 1917, and Pentagon spokesperson Lt. Col. Deborah said in a statement that “we have had a long relationship with MIT and want to continue that relationship.”⁴¹⁸

Harvard formally ended its ROTC program in 1970, in response to student anti-war protests, but continued to allow students to enroll in MIT’s ROTC program. Tufts and Wellesley followed suit. MIT’s move to guarantee scholarships for students who had been disenrolled from ROTC due to their sexuality was the first policy of its kind, and there was much fanfare presenting it as a significant win in the struggle for queer rights—though it’s difficult to see it as anything more than a concession by the university to one of its largest funders. This is hardly surprising, as university-based organizing efforts are frequently where the adage “claim no easy victories” goes to die. In a move that will be familiar to anyone who has ever tried to pressure a university to do anything, instead of ending its ROTC program or exerting meaningful pressure on the DOD, MIT formed a committee.

Despite the ultimately minimal impact of MIT’s new ROTC policy, the episode is treated with some alarm by military historians, who are wary of the influence that universities might exert on the military. Michael Nieberg describes the MIT incident as a contemporary example of “a process of remaking military training (and thus the military itself) in the universities’ image that has been ongoing since the inception of military training on civilian campuses in the nineteenth century,”⁴¹⁹ a conclusion that is difficult to interpret as anything but paranoid hyperbole given that the MIT policy in fact changed nothing about either the campus’s ROTC program or the national “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, but merely guaranteed

⁴¹⁷ Michael Logan, “MIT Faculty Vote to Allow Gays into ROTC,” *Daily Sundial*, April 30, 1996.

⁴¹⁸ Quoted in Logan, “MIT Faculty Vote to Allow Gays into ROTC.”

⁴¹⁹ Michael S. Nieberg, *Making Citizen-Soldiers: ROTC and the Ideology of American Military Service* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 1-2.

funding to students who were dismissed from ROTC because of their sexuality. Regardless, the potent emotions that this controversy evoked gesture toward the intimacy of the relationship between the university and the military. We might say, sardonically, that only family fights that way.

The charge of the Morrill Act that land-grant colleges instruct military tactics and strategy is only one particularly visible site of this familial relationship. As I have shown in this chapter, the militaristic functions of the land-grant institutions can be understood as operating on three levels: curricular content, research agendas, and infrastructures of accumulation and population management. When MIT faculty tried to sever the relationship between the institution and the ROTC, they discovered that, since an indispensable portion of the institution's funding was tied to the ongoing operation of the ROTC program, to sever the relationship would be a move toward the abolition of the institution. In other words, whether explicitly militarized or not, the land-grant university system is existentially dependent on, and a key mechanism of, the reproduction of U.S. militarism.

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