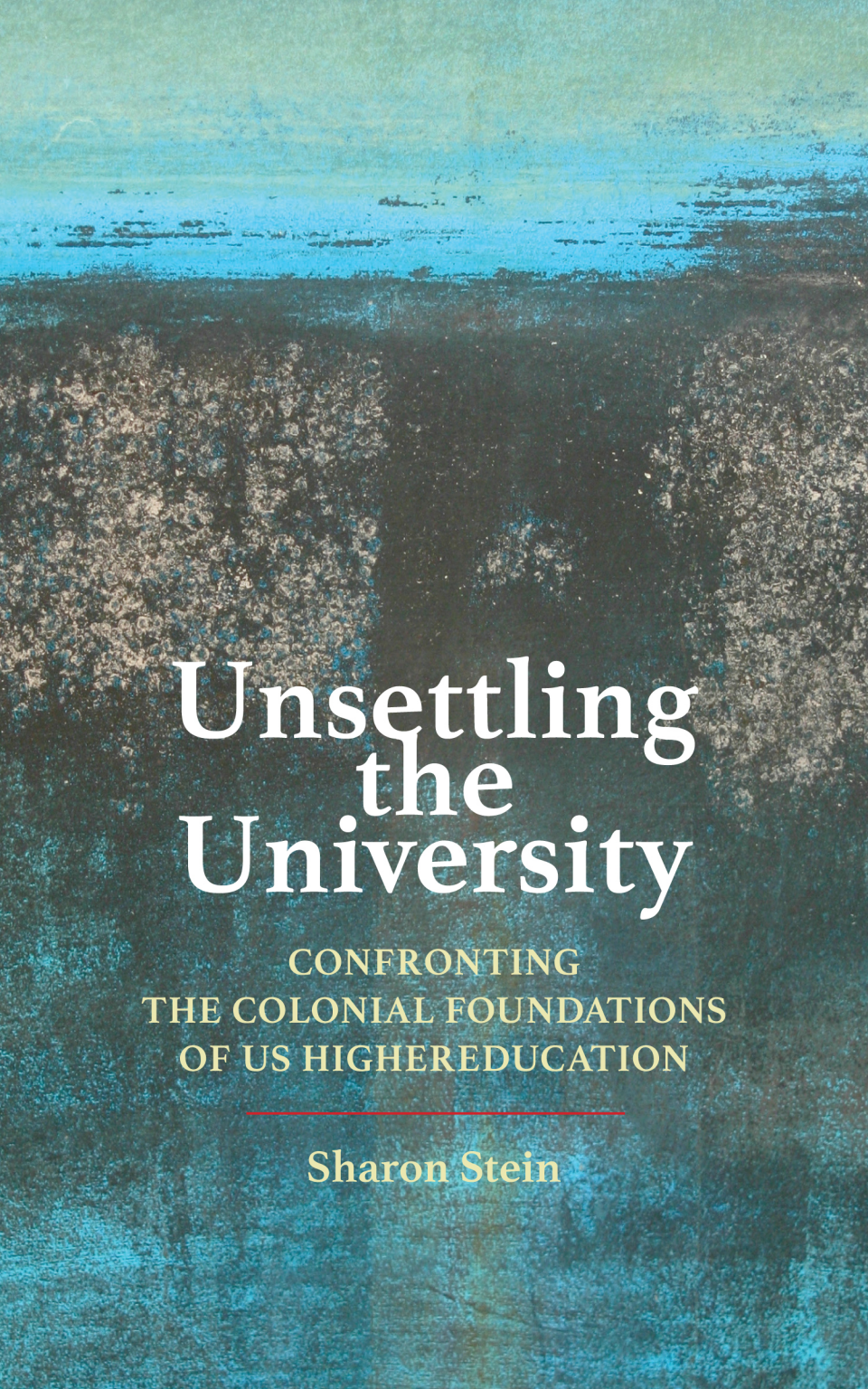
Unsettling the University
CONFRONTING THE COLONIAL FOUNDATIONS OF US HIGHEREDUCATION
Sharon Stein

Unsettling the University

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Confronting the Colonial Foundations of US Higher Education

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For Sarah R.
and all those fighting for decolonial futures

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Introduction

> Colleges and universities are historical institutions. They may suffer amnesia, or have selective recall, but ultimately heritage is the lifeblood of our campuses.
>
> —John Thelin, 2004, p. xiii

> Settler colonialism pervades almost every aspect of institutional memory and life. Let us not forget that what seemed to be "barren and desolate" actually held centuries of connections to plants, medicines, creation stories, and other meaningful connections that are forgotten in the told stories of higher education institutions.
>
> —Robin Starr Zape-tah-hol-ah Minthorn & Chris Nelson, 2018, p. 85

> American colleges were not innocent or passive beneficiaries of conquest and colonial slavery. The European invasion of the Americas and the modern slave trade pulled peoples throughout the Atlantic world into each others' lives, and colleges were among the colonial institutions that braided their histories and rendered their fates dependent and antagonistic.
>
> —Craig Steven Wilder, 2013, p. 11

On September 18, 2019, New Mexico announced plans to offer free public higher education for all state residents, funded largely by increased revenue from oil production in the state.

Just a day earlier, the University of California announced that it would divest its endowment funds of fossil fuel stocks. In an op-ed piece for the *Los Angeles Times*, the university's chief investment officer–treasurer and chairman of the board of regents' investments committee noted, "The reason we sold some $150 million in fossil fuel assets from our endowment was the reason we sell other assets: They posed a long-term risk to generating strong returns for UC's diversified portfolios. . . . We have chosen to *invest* for a better planet, and reap the financial rewards for UC, rather than simply *divest* for a headline" (Baccher & Sherman, 2019). Viewed together, these two announcements offer a glimpse into the possible futures for public higher education that are deemed imaginable and desirable in what is currently known as the United States. In one case, a state planned to boost public funding through profits made from the extraction and sale of fossil fuels (a plan that ultimately fell through), while in the other, one of the country's largest public university systems justified its divestment from fossil fuels out of concern for future profits.

Beyond illustrating some of the contradictions and convergences that circulate within current popular horizons of hope about the future of US higher education, when viewed from a decolonial perspective, these two announcements expose the ethical and ecological limits of these horizons. Throughout this book, I use "decolonial" to refer to analyses and practices that (1) critique ways of knowing, being, and relating that are premised on systemic and ongoing colonial violence, and that (2) gesture toward possible futures in which these colonial patterns of knowledge, existence, and relationship are interrupted and redressed. I describe my approach to decolonial critique further in chapter 1. Despite their differences, in both announcements the future of public higher education is predicated on the continuity of a political economic

system that requires endless growth, extraction, and consumption and that can therefore hold little regard for its negative impacts on the human and other-than-human beings who pay the price for this expansion. In this way, both of these proposed funding models reproduce the colonial architectures of accumulation that form the foundations of US higher education.

I use the phrase "colonial foundations of US higher education" to point to the fact that while entrenched patterns of institutional violence do have specific starting points, they are not relegated to the past. Rather, they have continued to shape all subsequent higher education developments—never in a deterministic way but nonetheless in a way that suggests different higher education futures will not be possible if we do not first untangle and reckon with these historical and ongoing colonial foundations. I trace the origins of these foundations, consider how the harms of colonization and slavery continue to seep through these foundations into the present, and question the structural integrity of a future that rests on these foundations, especially if we fail to confront their disavowed costs for people and the planet.

Situating This Book's Intervention

Scholars have addressed the immense contemporary challenges of US higher education from numerous theoretical and methodological perspectives. Yet across these different perspectives one finds a common rhetorical strategy (echoed in the popular media) that compares the current state of higher education to an idealized higher education past and uses that past as a guide for imagining an idealized higher education future.

There is an alternative means of engaging with contemporary US higher education that problematizes the naively hopeful narratives of US higher education futurity that presume seamless

continuity and progress, as well as the selectively nostalgic narratives of US higher education history that invisibilize (make absent) colleges' and universities' structural complicity in racial, colonial, and ecological violence. In doing so, this book intervenes in what are by now fairly prolific and increasingly mainstream conversations across the fields of critical university studies and higher education studies about the privatization and marketization of higher education. The book engages this literature but also stretches it by bringing a decolonial lens to the fore using a historiographic method of analysis.

By examining the colonial foundations of US higher education with a view to their implications for the present and future, I suggest that contemporary forms of academic capitalism in the neoliberal university should be seen not as entirely novel but as rooted in a long-standing architecture of dispossession and accumulation that has formed the template for US higher education from the very beginning. Although this book does not address in great detail pressing contemporary challenges, such as surging student debt, precarious academic labor, and contentious questions about increasingly diverse campuses and curriculum reform, it suggests that if we engage these issues with the underlying colonial template of US higher education in mind, we are likely to arrive at very different conclusions about both the root causes of these problems and ethical modes of responding to them.

In this sense, *Unsettling the University* resonates with the work of a small but growing number of scholars and activists who have drawn attention to how US colleges and universities have been consistently implicated in the reproduction and naturalization of social and ecological harm, particularly by serving as "*an arm of the settler state*—a site where the logics of elimination, capital accumulation, and dispossession are reconstituted" (Grande, 2018, p. 47 [emphasis in original];

see also Andreotti et al., 2015; Boggs et al., 2019; Boggs & Mitchell, 2018; Boidin, Cohen, & Grosfoguel, 2012; Chatterjee & Maira, 2014; Daigle, 2019; Hailu & Tachine, 2021; S. Hunt, 2014; La Paperson, 2017; Meyerhoff, 2019; Minthorn & Nelson, 2018; Minthorn & Shotton, 2018; Patel, 2021; Rodríguez, 2012; Stewart-Ambo & Yang, 2021; Wilder, 2013). Many of these scholars are situated not in higher education studies or critical university studies but rather in Black, Indigenous, or other critical ethnic studies, women and gender studies, and related interdisciplinary fields (Stein, 2021), some of them organized under the heading of abolitionist university studies (Boggs et al., 2019). Despite their internal diversity, these critiques share a diagnosis that the fundamental harm inflicted by US higher education institutions is not only that they *exclude* historically and systemically marginalized communities but also that they were founded and continue to operate at the *expense* of those communities.

Drawing on this basic decolonial insight, this book offers an invitation to rethink inherited assumptions about the relationship between the past and the present of US higher education so that we might pluralize the available imaginaries for the future (Barnett, 2012, 2014; Stein, 2019). To pluralize possible higher education futures requires first interrupting the hegemony of the currently dominant vision for the future, which is rooted in three primary promises: (1) that higher education should exemplify and enable *continuous progress* within its own walls and society at large; (2) that higher education is, in its truest form, a benevolent *public good*; and (3) that a primary purpose of higher education is to enable *socioeconomic mobility*. These promises, which I unpack in more detail in chapter 1 and illustrate throughout this volume, shape the terms of both scholarly and popular conversations about higher education, including the questions that we ask

about the predicament we currently face and, thus, the responses we are able to imagine and desire.

These promises have such a hold on the collective imagination about higher education that nearly all of the available theories, frames, grammars, and vocabularies for thinking about or enacting justice and change in higher education fail or falter when confronted with decolonial analyses that challenge their orienting assumptions and investments. As a result, many people—including scholars, administrators, students, staff, and the public as a whole—lack a frame of reference for substantively engaging with decolonial critiques and considering their implications for research, teaching, and practice in higher education. Further, even once people start to see the value of these critiques, they often decontextualize them, selectively extract from them, or graft them back into mainstream frames and practices in ways, whether intentional or not, that align with and therefore do not interrupt existing individual advantages and institutional agendas (Ahenakew, 2016; Spivak, 1988; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Thus, one reason that decolonial critiques are often misunderstood or misused in higher education contexts is that preexisting intellectual scaffolding is not in place that would support rigorous, reflexive decolonial inquiry. But another reason is that many of us lack the capacities to hold space for the affective difficulties and discomforts inevitably involved in facing the depth, complexity, and magnitude of problems that have no immediate, feel-good solutions. Such difficulties and discomforts are further amplified when decolonial critiques ask us to question our investments in the benevolence and futurity of the institutions that helped to create these problems in the first place and, further, to accept responsibility for our own role in reproducing those problems. To confront these difficulties and discomforts in generative ways would require

us to go beyond mere critique in order to develop stamina for the difficult, long-term work of confronting the violence that underwrites modern institutions of higher education, the study of higher education itself, and thus our livelihoods as scholars, practitioners, and students. It would also require us to develop capacities for redressing and repairing these violences within the contemporary context of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. This, in turn, has significant political and economic implications, as it would require those who currently benefit from systemic injustice to give up their accumulated power and wealth. Mobilizing these kinds of decolonial changes at both individual and institutional levels is beyond what can be accomplished in this or any scholarly text, especially because it requires more than just intellectual work; however, I gesture toward some possible pathways forward.

While there remains a serious question as to whether higher education institutions can "right the wrongs that brought them into being" (Belcourt, 2018), this book is primarily intended for those who are most invested in the promises offered by US colleges and universities, which tend to be those of us who work and study within them. However, the aim here is not to convince people to adopt or embrace decolonial critiques of higher education. Instead, I invite those concerned about the current state and future of US higher education to "pause" (Patel, 2015) long enough to open themselves up to being surprised and unsettled by what decolonial critiques might teach us—including insight into the underlying costs of the promises our institutions offer. This will require interrupting the temptation to selectively "consume" decolonial critiques in ways that circularly affirm existing colonial assumptions, investments, and desires, in particular desires for virtue, purity, progress, and futurity (Jimmy, Andreotti, & Stein in Ahenakew, 2019; Shotwell, 2016; Stein et al., 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

The book therefore offers no simplistic, universal, or feel-good solutions but rather emphasizes the challenges, complexities, conflicts, failures, and contradictions involved in trying to interrupt colonial patterns.

Although decolonial critiques offer no universal prescription for action, they can make it more difficult to avoid what many of us would rather not see and would prefer to turn our backs to. Facing this reality is vital in a time when it is increasingly difficult to ignore calls to reckon with the ongoing colonial legacies of our campuses. Thus, whether or not they ultimately agree with the decolonial critiques that orient this book, those who accept the invitation to pause might find that it enables them to ask previously unthinkable questions about the past, present, and future of US higher education, and about our subsequent responsibilities as scholars, practitioners, and students, without immediately demanding solutions or seeking absolution.

