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New university history, institutional reckoning and the materiality of ideas

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In recent decades a dual shift has taken place in histories of higher education: scholars have increasingly come to understand universities within the frame of power and empire, and universities have increasingly come to understand the need to engage critically with their own histories. The first of these departures might be understood as a second wave of ‘the new university history’ that emerged in the 1960s and ‘70s. Until then university history had been dominated by anniversary and celebratory volumes that told progressive and positivist stories of individual institutions. Influenced by the emergence of social history, university historians began to move beyond these accounts to instead ‘produce more critical examinations of institutions of higher education set in the context of their times.’¹ Although the older approach has not entirely disappeared, other concerns have emerged as a major focus of the revived field, including the social origins and character of university students and faculties, the extended unravelling of religious influence, and the public and civic foundations of nineteenth-century institutions and their connections to capital and the state.²

While it was robust in its critique of the social, gendered and racial character of universities, this first wave of ‘new university history’ tended to remain centred on individual institutions or national groupings and systems. It is only in the last decade, in keeping with wider historiographic trends, that transnational and imperial considerations have seriously been taken up by scholars of higher education. In the same period, scholars identifying with the interdisciplinary field of critical university studies also began emphasising the colonial as well as the capitalist character of

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¹Robert Anderson, ‘Writing University History in Great Britain, from the 1960s to the Present (Escribiendo Historia de La Universidad En Gran Bretaña, Desde 1960 Hasta La Actualidad)’, *CIAN-Revista de Historia de Las Universidades* 20, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.20318/cian.2017.3727>; Melissa Kean, ‘Tulane: The Emergence of a Modern University, 1945–1980’, *The Journal of Southern History* 68, no. 4 (2002): 999; Daniel Greenstein, ‘University History: Recent Contributions from Scotland’, *Oxford Review of Education* 23, no. 2 (1997): 223–27. Key examples are Sheldon Rothblatt, *The Revolution of the Dons: Cambridge and Society in Victorian England* (Faber, 1968); Lawrence Stone, ed., *The University in Society* (Princeton University Press, 1974).

²As examples see: William Whyte, *Redbrick: A Social and Architectural History of Britain's Civic Universities* (Oxford, 2015); Julia Horne and Geoffrey Sherington, *Sydney: The Making of a Public University* (Sydney University Press, 2012); Hannah Forsyth, *A History of the Modern Australian University* (NewSouth Press, 2014); A. Nelson, *Capital of Mind: The Idea of the Modern American University* (University of Chicago Press, 2024). For an overview of the field in Britain and Ireland see: Tom Woodin and Susannah Wright, ‘The History of Education in Britain and Ireland: Changing Perspectives and Continuing Themes’, *History of Education* 52, no. 2–3 (2023): 421–41.

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university ‘world-making’.³ Academic networks, student mobility, and the historical infrastructures and politics that have created uneven (and unequal) higher education landscapes all emerged as major themes of this second wave of historical work.⁴

In parallel to this recent reinvigoration of the field of the history of higher education, over the last 20 years a range of political factors have forced universities and colleges across the world to consider the origins of their wealth and their historical entanglement in slavery and empire. Student agitation beginning at Yale University in 2001, and initiatives such as the 2006 report into Brown University’s historical involvement in slavery, together with the highly influential Legacies of British Slavery (LBS) project directed by Catherine Hall at UCL (which makes publicly available the names of British slave-owners who received compensation following abolition in 1833), have led more than 100 universities in the United States, Britain, Canada and Ireland to launch institutionally-sponsored projects that examine their own ties to slavery.⁵ The legacies of Native American dispossession have not been prominent in these institutional initiatives, though Craig Steven Wilder and others have shown that not only was the history of the American college intertwined with ‘the social project of dispossessing Indian people’, but also that the project of Native American instruction and conversion was used to secure funding from slave-owners and slave-traders.⁶

Very recently ‘Indigenous land endowments’ have begun to be examined by scholars, with the 2020 *Land Grab Universities* database particularly influential for its systematic collection and analysis of the 11 million acres of expropriated Native American land that was distributed to universities and colleges in the United States under the 1862 Morrill Act.⁷ This attention has led to a series of institutional responses from what today are still called ‘land-grant universities’ that follow on

³Sharon Stein, *Unsettling the University: Confronting the Colonial Foundations of US Higher Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022); Priyamvada Gopal, ‘On Decolonisation and the University’, *Textual Practice* 35, no. 6 (2021): 873–99.

⁴Tamson Pietsch, *Empire of Scholars: Universities, Networks and the British Academic World* (Manchester University Press, 2013); Thomas Irish, *The University at War, 1914–25: Britain, France, and the United States* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Isaac A. Kamola, *Making the World Global: US Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary* (Duke University Press, 2019); Emily J. Levine, *Allies and Rivals: German-American Exchange and the Rise of the Research University* (University of Chicago Press, 2020); Chou Meng-Hsuan, Isaac Kamola, and Tamson Pietsch, eds, *The Transnational Politics of Higher Education: Contesting the Global, Transforming the Local* (Routledge, 2016).

⁵Antony Dugdale, J.J. Fueser, and J. Celso de Castro Alves, *Yale, Slavery and Abolition* (The Amistad Committee Inc, 2001), accessed 18 January 2025, <http://www.yaleslavery.org/Resources/summ.html>; *Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice* (2006), accessed 18 January 2025, <https://slaveryandjustice.brown.edu/report/2006-report>; Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, UCL, accessed 18 January 2025, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/history/research/centre-study-legacies-british-slavery-cslbs>; Universities Studying Slavery (USS) Consortium, University of Virginia, accessed 18 January 2025, <https://slavery.virginia.edu/universities-studying-slavery>.

⁶Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013) 150–55, 167–70. For links between the legacies of British slavery and Indigenous dispossession in Australia see: Georgina Arnott, Zoë Laidlaw, and Jane Lydon, eds, ‘Special Issue – Writing Slavery into Biography: Australian Legacies of British Slavery’, *Australian Journal of Biography and History* 6 (2022).

⁷Sharon Stein, ‘A Colonial History of the Higher Education Present: Rethinking Land-Grant