Addressing Unthought Questions

This book seeks to make tangible what remains largely "unthought" (Hartman & Wilderson, 2003) in both scholarly and mainstream conversations about US higher education. In particular, it seeks to interrogate the socially sanctioned ignorance (Spivak, 1988) about higher education's colonial foundations, so that we might identify and interrupt the reproduction of colonial logics and practices in the present. To do this, the book offers a thorough examination of what Kevin Bruyneel (2017) calls "settler memory" in narratives about US higher education. As Bruyneel notes, "When we fight about the meaning of the past, we are not fighting over history, we are fighting over memory, specifically the collective memories that purport to bind and define a people's sense of who they are from past to present and on into the future" (p. 36).

Settler memory refuses to attend to the implications of colonization in the present, even when evidence of those implications is readily available. I suggest that collective investment in the continuity of the shiny promises offered by US higher education, as well as collective disavowal of the role of racial, colonial, and ecological violence in enabling those promises, shapes the settler memory that contributes to the reproduction of higher education's romantic foundational myths and organizational sagas (Clark, 1972; Meyerhoff, 2019). Approaching the foundations of US higher education from a decolonial angle challenges the common framing through which people resist (admittedly troubling) contemporary institutional economic formations and imperatives by pining for a return to "better days."

As Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell (2018) note, this romanticism about the past "repeats the forgetting of the dispossession at the university's origins while simultaneously drumming up a sense of crisis regarding the potential consequences of its downfall" (p. 441; see also Boggs et al., 2019; Stein & Andreotti, 2017). In contrast to this wilful ignorance about the past and the ways it shapes the present, I invite readers to take up Jodi Byrd's (2011) question "*How might the terms of current academic and political debates change if the responsibilities of that very real lived condition of colonialism were prioritized as a condition of possibility?*" (p. xx [emphasis added]).

I supplement this question with another, which is implied by Byrd's but is nonetheless worth articulating, given the risk that critiques of colonialism will become anthropocentric and overlook the effects of colonization on other-than-human beings. That is: *How might the terms of current academic and political debates change if we also prioritized our reciprocal responsibilities to the earth as a living entity, rather than as a property or*

resource that can be commodified, owned, and even "made sustainable" for continued extractive purposes?

In bringing these two questions together, I am drawing on the work of decolonial, especially Indigenous, scholars and activists who have for a long time drawn connections between colonialism, capitalism, and climate change (Davis & Todd, 2017; Whyte, 2020). These connections point to the close relationship between (1) the systemic, historical, and ongoing racial-colonial violence that enables the US socioeconomic system and the comforts and securities it promises its citizens (especially white citizens) and (2) the inherent ecological unsustainability of a socioeconomic system that is premised on infinite extraction, growth, and accumulation, given that we inhabit a finite planet. This book seeks to integrate these two, often-siloed concerns, and consider their combined implications for higher education.

Many of the colonial dynamics, dispositions, and patterns that I address here have relevance beyond the US context. In particular, the book might resonate with the foundations of higher education in other settler colonial contexts, especially such Anglo-settler nations as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. However, one thing decolonial thinking teaches is that the specificity of our social and geographical locations matter a great deal in the production of knowledge. There is no universal, objective "view from nowhere." Thus, before I offer my decolonial analysis, it is important to clarify the locus of enunciation from where I speak. In this introduction, I situate my approach to this project based on my own social and geographical location as a white settler US citizen living and studying higher education in what is currently known as Canada. I also address possible responses to the book, articulate some of the questions that orient the book, and then outline each of the forthcoming chapters.

Colonial Foundations across the 49th Parallel: The View from Canada

Unsettling the University is about the colonial foundations of higher education in what is currently known as the United States, but it was largely written in what is currently known as Canada. I say "what is currently known as" in order to remind us that while settler colonization is an ongoing structure, its continuation is certainly not inevitable. Indeed, it is important to remember that "compared to the thousands and thousands of years of history and relationships that Indigenous nations have with these lands and waters," the Canadian nation-state is very young (Corrina Sparrow, personal communication, November 3, 2021). In this section, I focus on the Canadian context not only because it helps situate me as the author but also because some have suggested that institutions of higher education in Canada are more "advanced" in their conversations about settler colonialism. This perspective is often supported by a narrative, repeated on both sides of the US-Canada border, that positions Canada as more progressive and less racist than its southern neighbor (Shaker, 2010). Among other factors, this framing helps to perpetuate narratives of Canadian exceptionalism and to minimize the violences perpetrated and sanctioned by the Canadian state (Thobani, 2007). Thus, rather than frame Canadian higher education as an exemplary "model" for how to engage decolonizing work, we can ask what it might teach those in the United States about the complexities, challenges, circularities, failures, and possibilities that are involved in institutional efforts to address systemic colonial violence.

As Michael Marker (2011) notes, the US-Canada border is a colonial fiction, a relatively recent construct that has nonetheless arbitrarily, forcibly, and violently divided Indigenous

communities and other-than-human beings in the service of securing settler state sovereignties along with capitalist profits. Over time, the nation-states on either side of the border have developed their own particular brands of colonial governance (Thobani, 2018). It was on the Canadian side that I learned to think deeply about what it means to be a white settler-occupier on dispossessed Indigenous lands. And on that side of the border is where this book was mostly written, specifically, on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded lands of the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓-speaking xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nation, which is currently situated within the boundaries of what is currently known as Vancouver, British Columbia. More precisely, I wrote this book largely from my office in what is today the Vancouver (Point Grey) campus of the University of British Columbia (UBC) and my rented apartment in Wesbrook Village, on land that is "owned," managed, and made extremely profitable by UBC.

To avoid reproducing colonial notions of universality and placelessness, efforts to address enduring colonial relations in higher education should be highly attuned to the specific histories, landscapes, and contemporary social contexts of each institution. At the same time, the case of UBC, its colonial foundations, and contemporary efforts to address those foundations, illustrate larger systemic patterns that characterize the coloniality of higher education across both Canada and the United States—and in many other settler colonial contexts as well.

As Corrina Sparrow, a Two Spirit member and leader within the Musqueam Nation, points out, "UBC and essentially all academic institutions have situated their campuses on ancestral Indigenous lands without local Indigenous nations' consent" (personal communication, January 29, 2021). Before colonization, what is now the UBC Point Grey campus in Vancouver was a forest that fed and educated the Musqueam Nation and

played a central role in their spiritual and social life (Grant, 2018). Sparrow notes, "According to Musqueam cultural knowledge, our Nation has occupied and cared for these lands and waters in our ancestral territories since the last Ice Age, and we have resided in the 'Point Grey' area (we have our own hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ names for these places and the villages we have established here), for the past 3,000 years, as far as we know" (personal communication, November 3, 2021). Today, Musqueam continue to assert their presence as the original and ongoing inhabitants and caretakers of this place. So how did UBC come to occupy these lands, especially given that, as is the case with most lands in what is currently known as the province of British Columbia, the Musqueam Nation never signed a treaty to share it with settlers, let alone surrender it? In addressing this question, I first introduce how "whitestream" higher education institutions have sought to displace and replace Indigenous peoples and their knowledges. "Whitestream" refers to a context that is not only dominated by white people "but also principally structured on the basis of white, middle-class experience, serving their ethnopolitical interests and capital investments" (Grande, 2004, p. 125).

Settler Replacement and the Universalization of Western Universities

Western universities claim universal relevance as if they were synonymous with higher education itself, despite being rooted in the particularities of medieval Christian Europe and later of the European Enlightenment and industrial capitalist society. However, if we define higher education as the pursuit of specialized learning, then arguably every society has its own form of higher education (Perkin, 2007; Stonechild, 2006). Blair Stonechild (2006) reminds us that long before

European colonization and the establishment of settler colonial colleges and universities, Indigenous peoples "had traditional concepts of 'higher education' in which they undertook lifelong pursuit of specialized knowledge in order to become hunters, warriors, political leaders, or herbalists" (p. 2).

One way of de-universalizing the institutionalized modern university as the only viable model of higher education is therefore to suggest that "higher education" is not reducible to the modern university, much in the same way that K–12 scholars have established that "education" is not reducible to "modern schooling" (Calderon, 2014). In this framing, "education" refers broadly to learning oriented toward ends that different societies determine differently, whereas schooling is just one possible, Western industrial–style mode of education that specifically happens in classrooms according to a particular set of rules and norms (Andreotti & Ahenakew, 2013). Some have suggested that the term "higher education" itself presupposes and reproduces harmful hierarchies of value, given the implied contrast with "lower education" (Meyerhoff, 2019); in response to this concern, we might propose an alternative term, such as "deeper education," which avoids an assumption of vertical ascent or mastery. Regardless of the terminology we choose, the basic fact remains that many different forms of education preexisted modern schools, colleges, and universities and continue to persist beyond their walls.

Although not universal, the European mode of higher education was exported throughout the world and asserted as universal largely through processes of both settler and exploitation colonialism (Grosfoguel, 2013; Smith, 2012; Wilder, 2013). As Tamson Pietsch (2016) notes, "The most significant legacy of empire [in higher education] is the dominance of the university itself as the pre-eminent institution for higher education" (p. 34). This dominance of the Western university signifi-

cantly narrows which (and whose) knowledges, experiences, and forms of education are perceived to be legitimate and worthy of study, and this narrow range of possibilities is repeated in most mainstream US higher education history texts.

For instance, non-Western educational histories tend to be erased when we discuss the history of whitestream institutions. Yet as Robin Starr Minthorn and Chris Nelson (2018) write, whitestream institutions in the United States were not founded on empty spaces or terra nullius, waiting to be filled by Western people and knowledge. Instead, they "held centuries of connections to plants, medicines, creation stories, and other meaningful connections that are forgotten in the told stories of higher education institutions" (p. 85). The construction on Indigenous lands of an institution dedicated to Western learning is one tactic within the larger settler colonial strategy of seeking to permanently sever Indigenous relationships to place and thereby interrupt Indigenous political, economic, and ecological organization.

As Timothy Stanley (2009) notes, "How the European cultural institution of the University came to be located on the West Coast of what is today Canada is very much a matter of a history of colonization by people of European, and principally British, origins" (p. 148). In the case of what would become the UBC Point Grey campus, this process of colonization began decades before the institution was established and physically built in the early twentieth century (UBC, n.d.). At UBC, and at all universities in what is currently known as North America, colonial forces "remade the cultural landscape of the territory, imposing their disciplinary practices and ways of knowing on the territory and its inhabitants, effectively steamrollering [*sic*] the systems of cultural representations and the meanings already in place" (Stanley, 2009, p. 143). The intention was to remake the material landscape in ways that erased Indigenous

presence, relationships, names, and governing authority and naturalized white European settlers' presence, ownership, authority, and institutions.

Violence against Indigenous peoples went hand in hand with violence against the land itself. As Heather Davis and Zoe Todd (2017) note regarding the ecological impacts of colonization, "In actively shaping the territories where colonizers invaded, they [the colonizers] refused to see what was in front of them; instead forcing a landscape, climate, flora, and fauna into an idealized version of the world modelled on sameness and replication of the homeland" (p. 769). In the name of settler ownership, sovereignty, and futurity, many Indigenous peoples were and continue to be forcibly displaced from much or all of their traditional territories through violent means, and thereby alienated from ancestral webs of reciprocal connections between humans and other-than-humans (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This "disruption of Indigenous relationships to lands represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence" that is not just historical but also ongoing (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). As Justin Farrell and colleagues (2021) note, "Land dispossession and forced migration created the groundwork for contemporary conditions in which Indigenous peoples in the United States today face greater vulnerabilities to their health and food security, lack access to culturally appropriate education, and have heightened exposures to contaminants."

What I have learned during my time in Canadian higher education, first as a graduate student and now as a faculty member, is that institutionally sanctioned efforts to address historical and ongoing colonial relations tend to involve not only the selective recognition of Indigenous presence, rights, and sovereignty, and the conditional inclusion of Indigenous peoples and knowledges, but also the mobilization of these

efforts, paradoxically, to reassert the benevolence of the institution and legitimize its continued presence on Indigenous land (Ahmed, 2012; Daigle, 2019). These efforts are framed as part of an institutional commitment to continuous improvement and progress in ways that conveniently situate harms as done largely in the past or as at least gradually receding into a distant memory through the passage of time. The effect is both to ignore or minimize ongoing harm in the present and to foreclose further consideration of different possible—especially decolonial—futures. Thus, institutional efforts to reflect on examples of injustice can serve as an opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to justice and rehabilitate an institutional reputation, while leaving largely in place the continuation of colonial "business as usual" (Jimmy, Andreotti, & Stein, 2019). Such efforts do little to deepen settler responsibilities, enact repair for harms done, or support Indigenous resurgence.

There is a parallel danger in scholarship as well: that descriptive accounts and critiques of injustice authored by white settlers like myself may serve primarily as opportunities to demonstrate our own innocence and righteousness. The challenge is to instead invite ourselves and others into generative spaces of discomfort and deep learning and unlearning by decentering and disarming ourselves enough for the knowledge of our complicity to sink in, and for us to truly hear the call to responsibility that has always been there but long been denied.

We can consider that there are at least three different but interrelated dimensions of responsibility, based on a framework developed by the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures arts and research collective of which I am a part: (1) *attributability*, or recognition that the privileges and benefits one enjoys are rooted in historical and ongoing colonial and ecological harm; (2) *answerability*, or recognition of one's role in the systemic dimensions of harm; and (3) *accountability*, or recognition

that one is both systemically culpable and individually complicit in harm, and thus there are both an individual and a collective obligation to not only interrupt the reproduction of harm but also enact restitution for harms already done.

In higher education, the process of accepting all three layers of responsibility would require that we identify, denaturalize, interrupt, and seek to repair the harm caused by the enduring colonial modes of existence that are taken for granted within Western higher education in settler colonial contexts and within the societies in which they are embedded (Andreotti et al., 2015; Shotwell, 2016; Stein, 2019, 2020; Stein et al., 2021). In the following section, I consider the colonial origins of my own institution to illustrate a more generalized set of patterns.

The Colonial Foundations of UBC

While the initial idea for a university in British Columbia (BC) emerged in the late 1870s, UBC was not established until 1908. Between 1906 and 1915, a private institution—the McGill University College of British Columbia—offered courses toward a degree at McGill University, located in Montreal, Quebec, on the other side of the continent from British Columbia (MacKenzie, 1958). While the institution was short-lived, as rosalind hampton (2020) notes, this history indicates "the roles of universities in the westward expanding Canadian Dominion" by "symbolizing and propagating European civilization and Western knowledge" (p. 18). As UBC's first chancellor (and former McGill University College of British Columbia chancellor) Francis Carter-Cotton wrote in the early twentieth century to express his appreciation for the interprovincial connection to McGill, "[British Columbia's] sense of unity with other parts of the Dominion and with the Empire as a whole, and of the possession of common ideals of citizenship and culture has been deepened" (MacKenzie, 1958, p. 4). It is

also worth noting that McGill has its own histories of racial and colonial violence: James McGill, who bequeathed funds to establish what would become McGill University, was a colonial merchant and trader in and owner of enslaved persons (hampton, 2020).

UBC itself was first funded through the University Endowment Act of 1907, in which the BC provincial government granted lands in what is now central and northern British Columbia to be sold to fund a provincial university. In 1910, 175 acres of land at Point Grey, in the Musqueam Nation's territory, were identified as the future site of the university. The university was formally established through the University Act of 1908. From its earliest days, UBC presented itself as a purveyor of Canadian national progress, development, and enlightenment via higher education in the face of "ignorance" and "incompetence." Frank Fairchild Wesbrook, the university's first president, said in 1913: "The people's University must meet all the needs of all the people. We must therefore proceed with care to the erection of those Workshops where we may design and fashion the tools needed in the building of a nation and from which we can survey and lay out paths of enlightenment, tunnel the mountains of ignorance and bridge the chasms of incompetence." The choice of metaphors here that celebrate the violent and rationalistic mapping and transformation of landscapes as a universal good that "meets the needs of all the people" attests to the colonial processes involved in building higher education institutions, processes that were both naturalized and invisibilized in sanctioned accounts of the institution's history. This meant not only that Musqueam people were excluded from the early institution of UBC but also that the institution's presence at Point Grey was enabled at their expense. Thus, the claim that the university must meet the "needs of all the people" suggests that certain communities,

especially Indigenous communities, either were not counted among "the people" who mattered or were otherwise paternalistically perceived to lack the authority and the ability to determine their communities' own needs. In this way, non-Indigenous people were and continue to be prioritized over the Indigenous peoples of this place.

In 1914, the forests at Point Grey were cleared with dynamite (Metcalfe, 2019). In 1920, lands originally granted by the province in 1907 to fund the university were swapped for 3,000 acres of land near the campus. The "development" of these endowment lands was meant to finance the university instead. The permanent UBC campus was not opened until 1925, thanks in no small part to the efforts of students who were frustrated at the stalled construction. Their "Build the University" campaign culminated in what came to be known as the "Pilgrimage" and, later the "Great Trek," in which UBC students marched from the university's temporary location in downtown Vancouver to the Point Grey campus location. In doing so, the students were in many ways embodying the university's motto, *Tuum Est*, "It is yours," taking what they believed to be rightfully theirs—in this case, Musqueam lands at Point Grey.

Since then, the Great Trek has been widely celebrated as a turning point in the university's "organizational saga." As Burton Clark (1972) noted, "An organizational saga presents some rational explanation of how certain means led to certain ends, but it also includes affect that turns a formal place into a beloved institution, to which participants may be passionately devoted" (p. 178). These sagas, which may be understood as the product of selective, officially sanctioned institutional memory, have both internal and external purposes. Internally, these sagas help facilitate a shared identity and investment in the institution by its various members and stakeholders; externally, they tell a positive story about the institution in a way

that legitimates its existence and social purpose by linking the institution to a proud tradition, often in relation to the overcoming of some kind of adversity. In UBC's organizational saga, the Great Trek is presented as evidence of a university tradition of student engagement and advocacy on behalf of the institution (Metcalfe, 2012).

Noticeably absent from the sanctioned narrative of this organizational saga is any discussion of the Musqueam Nation's consent or sovereignty (Sparrow, personal communication, November 3, 2021). It likely never occurred to early UBC students that the lands at Point Grey were not theirs to claim and occupy. The norms of white settler Canadian society at the time certainly supported assumptions about settler ownership and entitlement to Indigenous lands. Yet the notion that it is wrong to judge past racist and colonial actions according to contemporary ideas of justice implicitly centers white perspectives; Indigenous peoples at the time certainly did not perceive their dispossession as just. For instance, in 1906, around the time of UBC's inception, several Indigenous leaders from nations whose territories make up British Columbia petitioned the king of England for recognition of their claims to the land (Carlson, 2005).

The idea that we should not judge the past according to the norms of the present can be understood as a means of absolving settlers today of their complicity in historical and ongoing racialized violence and the theft of Indigenous lands and resources. It also dubiously implies that the colonial norms of settler societies and institutions have significantly shifted with the passage of time. Certainly, much has changed at UBC and in Canadian higher education in general since their founding moments. In particular, many things have shifted in the wake of the 2015 release of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), which reckoned

with Canada's history of forcibly placing over 150,000 Indigenous youth in residential schools for over one hundred years. However, the underlying colonial template and governing logics of higher education largely remain in place. As a result, as Marker (2019) notes, "Universities are in increasingly paradoxical positions as they ostensibly invite Indigenous expression, but resist the undoing of hierarchies that maintain hegemonic equilibrium" (p. 502).

This paradox can be attributed in part to the persistence and power of (white) settler memory. As Bruyneel (2017) notes, settler memory is characterized by both acknowledging *and* disavowing "the history and contemporary implications of genocidal violence toward Indigenous people and the accompanying land dispossession that serve as the fundamental bases for creating settler colonial nations-states" (p. 37). To be oriented by settler memory is not necessarily to be an outright supporter of colonization or to be entirely ignorant of the colonial past, but rather to leave "unthought" how deeply colonization shapes the present, including the current position and systemic advantages of settler citizens. Allowing the enduring impacts of colonization to remain unthought in turn limits the kinds of futures, practices, and solidarities that are imaginable, often resulting in uncritical desires for settler futurity.

Settler Futurities in Higher Education

The UBC Vancouver campus now includes street signs written in both the English and the Musqueam language and prominently displays the Musqueam flag alongside the UBC and provincial flags. Most official university events now begin with a land acknowledgment, recognizing that the university is located on the "traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Mus-

queam people."* Many visitors, both international and Canadian, have remarked to me how impressed they are with UBC's commitment to Indigenization. However, as Michelle Daigle (2019) notes, on many Canadian university campuses, "white settler futurities, including university futurities, remain unchallenged despite good-feeling and albeit good intentioned reconciliation mandates" (p. 709). White settler futurities are rooted in desires for the seamless continuity of a colonial society that affirms white peoples' unrestricted autonomy, authority, and right to arbitrate justice. This does not mean that alternative futurities and desires are not posed by Indigenous peoples and others, including some settlers; indeed they are, and from a range of different perspectives. However, generally only approaches to Indigenization and decolonization that do not pose a substantive challenge to settler futurities are endorsed or tolerated in whitestream higher education institutions.

Perhaps nowhere is the presumption of settler university futurities more evident at UBC than in the example of Wesbrook Village, which lies just south of the Point Grey campus, where I lived for nearly two years. According to its official website, Wesbrook Village is "a collection of shops and residences on Vancouver's West Side. Located on a spectacular peninsula known for its ocean views, old-growth forest, outdoor recreation and the tier-one University of British Columbia (UBC), Wesbrook is an ideal starting point for an hour of excitement or a lifetime of enrichment."

In March 2019, the headline of an article in the *Vancouver Sun* about Wesbrook Village declared, "UBC turns land into a river

* For critical discussions of the limits and possibilities of land acknowledgments as decolonial gestures, see the work of Chelsea Vowel (2016), Lou Cornum (2019), Joe Wark (2021), and Theresa Stewart-Ambo and K. Wayne Yang (2021).

of gold" (Ryan, 2019). The title of the story illustrates how Indigenous land is framed within the settler imaginary as a permanent possession and an ongoing source of profit, rather than a living entity embedded in reciprocal relationships. In this framing, UBC itself is also celebrated for the ingenuity of this colonial act of commodification. The story reports on the vision of UBC alum and businessman Robert H. Lee, who proposed to use a portion of the UBC campus lands to build housing and to invest the profits in the university's endowment fund. Lee attributed the university's rise in status and reputation over the past thirty years primarily to its landholdings (Business in Vancouver, 2016). According to the article, as of 2019 the housing developments have generated $1.6 billion in profit. Legally, the university cannot spend the endowment funds, but it can spend the interest they generate. Most notably from the perspective of decolonial critique, none of these profits are shared with the Musqueam Nation.

In the article, UBC's associate vice president of campus and community planning said, "Universities plan for 1,000 years, they don't plan for 50, so there is perpetual benefit through the generations." This statement articulates a clear image of what Daigle (2019) calls university futurities: the endowment land is presumed to be unproblematically and unquestionably the property of UBC in perpetuity (or at least "for 1,000 years"). Thus, the continued colonial-capitalist transformation of land into a particular profitable, Eurocentric iteration of human-centered property and legacy is celebrated as an ingenious pathway toward generating revenue for the university "for generations"—particularly given the notoriously high value of Vancouver real estate. In this sense, Musqueam elder Larry Grant's (2018) rhetorical question is extremely poignant: "You know who the biggest benefactor of UBC is? It's not Koerner, it's not Barber, it's not Allard [the names of big institu-

tional donors]—it's Musqueam!" The big difference, of course, is that those institutional donors gave their wealth to UBC willingly, whereas with Musqueam land, this was hardly the case: it was not a donation but an act of dispossession. Indeed, Grant draws attention to "the billions of dollars of real estate that have been appropriated, that Metro Vancouver and UBC sit on." Sparrow notes that while UBC has made cautious institutional acknowledgments of this history over the past few years, "no plans have been made to make adequate/comparable repair, or to rematriate these lands back to xʷməθkʷəy̓əm Nation, despite this knowing" (personal communication, November 3, 2021).

UBC and Musqueam first signed a memorandum of affiliation (MOA) in 2006. It outlined some guiding dimensions of their relationship, including affirming "the importance of building a long-term relationship between the parties," an intention to "facilitate cooperation" between the two entities, and a commitment from UBC to ensure more opportunities for students from Musqueam to access UBC. A revised memorandum has been in the works for many years. As Sparrow observes, the 2006 MOA "does not mention anything about the land sovereignty of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm Nation, and the fact that we are a significant (if not the most significant) institutional partner, and how the university plans to rectify its illegal occupation of our ancestral lands for its own profit" (personal communication, November 3).

In 2020, UBC debuted its Indigenous Strategic Plan and accompanying self-assessment and action tools. The plan is framed as a response to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. Many of the goals outlined within the

plan specifically mention relationships and partnerships with Musqueam as well as with the Okanagan Nation, whose lands UBC's Okanagan campus occupies. The plan acknowledges that "the University of British Columbia has been, and continues to be, in many respects, a colonial institution" and that "for many Indigenous students, faculty and staff, colonialism is a daily reality at UBC" (UBC, 2020, p. 8). While these kinds of institutional acknowledgments and plans can be an important starting point for further action, as Sparrow emphasizes, universities have a long way to go in order to operate from a genuine commitment to reciprocity and "being in good relation" with local Indigenous nations (personal communication, November 3, 2021). She observes, for instance, that the UBC Indigenous Strategic Plan "does not acknowledge historic land dispossession fully, nor does it make actionable recommendations for how to give land back to the Nation, or how to specifically and equitably share university resources with the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm Nation. It only speaks about supports offered to xʷməθkʷəy̓əm members/Indigenous people who want to become students or faculty within the university."

It is important to note that Indigenous peoples have varied responses to institutional Indigenization and reconciliation efforts. It is not my place as a settler to speak on Indigenous peoples' behalf, nor is it possible within these pages to include all of the complex and heterogeneous desires and strategies that different Indigenous people have for engagement with UBC and other higher education institutions. Nevertheless, many questions remain about whether the recent expansion of institutional commitments at places like UBC will lead to a shift away from simply offering more conditional inclusion of Indigenous peoples and knowledges and toward redressing the ways that higher education has historically operated, and in many ways continues to operate, at the expense of Indige-

nous peoples. Such a shift would require going beyond institutional acknowledgements and apologies toward not just the redistribution of power and resources but also, ultimately, reparation for harms done.

At UBC, some have identified Wesbrook Village as a crass example of the contemporary corporatization of higher education, and of the movement away from education itself as the primary purpose of universities. However, Wesbrook Village may also be understood as a novel iteration of an enduring colonial pattern of property that was first established with the original University Endowment Act, a pattern whereby Indigenous lands are continuously transformed into new forms of institutional wealth. In this way, the initial "accumulation" and ongoing occupation of Indigenous lands by UBC enabled future processes of accumulation. The case of Wesbrook Village also makes clear that universities' complicity in Indigenous dispossession and environmental destruction was not a one-time, exceptional event that can be comfortably relegated to the past, but rather an ongoing structural condition and set of social and ecological practices that enable universities to continue to exist, thrive, and expand. As Amy Scott Metcalfe (2019) notes, "Signage announces the 'Brand New UBC Faculty & Staff Rentals' in buildings named 'Pine House' and 'Cypress House' that are '100% Leased.' The replacement of a forest with apartments named after trees is done without irony or apology" (p. 88).

Further, it is generally presumed (if rarely stated outright) that this dispossession will continue, as the land at Wesbrook Village is framed as UBC's property to dispose of as it sees fit (and, in particular, in the most profitable way), always with its public and educational mandate somewhere in mind. Thus, the university's statement of "long-term commitment to the Musqueam Indian Band and our vision of solidarity moving

forward" (*University News*, 2019) seems to fall away when it comes to certain dimensions of officially sanctioned university futurities. Rauna Kuokkanen's (2004) observation, made well before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, continues to be relevant: "The Musqueam are recognized when it is convenient for the university but ignored, neglected, and pushed aside on other occasions, particularly when the university wants to represent itself—walk on the spotlights—as the sovereign master to the outside world" (p. 222).

Sparrow argues that although Musqueam have "made some headway in reclaiming our rights as a sovereign Nation within the university," there is much work that UBC still needs to do in order to enact true accountability in its relationships with the Musqueam and other local Indigenous Nations. "We can imagine all sorts of ways to right and repair these colonial histories and relations between universities and local Nations in a good way," she notes, but to do this requires "a tangible university commitment to make larger changes within its own infrastructure and ways of relating with local Nations as true university partners and benefactors long term" (personal communication, November 3, 2021).

An Invitation to Start—and Stay—with Complicity

Decolonial critiques contest the notion that there exists any universally true knowledge that can be formulated from a neutral "view from nowhere." They emphasize instead that there are multiple, partial, contested ways to see and sense the world. In turn, these different ways of seeing and sensing the world also shape how we identify, understand, and respond to an issue or a problem of concern. As a white, middle-class, cisgender US citizen who moves across the US-Canadian border with relative ease, by securing first a student visa, then a postgraduation work permit, and now permanent residency status,

I am acutely aware of how deeply I am implicated in the structural problems that I seek to make visible. And while indispensable, this awareness in itself is deeply insufficient and does not absolve me of my complicity in various systems of ongoing social and ecological harm.

For instance, not only did I benefit from the excellent scholars, comparatively plush resources, and "world-class" reputation of UBC as a student, but also then, as now, the university paid my bills. When I lived in Wesbrook Village, I benefited from a modest staff-faculty subsidy that the university offers in a subset of housing there. Having been born into a white middle-class family, I benefited from numerous structural advantages that granted me access to high-quality public education for my whole life and that ultimately allowed me to secure a tenure-track faculty position that places me near the top of the academic hierarchy within a highly unequal system of academic labor.

These "advantages" are not simply benefits or privileges from which others have been excluded and that can therefore theoretically be expanded and extended outward until they are all but universal. Rather, these advantages are directly and indirectly subsidized by harmful and unsustainable colonial processes rooted in the ongoing exploitation, expropriation, and extraction of both human and other-than-human beings "at home" and "abroad." If people like me are to even begin the lifelong work of attempting to interrupt these colonial processes and disinvest from the colonial promises they enable, then we would need to honestly confront "how [our] own position is implicated in producing the problem" (Meyerhoff, 2019, p. 5).

Colonialism is not only what prompted me to write this book but also, paradoxically, what enabled me to write it. Apart from the aforementioned material comforts and securities it affords me, in order to critique higher education institutions,

I am mobilizing Indigenous, Black, and other de-/anti-/post-colonial critiques that are largely directed at the systems that structurally advantage people like me. White scholars have been rightfully critiqued for selectively engaging and instrumentalizing these critiques to serve our own ends, particularly for the accumulation of economic and moral capital. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) note, "Settler scholars may gain professional kudos or a boost in their reputations for being so sensitive or self-aware" (p. 10). Meanwhile, my Black, Indigenous, and racialized colleagues are frequently either ignored or punished for raising similar critiques, especially if they do so in ways perceived as "unproductive" (i.e., focused on something other than "moving on") or as insufficiently sensitive to white peoples' feelings. Sara Ahmed (2012, 2019) describes how, when racialized and Indigenous staff and faculty *name the problem*, they are perceived to *become the problem*. Although this experience at times happens to me as well, the backlash is rarely as intense or virulent, and it is just as likely I will be rewarded for being a "champion" of justice.

I offer these reflections on my own structural complicity not as a navel-gazing confession or self-flagellation in search of absolution or as a blanket mea culpa that excuses me from attending to these issues as I proceed. Rather, I use them as a means to both situate and provincialize what I offer in this book, and also to invite a broader and deeper conversation about responsibility for complicity in relation to the colonial past and present of higher education. My understanding of complicity is informed by incisive theorists of colonialism and especially of colonial desires, including Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), Gayatri Spivak (1988, 2004), David Jefferess (2012), Alexis Shotwell (2016), and Ilan Kapoor (2004, 2014).

The Impossibility of Innocence, and Uneven Implication in Harm

Complicity in harm is primarily shaped by our structural positions in relation to social, political, and economic systems, rather than by the effect of individual willed choices—meaning we cannot simply "opt out" of complicity or be excused from it just because we critique or disidentify with those systems. Particularly in relation to the question of complicity, I am conscious about my use of "we" and "our" throughout this book. Just as there is no universal individual subject, there is no universal "we." The use of "we" and "our" by white authors often recenters the supposedly neutral white collective.

I strive to be as specific as possible when referring to a particular group of people, but there is inevitably some slippage. One reason is that our membership in groups is slippery, and contested; it is not singular but multiple, contextual, and relational. However, often when I say "we," I am speaking broadly about those who study and work in universities in settler colonial states. This is already a considerable flattening of social positions and individual circumstances. Nonetheless, the choice of "we" also speaks to the fact that the university is a place of privilege and thus of structural complicity in harm—even as, of course, this complicity is not distributed evenly.

As Tiffany Lethabo King (2019) puts it, "'Innocence' does not exist within the lifeways of this hemisphere or the modern world" (p. xi). Speaking of complicity in higher education more specifically, Nick Mitchell (2015) writes, "There is nothing about our position in the academy, however marginal, that is innocent of power, nor is there any practice that will afford us an exteriority to the historical determinations of the place from which we speak, write, research, teach, organize, and learn" (p. 91). None of this means that we are "equally responsible"

or "equally called to respond" (Shotwell, 2016, p. 7) to the systemic violence perpetuated by the institutions that we inhabit. But it does suggest we are all implicated in that violence in some way, even when we are critical of it, even when we desire something different, and even if it has been enacted against us as well. Suriamurthee Moonsamy Maistry (2019) describes "a state of complicity by default," a phrase she uses to suggest that "western Eurocentric academics (of all races) are in a sense complicit in perpetuating coloniality as this is the theoretical home in which they have been raised and continue to build" (p. 181). This colonial home that we inhabit—albeit for some with great discomfort and a sense of being "out of place"—is not just theoretical; it is also deeply material. Furthermore, intellectually critiquing this "home" is not always necessarily accompanied by an affective desire or a practical ability to live outside its walls, especially if we have never known any other kind of shelter. That is, we can intellectually question a colonial habit-of-being without necessarily wanting to break the habit and enact restitution for its harmful impacts. Ultimately it is up to readers to decide for themselves whether or not to be interpolated by my use of "we" throughout the text.

To accept that we inhabit a colonial present that is inherently violent and unsustainable, and that our complicity in that violence and unsustainability is structural and systemic rather than individual, suggests that one cannot simply choose whether, when, or how to be complicit or not. Instead, one can choose only how one responds to the fact of complicity and the subsequent responsibilities that derive from it. This includes attending to the fact that the desire to address one's complicity, while extremely important, can quickly take the shape of a nongenerative desire for innocence and absolution.

Once we can no longer get away with pretending "that we don't need to tell or hear the painful stories of the actions that

created the world we live in" (Shotwell, 2016, p. 38), we often seek to quickly address that harm so that we can move on without the weight of history following us around, but without having to give anything up, either (Jefferess, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). As Shotwell (2016) argues regarding white people in particular, "That feeling, of wanting to be people unmoored from history, of endorsing the pretence that we have nothing to do with the past that constitutes our material conditions and our most intimate subjectivities, is a feeling that defines us" (p. 39). This feeling drives efforts to address complicity in a transactional way that seeks to shore up, rather than interrupt, a sense of security, purpose, exceptionalism, innocence, and worthiness, a sense possible only within a colonial system ordered by colonial hierarchies of value. This transactional approach often emerges when one tries to address complicity from a sense of guilt or shame. While there are important discussions to be had about the potential of both guilt and shame for mobilizing action (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, & Corntassel, 2014), without further processing of these responses, both tend to circularly recenter the complicit party. Actions driven by guilt or shame are often motivated by a search for redemption that would allow for a return to enjoying socially sanctioned perceived entitlements to feeling "good" and being seen as doing "good." Conversely, my intention in this book is not for people to feel "bad" about their complicity. Instead, I emphasize activating or amplifying a sense of responsibility—including the different layers of attributability, answerability, and accountability reviewed at the beginning of this chapter.

Focusing on complicity can be risky. Attending to the deconstruction of dominant myths of higher education, for instance, can be understood as recentering white settler memories and futurities. This presents an interesting paradox: in order to decenter something, do we have to first center it so as to then

denaturalize it, deconstruct it, disinvest from it, and ultimately clear space for something else? Boggs and colleagues (2019) observe that one way "to refuse and replace narratives of university history conditioned by white settler memory" is to "highlight counter-memories from the perspectives of people, such as Native Americans and African Americans, who have been involved in worldmaking projects alternative to liberal-capitalist modernity, and whose perspectives have been obscured or elided in the dominant narratives" (p. 12). This is absolutely necessary work. Yet, if we do not simultaneously identify and interrupt the conscious and unconscious effects of white settler memory, white settlers like myself risk letting mainstream narratives and colonial investments continue to implicitly frame how we read other histories and to haunt the possible futures that we can imagine.

Anticipating Possible Responses

By centering higher education's entanglement with racial, colonial, and ecological violence, this book necessarily decenters other questions and conversations, but it does not dismiss them or suggest they are no longer useful or important. As historian of higher education John Thelin (2004) notes, "My interpretation is admittedly selective" (p. xxii); I admit the same about my own interpretation. This selectivity is inevitable in the crafting of any narrative, academic or otherwise. I do not argue that colonization is the *only* "condition of possibility" for US higher education—indeed, there are many. Rather, I emphasize the need to make this particular condition visible where it is currently invisibilized or is engaged with insufficient depth. I seek to offer neither a replacement account of the problems of higher education in the present nor a comprehensive "alternative history" of higher education. As Thelin also notes, "No author can succeed at narrating a wholly com-

prehensive chronology of American higher education in a single, concise volume" (p. xxii). One primary violence of colonialism is not simply that it asserts the universality of Western knowledge in particular but that it asserts the possibility of universal, totalizing knowledge in general.

To bypass the imperial tendency to compete for a position of universal epistemic authority, we would need to foster an ecology of narratives about higher education, rather than a single story. At the same time, to crack the currently hegemonic narrative, we need to attend to the uneven epistemic and social power of different narratives by both drawing attention to the harmful impacts of this hegemony and creating more space for alternative narratives to be engaged in nontokenistic ways. Following Roland Sintos Coloma's (2013) suggestion that "the analytic of empire can enable new questions to be asked and persistent problems to be addressed differently" (p. 640), my intention in offering a decolonial reading of higher education history is not to replace dominant narratives and create a new hegemony but rather to clear pathways for more complex, difficult, self-implicating questions and conversations about the colonial foundations of our institutions, about how these foundations shape present challenges, and about how we understand and address those challenges.

Those who are suspicious of the overarching premise of the book—that racial, colonial, and ecological violence are underlying conditions of possibility for US higher education—are unlikely to read it in the first place. But to those who nonetheless do, rather than approaching the book with the intention to either agree or disagree with the analysis offered, I invite you to instead ask what you might learn through your own engagement with the text (including what you might be taught by your resistance to it). To those who might suggest that I give insufficient attention or credit to (white) institutions or (white)

individuals who mobilized higher education toward doing "good" or who resisted or reformed mainstream practices of violence, I would direct you to a considerable body of higher education literature that already offers these more celebratory narratives. I focus on the mundane, systemic patterns through which white settler individuals and institutions reproduce and benefit from harm, rather than on stories of those who committed either "exceptionally bad" acts of violence or "exceptionally good" acts of challenging that violence. In doing so, I also seek to bring attention to the fact that this violence is painfully ordinary—which makes it easier for white settlers not to see.

As I note earlier in this introduction, some might dismiss my decolonial readings of universities' histories for being "presentist." These responses maintain that the implicated individuals and institutions were simply acting according to the (racist and colonial) social mores of their time and, therefore, they should not be judged against the now-reformed, more progressive morals of the present (e.g., Davenport, 2015). Yet these responses effectively recenter dominant white perspectives from the past while ignoring the fact that Indigenous and Black people were, at the very same time, actively critiquing and resisting their own subjugation through various means (Patel, 2021; Mustaffa, 2017; Stonechild, 2006; Wright, 1991). These responses also in many ways ignore the fact that racist, colonial social mores are still very much alive and thriving today, albeit often in revised forms.

At the same time, this book is not intended to "trash" US higher education; indeed, US colleges and universities have offered many benefits that have been extensively catalogued and recounted in mainstream literature and thus need not be repeated here. However, I invite readers to consider the hidden costs of these benefits and whether higher education might take other, less harmful forms. This book is also not meant to

dismiss other accounts of US higher education history, including those that I review with a decolonial lens. Rather, like Thelin, I suggest the need to consider that all historical accounts of higher education (including this one) emerge from particular contexts and situated perspectives that shape the production of knowledge itself. Provincializing and contextualizing these accounts is crucial if we seek to engage and produce knowledge about higher education in more socially relevant and socially accountable ways.

It is not only those who are skeptical of this book's premise who might be frustrated by what it does or does not do. For instance, this book will likely disappoint those who support decolonization in higher education but are looking for concrete solutions or how-to guides for immediate change. Such proposals are extremely important, and many are being put forward by various groups and collectives, including students making demands on their own institutions, as well as social movements not formally rooted in or affiliated with higher education institutions. What I offer in this book is meant not to replace or supersede those proposals but rather to supplement them. The urgency of ongoing systemic violence demands immediate responses that can reduce harm and push the boundaries of what is currently possible within existing institutions. At the same time, there is also an imperative to preserve spaces for sitting with the full depth, magnitude, and complexity of how enduring colonial patterns and structures continue to shape higher education institutions, the individuals who work and study within them, and, to a large extent, the resistance that can be intelligible and actionable within them. In rushing to translate our analyses into action, we might overlook the need to address the complexities, contradictions, and circularities often involved in efforts to interrupt, unlearn, and disinvest from colonial promises and to create

and practice more generative ways of knowing, being, and relating. This work of pausing (Patel, 2015) is crucial for those invested in transforming higher education, whether from within or outside existing institutions. We will need to learn how to do this work of pausing alongside the practice of systemic change in ways that do not treat pausing as an excuse to perpetually defer this practical work, and in ways that do not treat this practical work as if it makes the former irrelevant or unimportant.

For those who expect this text to offer clear promises of "hope" and who might therefore interpret it as propagating cynicism or pessimism in its refusal to offer easy solutions or alternatives, I suggest that this is only a further indication of the need to develop deeper capacities to address the complexities involved in decolonizing work, including the possibility that our institutions might be "beyond reform." These are issues that many students in our institutions are already raising, and we owe it to them to create spaces where we can sit with these possibilities without seeking immediate resolution.

This book might also frustrate those who are seeking a more comprehensive account of how racism and colonialism have shaped US higher education across time. In particular, some might take issue with my rather exclusive focus on the violence that has been enacted toward and resisted by Black and Indigenous communities. This choice of focus is not to suggest by any means that the violence experienced by other racialized communities, including Latinx, Asian American, and Middle Eastern communities, is somehow less important. This focus is also not intended to erase the fact that there are individuals and whole communities that fall into multiple groups (such as Black or Indigenous peoples from Latin America, or people who are both Black and Indigenous). Rather, I recognize the impossibility of addressing within a single text the foundational legacies of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous vio-

lence, and Black and Indigenous resistance to that violence, in higher education, while also doing justice to the important histories of anti-Latinx, anti-Asian, and anti–Middle Eastern violence and resistance to that violence.

Indigenous, Black, and other racialized students, scholars, and activists in both Canada and the United States have pointed out the pressing need to address the complex, entangled relationships between the historical and ongoing legacies of settler colonialism, slavery and anti-Blackness, anti-Asian racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, border imperialism, and the extraction of wealth and resources across the Global South (e.g. Day, 2015; Diabo, 2019; hampton, 2020; King, 2019; Patel, 2016; Simpson, 2016; Thobani, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Walcott, 2019; Walia, 2013). These thinkers have pointed to the importance of linking these overlapping and often mutually reinforcing systemic violences (in higher education and beyond), without collapsing important differences between these multiple violences, and between the experiences of different communities that are subject to and resist these violences. They also note the importance of not assuming that there is solidarity between communities just because they are all harmed by white dominance, and emphasize the need to recognize that marginalized peoples are not immune from complicity in the oppression of others. Although it is impossible for me to do justice to these complex entanglements in this book, consideration of their implications must be deepened in conversations about the possibility of alternative futures in higher education.

Finally, this book might frustrate those who are looking for a text that approaches social, political, and institutional change based on the "Five E's": exceptionalism, exaltedness, entitlement, empowerment of the ego, and externalization of culpability (Andreotti, Jimmy, & Calhoun, 2021). Overall, an

approach to change that is rooted in the Five E's tends to rest on the romanticization and idealization of a virtuous and infallible leader, movement, or community that is held as the highest measure of humanity. Different theories of change tend to elevate different groups. For instance, in whitestream academic culture, the Five E's tend to be applied in ways that reproduce white and Western supremacy by elevating white and Western scholars. In other cases, often in an effort to contest that presumed white or Western supremacy, it is marginalized people or communities that are romanticized and idealized with the Five E's.

While the harm of applying the Five E's to white individuals or communities might be obvious given that they already enjoy many systemic advantages, applying the Five E's to systemically marginalized communities has in many cases served as an effective way to counter narratives that pathologize or deficit-theorize these communities. The mobilization of the Five E's by these communities has served as a source of internal belonging, community, strength, and well-being and has also enabled important forms of social and organizational change (especially increased representation of and redistribution to those communities) within institutions in which the Five E's are the most intelligible and accepted forms of politics. However, romanticization of marginalized communities is not necessarily a sustainable alternative to pathologization in the long run. In general, it creates a dynamic in which support for marginalized peoples' struggles and commitments to redress historical and ongoing harms done to them are contingent upon their living up to a nearly impossible ideal, disallowing space for their complex personhood, and creating the conditions under which solidarity can be easily withdrawn (Kelley & Moten, 2017).

Although I seek to challenge the Five E's throughout this book, this is a failed experiment; undoubtedly, I have repro-

duced them at various points. This is due both to my own limitations and to the limitations of the frames of reference and intelligibility that organize most critical scholarship. Rather than view this failure as a problem, I view it as an important reminder that decolonizing work is difficult, complex, and at times seemingly impossible. This reminder also underscores the need for those engaged in decolonizing work to develop greater stamina and deeper intellectual, affective, and relational capacities and dispositions that can allow us to face not only the challenges, discomforts, tensions, and failures that inevitably arise in the work of decolonization in practice, but also the uncertainty, complexity, and volatility that characterize the contemporary moment.

Just as colonization is an ongoing practice rather than a singular event, so is decolonization. If decolonization is not a predefined destination, then perhaps it can be a compass that continuously reorients us away from reproducing further harm and toward enacting redress and repair for harms already done, as well as toward more generative possible futures that are collaboratively woven in ways that support collective well-being for current and future generations. In this process, we will stumble and make mistakes along the way, and we must hold ourselves accountable for our failures, including by learning from them so that we do not repeat them. This requires us to develop maturity, comfort with uncertainty, and a mode of engagement driven not by guilt, shame, or a desire for "goodness" but by a sense of humility, hyper-self-reflexivity, and accountability that comes "before will" (Spivak, 2004).

Orienting Questions and Directions

Addressing higher education's historical and ongoing complicity in systemic racial, colonial, and ecological violence entails raising a number of difficult questions, a few of which

I include below. To engage these questions with the depth they warrant requires rethinking some of the most cherished ideas about US higher education, and its promises. Many contemporary critiques of higher education are rooted in a concern that these promises have been broken and thus need to be repaired and even expanded. This book takes a different starting point, arguing that the fulfilment of these promises has always been subsidized by racialized exploitation, expropriation, and ecological destruction; it also suggests that the perpetuation of these promises may no longer be tenable, at least in the long-term. In turn, this approach challenges the illusion that we can—or should—hope for a return or restoration of an earlier, more innocent era of higher education. Instead, it gestures toward the difficult, long-haul work of both interrupting enduring colonial modes of existence and imagining higher education otherwise.

This book seeks to lay the contextual and conceptual groundwork necessary to even *ask* the following questions; for the most part, it does not presume to *answer* them or to offer prescriptive reforms or prefabricated alternatives to the higher education we have inherited.

- How have US universities benefited from exploitation, expropriation, destitution, dispossession, displacement, ecocides, genocides, and epistemicides? How are those of us who work and study in universities also complicit in this systemic, historical, and ongoing harm?
- Why do we remain so deeply attached to a higher education system premised on racial, colonial, and ecological violence? Why do we often deny that this violence is harmful and unsustainable, even when we have plenty of research that proves that this is the case?
- How has our higher education system set us in the direction of exceptionalism, entitlement, and individual-

ism? What other kinds of knowledges and educational practices might interrupt these patterns and reorient us toward responsibility and interdependence? How can those of us educated outside these knowledges and practices engage them without reenacting colonial patterns of extraction, appropriation, or romanticization?

- How can we interrupt and unlearn harmful ways of thinking, feeling, doing, relating, knowing, and being? What would we have to give up in order to do this work and to enable other ways of thinking, feeling, doing, relating, knowing, and being to become viable?
- What will it take for us to actually do the difficult and uncomfortable work of restitution and reparation for racial, colonial, and ecological violence that needs to be done without expecting it to be easy, to feel good, or to make us look good to other people?
- Why is it so difficult to imagine higher education otherwise, even when we are faced with the limits of dominant imaginaries? What could prepare us to face the many challenges ahead, accept our responsibility for contributing to the creation of those challenges, and shoulder our responsibility to address them in ways that do not create further harm?

In the book's concluding chapter, I return to and supplement these questions in an effort to indicate that our inquiry about these issues needs to be continually deepened and nuanced.

How to Read This Book

While this book is primarily an intellectual endeavor, it also addresses some of the limitations of undertaking decolonizing work solely in the intellectual realm. This tendency to intellectualize to the exclusion of other forms of engagement

is reflected in Melissa Phruksachart's (2020) observation that "there is a long tradition of white people thinking they can read their way out of trouble." In turn, this tendency is rooted in what Bruyneel (2013) describes as a "liberal rationalist approach" to violence in which, "if only we all knew better, had all the facts, then these historic injustices would be resolved, or at least we would be on our way to addressing them" (p. 238). From this perspective, white settlers' collective failure to accept accountability for complicity in harm and responsibility for repair can be painted as a product of *ignorance about colonialism* rather than a product of *investment in colonialism*. This approach also effectively erases the place of injustice in the ordering grammar of modern systems and institutions, which require the continuation of violence for the continuation of their existence.

By contrast, this book addresses the ways the enduring coloniality of US higher education is not only the result of ignorance that can be solved with more information. Certainly, this lack of information is part of the problem, but it is not the whole story. Coloniality also endures because of a denial of individual and collective responsibilities, and an investment in the continuity and expansion of the "American Dream" and its associated promises, pleasures, comforts, and securities without being accountable to the "Colonial Nightmare" that is its underside (TallBear, 2019). As such, one can "know better" on one level while denying the implications and responsibilities of that knowing at another level.

Further, at least some of these investments and desires are unconscious, meaning that bringing individuals' conscious attention to the violence required for their fulfilment may not necessarily lead to different investments and desires. Thus, I argue that the general lack of engagement with colonial vio-

lence in higher education can also be understood as a product of denial, disavowal, and desire, rather than a lack of information. In that case, what is required in response is not only intellectual critique but also an ongoing affective and relational practice of disinvesting from the harmful desires projected onto higher education, and investing in remaking our collective existence in ways that honor our responsibilities to one another and indeed all beings on a shared, finite, living planet. Toward this end, I invite readers not only to engage and reflect on this book in intellectual ways but also to observe their visceral and embodied responses to an uncomfortable reality that many would rather not confront: the foundational and ongoing complicity of US higher education in genocides, ecocides, and epistemicides and, thus, the true social and ecological costs of higher education's shiny promises. This is one possible way forward for reimagining higher education.

Structure of the Book

I begin chapter 1 by arguing for the importance of addressing the colonial foundations of US higher education. I introduce the decolonial historiographic methodology I employ in chapters 2, 3, and 4 in order to examine these foundations in different eras, and offer a synthesis of the decolonial critiques that inform my reading method. I establish the need for a decolonial approach by considering which questions and concerns are centered in mainstream historical accounts of US higher education and which questions and concerns are absent. In doing so, I also describe how decolonial analyses differ from analyses that center on legacies of exclusion. As well, I address how presumptions of exceptionalism shape US society and higher education and then review the three specific promises of US higher education, which I revisit throughout the book.

In chapter 2, I consider how most mainstream accounts of the beginnings of US higher education (starting before the United States itself existed) naturalize the establishment of early colonial universities. These accounts further tend to center white men as the subjects of higher education history and presume that readers will identify with these protagonists. I first review these accounts and read them through a decolonial analysis in order to denaturalize how they frame the founding of universities in the colonies as part of the natural progression of a settler society, and to emphasize the racial, colonial, and ecological violence that subsidized these institutions. I then review the ways that early institutions of higher education were implicated in and actively supported and benefited from settler colonialism and slavery. I conclude the chapter by considering how continuities between the past and present of US higher education offer new openings from which to examine contemporary challenges but also to reimagine possible futures, a theme I return to throughout the book.

In chapter 3, I address the Indigenous dispossession that is at the root of land-grant colleges and universities. In mainstream higher education scholarship, as well as in more popular discourses, land-grant institutions serve as a powerful metonym for the public good promises of US higher education. In this function, land-grant legacies are periodically evoked in efforts to reinvigorate public higher education (Sorber & Geiger, 2014). I argue that if indeed land-grant institutions are the model for US public higher education, then our vision of the public good has always depended on colonial expansion and, thus, on ecocidal and genocidal modes of capital accumulation. Land-grant institutions were made possible through the colonial enclosure of Indigenous lands, which were accumulated by the federal government through processes of removal

and dispossession and then sold as private property to pay for the schools. By establishing stolen Indigenous lands as the ongoing material base of the public land-grant university, the Morrill Act helped produce a colonial "template" of the public good that reemerges in new forms in the context of contemporary higher education privatization.

In chapter 4, I address the most celebrated era of US higher education, the post–World War II and Cold War "golden age," from the 1940s to the 1970s. During this time, there was a promise of expanded access to the American Dream. A booming economy and pressure to represent US capitalism in a positive light vis-à-vis socialism resulted in the creation of new opportunities for social mobility by way of higher education. As access to higher education expanded, Simon Marginson (2016) suggests, it was "widely agreed that the fairest and best means of sorting the continuing competition for social position and success were higher education and the nexus between education and professional occupations" (p. 15). However, the expansion of access to higher education and the accompanying promise of merit-based social mobility were facilitated through conditional forms of inclusion, and historically high levels of public funding depended on a commitment to positioning the US as a global military and economic hegemon (Labaree, 2016). Thus, the shine of the "golden age" relied on the shadows of US imperialism and on the domestic promise of formal equality of opportunity that functioned to "explain (away) the inequalities of a still-racialized capitalism" (Melamed, 2006, p. 9).

In chapter 5, I address the recent trend in universities' institutional responses to these histories of violence. I argue that these responses tend to be articulated through liberal frames of justice that relegate institutional complicity to a regrettable but

discrete historical moment in ways that disavow universities' active participation in ongoing structures of colonial violence. I also consider how these responses often become opportunities for institutions to reassert their own relevance, benevolence, and underlying character of institutional "goodness." Thus, the very moment in which the existence of an institution is revealed to be a by-product of violence paradoxically becomes a moment in which the institution justifies its existence and importance and exemplifies its commitment to the promise of "continuous progress." Framed within a "hermeneutic of reconciliation" (Hunt, 2018), these institutional efforts narrowly circumscribe the kinds of justice it is possible to demand and desire. I also consider alternative approaches to addressing these ongoing legacies of institutional violence, emphasizing the importance of a horizon of change oriented by a commitment to interrupt and repair colonial harms.

In chapter 6, I consider some of the contemporary implications of the colonial narratives that the previous chapters examine. Decolonial engagements with both the past and present of higher education can interrupt satisfaction with the currently imaginable higher education futures. I therefore ask how the colonial histories reviewed in previous chapters might shift commonsense understandings about the contemporary challenges that we face. I reemphasize that my intention with the book is neither to describe an alternative history nor to prescribe a particular future, but rather to rethink how we frame the problems of the present and their relationship to the past so that we might pluralize the available horizons of hope and futurity (Scott, 2004). Thus, rather than put forward any particular alternative vision of higher education, I emphasize the importance of nurturing the "possibility of possibilities" from which different futures and formations of higher education might emerge (Barnett, 2014)—while enabling the important

work of immediate harm reduction in the institutional spaces in which we find ourselves. Finally, I suggest that it might be possible to imagine higher education otherwise only once we confront the possibility of the end of higher education as we know it, and move away from a mode of existence rooted in entitlement, exceptionalism, and innocence, and toward modes of knowing, being, and relating rooted in humility, generosity, and responsibility.

Chapter One

A Colonial History of the Higher Education Present

> From the sixteenth century onward race and gender divided humans into three categories: owning property, becoming propertyless, and being property.
>
> —Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 2015, pp. xxiii–xxiv

> We need to learn again how five centuries of studying, classifying, and ordering humanity within an imperial context gave rise to peculiar and powerful ideas of race, culture, and nation that were, in effect, conceptual instruments that the West used both to divide up and to educate the world.
>
> —John Willinsky, 1998, pp. 2–3

> The crisis that American and European universities suffer today [is] not only the result of pressures created by neoliberalism, the financial crisis and global capitalism. . . . This crisis also originates in the exhaustion of the present academic model with its origins in the universalism of the Enlightenment.
>
> —Capucine Boidin, James Cohen, & Ramón Grosfoguel, 2012, p. 2

The decolonial framework that I employ in this book emphasizes the relationship between modern promises and the colonial processes that subsidize them. From this perspective, colonialism, racism, and environmental extractivism are not the result of the failures or shortcomings of modern institutions

to fulfill their promise of extending their universal benevolent gifts to all. Instead, these harmful practices are primary *conditions of possibility* for the (re)production of modern infrastructures and subjectivities. This interdependent relationship between modern promises and colonial processes can be understood through the concept of "modernity/coloniality," developed by Latin American scholars including Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Maria Lugones, which suggests that "modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 42).

Within the dynamic of modernity/coloniality, violence is the constitutive underside (the "shadow") that makes possible modernity's "shiny" achievements—including social mobility, political stability, economic growth and development, legal equality, and public goods. These achievements have been guaranteed for some people at the expense of other people, as well as other-than-human beings, who are subject to genocide, dispossession, enslavement, displacement, segregation, incarceration, exploitation, militarization, ecological degradation, destitution, and cognitive imperialism. Modernity/coloniality is broadly made up of a relational system organized to ensure unrestricted and unaccountable autonomy, a political system organized by nation-states, an economic system organized by racial capitalism, and a knowledge system organized by supposedly "universal" reason. In this chapter, I present my approach to decolonial critique by reviewing the basic elements of these systems, and then describe how they shape the historiographic reading of US higher education that I offer in this book.

Before I proceed, I should note that the mainstream historical narratives analyzed here come predominantly from overview texts that are often used in courses about the history of higher education. The general trends and trajectories

synthesized by their authors and analyzed by me are not equally relevant for all institutions or institutional types at all times, and are most relevant for the four-year institutions (public or private) that can be understood as historically white colleges and universities (HWCUs)—meaning institutions that were historically founded and developed primarily to educate white students, serve the interests of white people, and reproduce and naturalize white middle- and upper-class social, economic, and intellectual norms. These institutions have different histories than historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), and community colleges. However, the histories of all these institutional types are also quite intertwined and are deeply, though differently, shaped by the colonial logics and practices that I review in this book. Thus, although the general systemic patterns described in this book are present to varied extents across different institutional types and different individual institutions, further analyses of how these patterns have shaped these specific institutions and different institutional types, and how these patterns have been negotiated and resisted within them, are certainly warranted.

In this chapter, I briefly introduce the importance of critically engaging the colonial foundations of US higher education before introducing my approach to decolonial historiography. I then review the decolonial critiques that inform this approach before using it to consider dominant ("whitestream") narratives of US higher education history. From here, I consider how a decolonial analysis of the foundations of US higher education differs from analyses that focus on exclusion. Next, I address how presumptions of exceptionalism, entitlement, and innocence shape US society in general and higher education specifically, and then conclude by reviewing three primary

promises of higher education that both rest on and reproduce these presumptions.

"The Past That Is Not Past"

As Lindsey Walters (2017) notes, most "universities pay constant homage to aspects of their pasts, while simultaneously 'forgetting' those histories that are difficult, embarrassing, or shameful to remember" (p. 727). However, US higher education institutions are increasingly coming to terms with their violent foundations, often in response to pressure from students and community activists. These responses have included formal apologies, sponsored reports on institutions' racial and colonial histories, and subsequent commitments that often take the form of commemoration and a promise to mobilize the research and educational missions of the institution toward further analysis and understanding of these shameful pasts.

In the United States, most efforts to address higher education institutions' complicity in systemic, historical, and ongoing violence have focused on slavery and, to some extent, segregation and other forms of anti-Black racism that endured after the Civil War. Less work has been done to address institutional complicity with settler colonialism or global imperialism, though this too is shifting. Some of the first examples of addressing complicity in settler colonialism were the University of Denver's and Northwestern University's investigations of the role of shared founder John Evans in the Sand Creek Massacre, a mass murder of hundreds of Cheyenne and Arapaho people, a majority of whom were women and children, by US soldiers in 1864 (Stratton, 2017).

As I argue in more detail in chapter 5, even when higher education institutions' historical entanglements with racial and colonial violence are addressed, these entanglements are

often framed as separate or distinct from histories of pride, benevolence, and accomplishment—rather than as the hidden cost of those accomplishments. There is also a common temporal separation of violence between past and present. That is, not only are the "good things" understood to be entirely separate from the "bad things," but the "bad things" are also understood to shape the present only marginally, at most, as they recede ever further into the past with the passage of time. When legacies of violence are framed as if they are contained within discrete and exceptional moments, they can be safely addressed and left in the past, creating the illusion of a clean break between the present and earlier transgressions. Meanwhile, "proud" moments of early institutional history are framed as the kernel of a continued, inevitable evolution toward ever greater and more democratic forms of inclusion and universalism. In reality, as I argue throughout this book, violence is foundational to US higher education's structure and organization, and it is an ongoing condition of possibility for its contemporary existence—that is, violence is in the marrow of the bones of contemporary institutions.

The wealth that was expropriated from Black and Indigenous peoples through enslavement and colonization and then donated or granted to various institutions of higher education in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries continues to circulate and produce more wealth for these institutions (Boggs et al., 2019; La Paperson, 2017; Lee & Ahtone, 2020; Stein, 2020; Wilder, 2013). Universities have trained, and continue to train, graduates for all kinds of jobs that require them, both directly and indirectly, to extend extractive practices and relationships in both the public and the private sector. Meanwhile, the underlying imperative of perpetual capital accumulation continues to propel much of the research and teaching at US universities and to leave social and ecological destruction in its wake.

This book specifically seeks to make visible the disavowed colonial conditions of possibility for three celebrated eras of US higher education: the initial "colonial era" of early institutions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the land-grant era in the mid- to late nineteenth century; and the post–World War II era in the mid-twentieth century.

Scholars of US settler colonialism find that it forms an ongoing structural relation that organizes everyday life in US society. Thus, "it cannot be reduced to, as many nationalist ideologies would have it, the merely unfortunate birth pangs of its establishment that remain in the distant past" (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013, p. 12). Similarly, scholars of anti-Black violence describe how US society and modern global society more generally continue to be structured by anti-Blackness in ways that were first established through chattel slavery and that continue to be perpetuated through what Saidiya Hartman (2008) calls "the afterlife of slavery," in which "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racist calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (p. 6).

Thus, to single out three specific eras of history is just one possible way of storying the foundations of US higher education, one that mirrors but also speaks back to current historical "common sense" rooted in settler memory. Theoretically, one could write a continuous history of the racial-colonial entanglements of US higher education from the seventeenth century to the present. Or one could read this history in a nonlinear fashion that traces recurrent colonial patterns across time.

However, the fact that settler colonialism and anti-Blackness cannot be reduced to a single event or era of history does not mean that specific historical events are unimportant. Rather, as Bruyneel (2013) suggests, "we need to see events as productive and reproductive of contemporary structures and structural relations" (p. 315). Hence, by unpacking narratives

of particular historical moments or eras, especially those that are highly celebrated, we can better understand how the racial and colonial structures of US society and its institutions are naturalized and reproduced, including institutions of higher education.

A Decolonial Historiography of US Higher Education History

Inspired by Christina Sharpe (2016), I undertake decolonial historiography as "a method of encountering a past that is not past." To do so, I primarily read secondary sources, as well as some primary sources, "along the grain" while also offering parallel accounts of the invisibilized violence that subsidized celebrated moments of US higher education history. I also point to how these histories inform the present. This approach challenges the common organizing desire of white settler memory to "move past" these histories in order to "move on" or "move forward," instead suggesting that we cannot move past what is not actually past and continues to shape US society. Referring to museums, Sharpe asks: "How does one, in the words so often used by such institutions, 'come to terms with' (which usually means move past) ongoing and quotidian atrocity?" (2016, p. 13). Increasingly, universities, too, are trying to move past the colonial relations that continue to make the campus possible in the first place and that the campus also continues to make possible.

Rather than understand the current moment as the outcome of linear historical developments from "here" to "there," or presume that we can cleanly separate formations of US higher education between "then" and "now," this method recognizes that "attending to the present moment implies, necessarily, understanding that the present we move through . . . is a reliquary of the past, holding traces of everything that has

happened and everything that has been erased" (Shotwell, 2016, p. 77).

If the entanglement of US higher education in genocidal and ecocidal violence is acknowledged at all in mainstream history texts, the presumption of linear progress generally frames it in the past tense. In this framing, that violence can now be acknowledged but also neatly relegated to history, safely integrated into white settler memory in a way that allows us to move past it and thus cease to be accountable for it. This book questions the assumption of linear progress, even as it proceeds in a fairly typical linear fashion through three eras of history.

To situate my decolonial historiographic reading of the foundations of US higher education, in the following section I briefly synthesize the analyses offered by decolonial critiques.

Decolonial Critiques

Within the decolonial analyses that inform this book, modernity/coloniality is not understood as a single event, or even a distinct historical era; rather, it is taken as a contested and constantly shifting but enduring global system. Decolonial scholars date the origins of this system to the fifteenth century when Europe first initiated the colonization of the Americas and the transatlantic slave trade. They suggest that, since that time, in the United States and elsewhere, this system has shape-shifted and transformed, often as a means of adapting to resistance to its violence. Through these shape-shifting efforts, the global colonial system has continued to affect the ongoing dispossession (exploitation and expropriation), destitution, and premature death of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities both "at home" and "abroad." In addition to racial and colonial violence, this system also affects ecological violence through the objectification of nature

and the extraction and consumption of so-called natural resources.

The theoretical framework that I employ is informed by several genealogies of decolonial theory and practice that have challenged this violence and sustained the possibilities of other modes of existence. These include Black studies, Indigenous studies, postcolonial studies, modernity/coloniality studies, and queer and feminist studies. The decolonial lens I employ is also deeply informed by my work as a founding member of the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures arts and research collective and by our collaborations with Indigenous communities in Canada, Peru, and Brazil. I position my theoretical framework as being "inspired by" these genealogies because it is not possible to articulate a definitive decolonial critique or to do justice to the internal diversity, depth, and complexity of each genealogy. Thus, my theoretical framework is situated and partial, as all frameworks inevitably are. This is particularly important to emphasize given my position as a white settler author and the risk that my analyses will be privileged over Indigenous, Black, and racialized peoples' analyses because of the colonial politics of knowledge that naturalize white epistemic authority (Cusicanqui, 2012; King, 2019). Engagements with decolonial theories and practices must attend to the intellectual, political, and other labor of the abovementioned and many other communities that have developed these critiques in the context of high-intensity struggles to protect their lives and livelihoods. Apart from merely crediting these communities for this labor, we need to ask what our ongoing accountabilities to them are in the context of higher education and beyond.

Below I summarize my approach to decolonial critique by reviewing four primary systems that sustain a modern/colonial mode of existence: relational, political, economic, and

Table 1. Modern promises and the colonial process that makes them possible

	Modern promise	Colonial process
Relational system: Separability	Independence, individualism, and unrestricted autonomy (for certain [white] people); accountability and responsibility are optional choices	Denial of interdependence and refusal of its related responsibilities; creation and maintenance of racialized and gendered hierarchies of existence
Political system: Nation-states	Security, order, progress; protection of (certain) people and property; national homogeneity	State and state-sanctioned violence (e.g., policing, prisons, occupation, dispossession, borders, militarism, imperialism)
Economic system: Global capitalism	Continuous economic growth, consumption, and wealth accumulation	Expropriation and exploitation of humans and other-than-human beings; ecological destruction
Epistemological system: Western universalism	A single, totalizing knowledge system that offers certainty, predictability, and consensus	Suppression and attempted obliteration of other knowledges; knowledge used to index, control, and engineer the world

epistemological. Each of these systems has significantly shaped US higher education and how we understand its history and imagine its possible futures. These critiques make connections between the modern promises made by each system and the colonial processes that enable those promises (summarized in table 1). Although higher education predates the modern university and has taken many forms throughout time, today it is extremely difficult to imagine a form of US higher education that would effectively operate outside even just one of the systems reviewed below, let alone all four of them.

Relational System: Separability

Decolonial critiques emphasize that modern modes of existence are established through a colonial relational system that promises unrestricted and unaccountable autonomy through

an organizing principle of separation. Scholars identify slavery and colonialism as foundational moments of this separation, which resulted in a denial of responsibility to and interdependence with not only other humans but also with other-than-human beings and the earth itself (e.g., Ahenakew, 2019; Alexander, 2005; Silva, 2014; Whyte, 2018, 2020). Davis and Todd (2017) argue that colonization and slavery affected "a severing of relations between humans and the soil, between plants and animals, between minerals and our bones" (p. 770). According to decolonial scholars, this initial fantasy of separation created the necessary conditions for the subsequent creation of colonial categories of being and "deadly hierarchies of life" (TallBear, 2019, p. 26) that rank purportedly separate beings according to their perceived value (Alexander, 2005; King, 2019; Silva, 2014; Wynter, 2003). The resulting hierarchies both naturalize human exceptionalism in relation to other living beings and claim racial or cultural exceptionalisms within humanity itself. As a result of this relational system, Black and Indigenous peoples, as well as "nature," are systemically treated as possessable, exploitable, and expendable for the sake of "progress" and the fulfillment of modern promises that are offered primarily to white people, who in turn are structurally positioned as the rightful leaders of humanity.

Political System: The Nation-State

Higher education institutions are significantly shaped by, and in many cases expected to serve, the political systems in which they are embedded. The modern political system is organized by nation-states. Mainstream narratives imagine this system to be the result of a social contract in which rational individuals decided to give up certain freedoms for the promise that the state will ensure order and protect their life, liberty,

and property (Mills, 2015; Silva, 2016). In contrast, many decolonial critiques suggest that this promise is actually kept through colonial processes of state and state-sanctioned violence against "othered" communities (Byrd, 2011; Hong, 2014; Wynter, 2003). These processes include various forms of removal, confinement, occupation, incarceration, enslavement, and outright state or state-sanctioned murder; domestic policing as well as policing of nation-state borders; and the export of state violence through global militarism and various forms of political and economic intervention abroad (Walia, 2013).

Decolonial scholars argue that the nation-state protects only those it deems "worthy"—generally, white and wealthy people. Thus, these critiques tend to challenge mainstream horizons of hope and change that define justice as democratized inclusion into the state. Decolonial critiques do not suggest that efforts to expand access to civil rights and public services are unimportant, but rather that there is also a need to simultaneously imagine entirely different modes of political organization outside the nation-state (Aikau, 2015; Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013; Byrd, 2011; TallBear, 2019; Trask, 2004; Wilderson, 2010).

Economic System: Global Capitalism

Higher education institutions are also deeply shaped by the economic system in which they are embedded and operate. The modern economic system of capitalism offers the promises of perpetual growth and wealth accumulation. Even as some have sought to harmonize capitalism with meritocratic promises of a prosperous and diverse middle class, decolonial critiques conclude that capitalism continues to require unequal outcomes, premised as it is on profits made from exploitation, expropriation, and ecological destruction (Coulthard, 2014; Silva, 2014; Whyte, 2018). Here, "expropriation" refers to the appropriation

of the entire value of land, labor, or "natural resources," and "exploitation" refers to underpaying for land, labor, or "natural resources"

Decolonial scholars suggest that the wealth that was expropriated through slavery and colonialism continues to form the basis of global capitalism (Coulthard, 2014; Robinson, 2000; Silva, 2014). They note that while most white people are themselves exploited by the capitalist system, this system nonetheless offers them security and prosperity at the expense of other people and other-than-human beings. W. E. B. Du Bois argued that even when white individuals are poor, they are advantaged in their relative social and political position, being "compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage" that promises superiority, entitlement, and exceptionalism (as quoted by Nopper, 2011, p. 19). Beyond access to public services and institutions—including higher education—these "wages of whiteness" foster white people's allegiance to the dominant political and economic order.

Epistemological System: Western Universalism

It perhaps goes without saying that the epistemological system of higher education institutions significantly shapes the form, content, and direction of the education offered by those institutions. These institutions serve as primary sites where this epistemological system is reproduced and naturalized, though this role is increasingly being challenged. Decolonial analyses argue that this epistemological system promises that there is only one, universally relevant truth and way of knowing, which can be used to describe, make predictions about, and engineer outcomes in the world. Although this "truth" is continually revised, there is a consistent investment in the idea that it will be found within Western knowledge (Maldonado-Torres,

2007). Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) observes that the colonial cost of the modern promise of universal epistemic relevance has been denial of the value and even the existence of other knowledge systems. These other knowledge systems have been ignored, repressed, and in some cases entirely eradicated. Decolonial analyses argue that historically modern universities have sought to contain the challenge that other knowledges and ways of knowing pose to the supposed universalism of the modern Western episteme and its ordering of the world, given that these other knowledges signal the limits of mastery and totalizing truths and continue to hold possibilities for otherwise worlds (Hong, 2008; Silva, 2014; Wynter, 2003).

Contesting Whitestream US Higher Education History

Especially in the analysis of early US higher education in chapter 2, I focus my decolonial historiographic reading on four higher education history books: John R. Thelin's *A History of American Higher Education* (2004), Arthur M. Cohen and Carrie B. Kisker's *The Shaping of American Higher Education* (2010), Christopher J. Lucas's *American Higher Education: A History* (2006), and Roger L. Geiger's *The History of American Higher Education* (2014).

I chose these books because they are commonly assigned as key texts in courses about the history of US higher education. Thus, for many scholars and practitioners of higher education, this literature provides some of the only exposure to higher education history that they have unless their own research, practice, or personal interest inspires deeper engagement. While Lawrence Veysey's *The Emergence of the American University* (1965) and Frederick Rudolph's *The American College and University* (1962) are also considered classic works in this area, I focus my analysis on more recent texts.

One way to begin a decolonial engagement with historical narratives is to ask a few basic questions: From whose perspective is this history told? Whose experiences are centered in the narrative? Which events are considered significant, which are given passing mention, and which are ignored?

In the case of most mainstream higher education history texts, these narratives implicitly center the stories and experiences of white, middle- and upper-class, property-owning men. In certain ways, this choice feels logical, as these are the people for whom and in whose image US higher education was largely developed, particularly in its earliest eras. Further, even to the extent that these institutions were intended to serve "society" or "the public," the imagined constituencies and their interests were narrowly defined by and in the service of the white male elite. Yet, while the earliest institutions of higher education were white and male supremacist to their core, rarely are they explicitly framed as such, and rarely is their role in both producing and upholding the raced and gendered hierarchies of early colonial society thoroughly examined. Our understanding of racism, colonialism, and sexism in the present will be less rigorous if we lack a solid account of how these systems of domination shaped our institutions from the start.

While it is inevitably acknowledged at some point in most contemporary texts that the staff and student body in early higher education were largely white and male, little attention is paid to the implications of this fact for how higher education developed, how we understand the challenges of present, and what kinds of futures we imagine as desirable and possible.

Although accounts focused on the racial and colonial foundations of US higher education are still relatively few, there is scholarship that documents marginalized peoples' exclusion from, subjugation within, resistance to, and transformation of whitestream colleges and universities. Yet these histories of

marginalized communities are also marginalized histories, in that even when considered, they are rarely understood as formative or definitive of US higher education as a whole (Chambers & Freeman, 2017; Patton, 2016). As a result, what are presented as universal, neutral "view from nowhere" histories (Maldonado-Torres, 2011) are largely histories of white, male, middle- and upper-class higher education.

Beyond what and whose stories are told in historical narratives are other questions: How should we address or adjust existing narratives such that the absence of invisibilized narratives can be noticed? Why were these other histories invisibilized for so long, and what did their absence enable and foreclose? How can we make what is absent present in ways that do not become tokenistic or additive and thereby leave systemically marginalized histories at the margins, while the colonial center remains unexamined and untouched (Ahenakew, 2016)? After all, the history of dominant groups is deeply entangled with, and often directly dependent on, the subjugation and conditional inclusion of marginalized communities (Wilder, 2013). This entanglement includes the ways that the resistance of marginalized communities has prompted various institutional changes over time.

Craig Steven Wilder (2013) describes the life of Henry Watson, a white early Harvard graduate who was trained in scientific racism at his alma mater and eventually became a plantation owner and enslaver. According to Wilder, Watson "likely never appreciated the intimacy of his connections to Native and African peoples—the ways that their lives unfolded into his hands and his into theirs, but his choices reflect that reality" (p. 8). Watson's "career as master of a 'degraded race' forced to work the lands of a 'vanished people' embodies central themes in the history of the American college" (p. 8). Like Watson, many of us—especially white people—who work and study in US

colleges and universities also fail to realize the intimacy of our own, unevenly distributed entanglements with social and institutional violence, or the implications of those entanglements for our responsibilities in the present.

According to Jana Nidiffer (1999), "Historical treatments of the poor and higher education" (p. 324) generally fall within one of five categories, or some combination of these: "traditional/omission, increased inclusion, center of analysis, issue specific, and broader social analysis" (p. 323). Nidiffer's typology is useful for analyzing historical treatments of marginalized communities in higher education more generally. Most popular, contemporary higher education historical survey texts have adopted an "increased inclusion" approach. These reference, at various points, the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other racialized peoples, poor people, and (primarily white middle- and upper-class) women, but these experiences and the structures that shape them are not centered or placed in the context of broader social analyses (Mustaffa, 2017; Nicolazzo & Marine, 2016). Further, when they are referenced, these experiences are generally framed as the product of exclusion from white, middle-class, and male-dominated institutions. In the following section, I consider possibilities for thinking about US higher education history beyond the common frames of "exclusion" and "inclusion."

Beyond Inclusion and Exclusion

As Justin Leroy (2016) notes, when thinking through the constitutive role of slavery and colonization in the United States, "the hinge of inclusion/exclusion both misnames that violence and narrows any sense of possibility for how it can be redressed" (para. 3). This book does not primarily provide a history of exclusion from US higher education, though it contains some elements of this history. Rather, it draws attention

to the systemic, historical, and ongoing racial, colonial, and ecological violence that has subsidized US higher education over time. More specifically, it offers an account of how mainstream narratives tend to reproduce white settler memory by disavowing universities' complicity in that violence.

This focus on violence risks reproducing what Tuck (2009) describes as "damage-centered" narratives that take "a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community" as part of an effort to document "harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" (p. 411). Damage-centred research frames marginalized, especially Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities as if they were defined by the violence that has been committed against them by white settler individuals and institutions. Tuck suggests that an antidote to this tendency is for marginalized communities to instead create "desire-based research" that is "concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (p. 416). Jalil Mustaffa (2017) models a version of this desire-based approach to research by reading anti-Black violence and Black life-making practices and resistance alongside each other throughout US higher education history. He describes practices of Black life-making as "creative spaces of possibility and freedom Black people produce when practicing self-definition, self-care, and resistance" (p. 712).

Resistance to violence is not just a refusal of what is but also an insistence that it can be otherwise. Insisting on other educational futures continues in contemporary efforts that seek to reform, transform, or even abolish higher education institutions. In this book, I deconstruct the foundations of US higher education in order to discern the significance of these foundations for both the present and the future. But while I do attend to resistance at various points throughout the book, this book is not a history of Black and Indigenous resistance

in and to higher education. I do hope, however, that this text will encourage others to seek out accounts that offer a deeper focus on the histories and complexities of anticolonial and antiracist resistance in higher education where they already exist and to create them where they remain to be written. Such accounts include Roderick Ferguson's *The Reorder of Things* (2012), Nick Mitchell's *Discipline and Surplus: Black Studies, Women's Studies, and the Dawn of Neoliberalism* (forthcoming), Robin Starr Zape-tah-hol-ah Minthorn and Heather Shotton's edited volume *Reclaiming Indigenous Research in Higher Education* (2018), Leigh Patel's *No Study without Struggle: Confronting the Legacy of Settler Colonialism in Higher Education* (2021), Ibram X. Kendi's *The Black Campus Movement* (2012), Eddie Cole's *The Campus Color Line: College Presidents and the Struggle for Black Freedom* (2020), rosalind hampton's *Black Racialization and Resistance at an Elite University* (2020), and La Paperson's *A Third University Is Possible* (2017).

I have chosen to focus here on the colonial structures and subjectivities that make up the foundations of US higher education, rather than resistance to these structures and subjectivities, in part because I do not think I am the right person to write the latter book. As Leigh Patel (2015) writes, before embarking on research, one should ask the question "Why me?" alongside the questions "Why this?" and "Why now?/Why here?" She suggests that these questions "should prompt a humble pause and reflection on the specific of individuals' experiences that make them appropriately able to craft, contribute, and even question knowledges" (p. 58). As a white settler, I may be unable to do justice to the full depth, complexity, and texture of nonwhite peoples' educational experiences and resistance. I am also wary of reproducing the pattern whereby white people celebrate and even romanticize racialized and Indige-

nous peoples' resistance to systemic violence in order to deflect attention from their own complicity in that violence.

In an effort to interrupt this pattern, I read mainstream narratives of US higher education history along the grain. Ann Stoler (2009) distinguishes between reading *against the grain* and reading *along the grain*. She notes that in many cases, critical engagements with colonial archives position themselves against the grain, seeking to renarrate history "from the bottom up" and emphasizing the agency and resistance of oppressed and dispossessed peoples. However, at times efforts to read against the grain assume that the colonial narrative of history—"the grain"—is already adequately understood and accounted for. "Assuming we know those scripts," Stoler cautions, "rests too comfortably on predictable stories with familiar plots" (p. 50). She suggests adopting a humbler stance. She argues for the value of also rereading colonial narratives in ways that examine how these narratives are constructed and naturalized. It is this approach that I adopt in this book, while recognizing the importance of both forms of reading for the larger project of decolonizing higher education.

By bringing mainstream narratives about celebrated higher education accomplishments into conversation with the racial and colonial conditions of possibility for those accomplishments to occur, I seek to denaturalize and problematize the whitestream narrative arc of US higher education history that posits the inevitability of linear movement across time (of growth, democratization, and inclusion) and expansion across space (from East to West, and now globally). In particular, this method enables me to identify how narratives of US higher education history that are steeped in settler memory are mobilized in response to challenges of the present in ways that obscure the ongoing impacts of racial and colonial violence.

As Mark Lewis Taylor (2020) notes, "None of us, especially in US higher education, is free from being entangled in the webs that slavery and white supremacy have spun" (p. 309). To focus on the violence that US higher education institutions actively participated in and benefited from is to turn the gaze toward those institutions and toward the individuals who continue to benefit from the institutions' entanglements with slavery and colonization—including myself.

Kyle Whyte (2018) argues, "There's just no way to imagine an alternative where the US is exactly what it is today economically, culturally, and politically without the commission of genocide, unwarranted killing, sexual violence, forced assimilation, child abuse, and economic injustice" (p. 284). This framing, which emphasizes the deep dependence of the US and its white settler citizens on genocide, ecocide, and epistemicide, contrasts with the common assumption that the white citizen is independent, self-made, and self-determined (Silva, 2007). This framing suggests, instead, that white settler subjectivities are largely constituted through their structural complicity in systemic state and state-sanctioned violence (Flowers, 2015). Indeed, decolonial analyses suggest that many of the accomplishments and advantages that white people enjoy are a product not of their hard work and natural abilities but of a colonial system. This may in fact be part of the reason why these analyses are often perceived as threatening and destabilizing to white people. These decolonial analyses are not intended to suggest that people who are white are solely defined by the violence in which we are complicit. However, they do suggest that white people are accountable for interrupting and enacting restitution and reparation for the ways that violence continues to subsidize our lives and livelihoods.

By reading along the grain, this book offers, if anything, a "damage-centered" narrative of whitestream higher education

itself. While merely flipping inherited scripts of damage will not necessarily lead to transformation, it can be a first step in denaturalizing and identifying the limits of those scripts and gesturing toward the possibility and necessity of entirely different ones. By emphasizing the colonial constitution of mainstream institutions of higher education, I also consider the limits of efforts to decolonize higher education history that simply incorporate marginalized groups into mainstream historical narratives as temporarily excluded parties. In these narratives, it is assumed that the inclusion of these groups will be achieved with the passage of time, as higher education delivers on its promises of continuous progress and intrinsic benevolence, and that this is the only viable path forward. I consider how these narratives of inclusion and exclusion naturalize both the emergence *and* presumed continuity of white settler colonial dominance, both in higher education and in general.

To bring attention to the dependence of whitestream US higher education institutions on violence is to challenge presumptions of the exceptionalism, entitlement, and innocence of white people, the United States as a whole, and US higher education specifically.

Undoing Presumptions of Exceptionalism, Entitlement, and Innocence

One way that white supremacy is sustained in higher education is through narratives that reproduce white exceptionalism. White people often convince ourselves that we have earned all of our advantages and achievements through our individual talent, merit, and hard work. In this way, white people come to believe that we are the rightful leaders of society and, indeed, humanity as a whole. In other words, we use our presumed exceptionalism to rationalize our socially sanctioned entitlement to a range of promises offered by dominant systems—including

the promise of moral and political authority, epistemic certainty, unrestricted autonomy, and material (economic) security. This presumed exceptionalism also tends to extend to a sense of our own innocence of wrongdoing, which makes it very difficult to draw white peoples' attention to their complicity in structural domination without activating significant resistance (Ahmed, 2012; DiAngelo, 2011; Shotwell, 2016; L. Taylor, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

To remind white people of the specificities of our position, and specifically of how that position is subsidized through colonial violence and ecological destruction, is to interrupt our presumed innocence as well as the presumption that we have rightfully earned our structural advantages. Even when white settlers critique settler colonialism, it is often difficult for us to confront just how deeply we are shaped by it (Kotef, 2020). And even those of us who critique structural white supremacy do not necessarily see our own self-images of exceptionalism, entitlement, and deservingness as an extension of that white supremacy—in part because we still tend to think of ourselves as unique, objective, independent individuals, rather than consider the ways we are embedded and socialized into larger structures of domination.

Beyond the presumed exceptionalism inherent in white supremacy, in order to address colonial violence in US higher education, it is important to confront the characteristics of American exceptionalism.* As Donald Pease (2009) notes, "A vast complex of ideas, policies, and actions is comprehended

* Throughout this book, I avoid referring to the United States as "America," or US higher education as "American higher education," given that "America" can also refer to two entire continents (North and South America). However, I do reference "American exceptionalism" and the "American Dream," given that these terms have a particular socio-historical meaning within the US context. In some cases, quoted sources also use "America" to refer to the United States.

under the phrase American exceptionalism, and the disparate significations of this complex are neither compatible [with] nor derived from a shared semantic source" (p. 23). Broadly speaking, however, American exceptionalism paints the US nation-state as both an exemplar and a defender of freedom, and in so doing rationalizes its right to make war to protect that freedom, both on the continent (through Indigenous dispossession framed as Manifest Destiny) and abroad (beginning with the Spanish-American War and continuing to this day).

Natsu Taylor Saito argues that the narrative of American exceptionalism "presumes that human history is best understood as a linear progression toward higher stages of civilisation, that western civilization represents the apex of this history, and that the United States embodies the best and most advanced stage of western civilisation and therefore, human history to date" (as cited by Sirvent & Haiphong, 2019, pp. xx–xxi). In this way, American exceptionalism is rooted in a broader narrative of Western civilizational supremacy that is premised on a racist hierarchy of humanity and a Eurocentric imaginary of progress and development that have been used to justify anti-Black and anti-Indigenous violence for more than five centuries.

Among other consequences, narratives of American exceptionalism reproduce ideas of innocence that disavow the historical and ongoing genocidal and ecocidal violences that are performed and sanctioned by the US state. US higher education is deeply entangled in the reproduction of these narratives and, in many cases, in the reproduction of their material manifestations. Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira (2014) observe, "As in all imperial and colonial nations, intellectuals and scholarship play an important role—directly or indirectly, willingly or unwittingly—in legitimizing American exceptionalism and rationalizing U.S. expansionism and repression, domestically and globally" (pp. 6–7).

US exceptionalism is also tightly linked to the promises of the American Dream. The term "American Dream" is likely a twentieth-century coinage by James Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*, in which he described it as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (Adams, 2017, p. 404) However, the underlying ideas of the American Dream have been around in some form for all of US history (Cullen, 2003), ideas made particularly visible in Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" in the late nineteenth century (see chapter 3). The Dream has several interrelated varieties, which have shifted over time, but most rest on ideals of individual freedom and security and require a stable social order. Common elements across many varieties of the American Dream include upward social and economic mobility; (formal) equality of opportunity; home ownership; personal fulfillment; and a comfortable retirement (Cullen, 2003; McNamee & Miller, 2009). While white people have historically had greatest access to the American Dream, it is not exclusively white people who have sought to achieve it, as its access is promised to anyone who "earns" it.

Higher education is today often understood as a central pathway or engine for achieving the American Dream. According to Martin Trow (2000), "This sense of society with limitless possibilities for all, largely (though not exclusively) through higher education, is what is usually meant by 'the American dream'" (p. 312). Several recent books reiterate this association, primarily as a means to critique recent political economic shifts toward privatization and marketization in higher education, changes perceived to have compromised higher education's central role in providing a pathway to the American Dream. This includes Suzanne Mettler's *Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream*

(2014) and Sara Goldrick-Rab's *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream* (2016).

However, decolonial analyses of the American Dream offer a different perspective. From a decolonial perspective, the promises of the American Dream have always depended on a disavowed underside of racial, colonial, and ecological violence (TallBear, 2019). In this analysis, the issue is not primarily that certain subjugated communities have been and are still being excluded from the promises of the American Dream, but that it is through the subjugation of those communities that the Dream is realized for other communities (especially white communities). Thus, current economic inequities and insecurities are understood not as a betrayal of the American Dream but rather as a product of its continued operation and expansion. I expand on this argument further in chapter 4.

Much in the same way that narratives of US exceptionalism are often embedded within a larger presumed exceptionalism of Western civilization, narratives of *higher education exceptionalism* are also embedded within the US and Western civilizational exceptionalisms. By higher education exceptionalism, I mean the ways that US institutions of higher education are framed as moral and intellectual leaders of society and, thus, as sites of social progress, in a way that other institutions are often not. Eli Meyerhoff (2019) describes the "romance" of (higher) education, which promises both individual and national uplift. It is partly due to the prevalence of these exceptionalist narratives that the entanglements of higher education with racial, colonial, and ecological violence have been overlooked for so long. And even when this violence is acknowledged, as is increasingly the case today, it is generally assumed that "universities are especially able to facilitate meaningful apologies and engage their history regardless of its emotional or political valence" (Clarke & Fine, 2010, p. 107).

However, it is questionable whether institutions can honestly confront and redress the impacts of their histories of violence while also restoring the promises that underscore claims of US higher education exceptionalism, including (1) the promise of continuous progress, (2) the promise of a benevolent public good, and (3) the promise of social mobility. These promises are common within whitestream narratives of US higher education history and are still widely held today. In the following section, I offer a brief decolonial reading of each of these promises, and in following chapters I read historical narratives along the grain in an effort to trace the origins, development, and continued investments in these promises, as well as the colonial processes that subsidize them.

The Promise of Continuous Progress

A teleological and progress-oriented history shapes most narratives about higher education, including critiques of the present (Boggs et al., 2019; Stein, 2018). These narratives presume that higher education reached its zenith in the post–World War II "Golden Age" but was interrupted by the rise of neoliberalism over the past several decades (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018). This historical narrative is often mobilized to assert an underlying imperative to redeem institutions and restore the derailed path of progress.

In their 2015 article, "The Public University: Recalling Higher Education's Democratic Purpose," Michael Benson and Hal Boyd offer what is by now a familiar narrative: the history and development of US higher education was premised on commitments to "fostering more fulsome democratic engagement, raising the country's global reputation, cultivating goodwill between states and nations, and expanding opportunities for more Americans" (p. 70). According to this narrative, contemporary developments toward the economization, privati-

zation, commercialization, and marketization of higher education threaten this proud legacy, and it is therefore necessary to return to the promises of an earlier era and thereby "recapture the democratic purpose of higher education in America" (p. 79). Their critique of the contemporary moment is relatively mild, but others offer more passionate invectives about how these developments threaten the proud legacies of public US higher education and, in effect, the integrity and futurity of the American Dream itself (see chapter 4).

This "progress, interrupted" narrative has a broad appeal that brings together concerned academics with a range of disciplinary—and to some extent, political—affiliations, ranging from Benson and Boyd's fairly measured contribution to books with such dramatic titles as *The Fall of the Faculty*, *The Last Professors*, and *Zombies in the Academy*. Boggs and Mitchell (2018) diagnose the genre of responses that romanticize histories of higher education as part of "the crisis consensus." They write, "With the glossy patina of an ostensibly progressive liberal humanism, the crisis consensus invokes the university as the protector of time-honored and -tested values, one whose defense requires a temporality characterized simultaneously by urgency and nostalgia" (p. 434). This narrative has taken on the role of an organizational saga of US higher education writ large (Kimball & Ryder, 2014) and is commonly evoked in arguments for varied proposed higher education reforms.

From decolonial perspectives, however, the notion of progress itself imperialistically presumes a single valid "forward" direction for all and often rationalizes the sacrifice of any people and other-than-human beings who are perceived to be barriers to that progress (Smith, 2012; TallBear, 2019). Indeed, the expansion of higher education has always come at the expense of marginalized peoples. This includes, to different degrees,

both those who are conditionally "included" in existing institutions (Ahmed, 2012) and those who are excluded from these institutions and pay the highest price for systemic expansion. However, because notions of progress tend to "have a teleological bent, presuming that society is meliorative—gradually moving toward perfection—through incremental reforms of social action" (Seamster & Ray, 2018, p. 316), it can be difficult to identify these continuities of violence. Colonial promises of continuous progress shape how we understand the history of higher education, as well as how we understand possible responses to contemporary challenges and crises.

The Promise of a Benevolent Public Good

Adriana Kezar (2004) outlines the different elements of higher education's "traditional" public good role, including "educating citizens for democratic engagement, supporting local and regional communities, preserving knowledge and making it available to the community, working in concert with other social institutions such as government or health-care agencies to foster their missions, advancing knowledge through research, developing the arts and humanities, broadening access to ensure a diverse democracy, developing the intellectual talents of students, and creating leaders for various areas of the public sector" (p. 431). Several critiques of neoliberalization express concern that these public good roles of higher education have been compromised (Marginson, 2016; Newfield, 2016; Pusser, 2014). Others have brought attention to how certain communities have historically been systemically excluded from the category of "the public." Yet, whether one believes that higher education ever in fact fulfilled these promises or that these promises remain an orienting compass for change, there is a broad consensus in public discourse as well as scholarship that US higher education both *should* and *can* be a benevo-

lent institution that serves the public good. This is a form of higher education exceptionalism that presumes higher education is "a good in itself, as an institution defined ultimately by the progressive nature at its core" (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018, p. 434).

Decolonial critiques raise questions about what constitutes the "good" and "the public" in common notions of "the public good"—including questions about who decides what is good, in whose name, for whose benefit, to what end, and at whose expense. However, these critiques also draw attention to the ways many "public goods" were and are accumulated through racialized processes of exploitation and expropriation, and ecological extraction, in much the same way that "private goods" were and are. Thus, while many decolonial critiques challenge contemporary patterns of neoliberalization and privatization, they also question the assumptions that are naturalized through the very notion of public goods, and whether institutions so deeply rooted in violence can ever be made "benevolent." Further, these critiques draw attention to how the assumption of benevolence might lead to a narrowing of horizons, including the foreclosure of futures in which life is organized in another way than through the inherited categories of public versus private that are naturalized by the modern/colonial political economic system.

The Promise of Social Mobility

According to Trow (2000), "Through its role in fostering social mobility and the belief in a society open to talents, American higher education legitimates the social and political system, and thus is a central element in the society as it is nowhere else" (pp. 312–313). The promise of higher education as a means to access social mobility is premised on meritocracy, that is, the presumption that "those who are the most talented,

the hardest working, and the most virtuous get and should get the most rewards" (McNamee & Miller, 2009, p. 4). The existence of socioeconomic classes in the United States is partly justified through the promise of accessible pathways for mobility between classes based on merit, which today is largely assessed through educational sorting.

Many critiques point to the failure of higher education to live up to its promise and potential as a pathway to social mobility. Evidence for this failure includes the facts that the rising cost of college bars access for many low-income students (especially access to more elite institutions); that the universities which enable the most social mobility tend to be the least accessible (Reber & Sinclair, 2020); and that dominant ways of operationalizing merit often serve to rationalize and facilitate the persistence of existing inequities, rather than to interrupt those inequities (Guinier, 2015). Other critiques point to the ways that opportunities for social mobility are often made available only to those who are willing and able to approximate or align with white middle- and upper-class norms and values (Jimmy, Andreotti, & Stein, 2019).

Notwithstanding the important concerns raised by these critiques, they are somewhat distinct from a decolonial critique of social mobility that challenges the framework of mobility altogether, as this frame implicitly assumes the continuity of a hierarchical capitalist system in which there is an unequal distribution of resources and power, and thus unequal socioeconomic "positions" (classes) within which one can be mobile, or not (Ahenakew et al., 2014; Paradies, 2020). Beyond its inherently hierarchical nature, this framework implicitly presumes the continuity of ongoing capitalist accumulation that is, according to decolonial critiques, structurally dependent on racialized and gendered forms of exploitation, expropriation, and ecological destruction. The promise of an ever-expanding

middle class thereby naturalizes the continued exploitation of the classes below it, and the outright expropriation of lands and labor from the most marginalized, both domestically and abroad. Middle- and upper-class lifestyles are also ecologically unsustainable and burden the earth itself. For instance, if everyone in the world consumed resources at the same rate as the average person in the United States, we would need about five earths to sustain us (Global Footprint Network, n.d.).

In our current context, in which there is more competition for fewer secure middle-class positions, many nonetheless believe that higher education is a means through which to distribute social positions fairly (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018). Furthermore, when the promise of social mobility is unfulfilled, it is framed as a *broken* promise that requires repair (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). The inevitability of the enduring hierarchies within which one is or is not mobile is rarely questioned, and increased access to mobility is treated as the primary horizon of justice, hope, and change. A decolonial reading suggests instead that for many people the promise of social mobility has always been impossible and that, to the extent it has been possible for some, it has always come at the expense of others. A decolonial approach to social mobility would never shame or discourage low-income students from seeking mobility by pursuing higher education. If the only options are a classed system with no or low mobility or a classed system with some possibility for mobility, then the latter is clearly preferable. But these critiques invite us to ask how and why we have come to accept these as the only two possible options, as well as to consider what other modes of social organization might be possible and why is it so difficult for many people to imagine, let alone create, these other possibilities.

The Limits of Higher Education's Promises

In this chapter, I review the promises offered by modern relational, political, economic, and epistemological systems, and the related promises offered by modern institutions of higher education. I also consider the colonial processes that subsidize the fulfilment of these promises. These promises tend to be fulfilled most widely during times of abundance, and less so during times of scarcity. In the current context, these promises are increasingly going unfulfilled as we face the biophysical limits of a finite planet and the sedimentation of a state-enabled financialized capitalism with few redistributive imperatives. One possible response is to double down on demands that modern promises be met, hoping they can be reinvigorated and even expanded to new communities and contexts. However, this book offers an alternative approach, one in which we intellectually grapple with the ethical and practical limits and costs of these promises themselves, so that we might affectively and relationally untangle and disinvest our hopes and desires from those promises. In this way, we might gesture toward horizons of hope that open up the possibility of less harmful, more sustainable higher education futures that are viable but currently unfathomable.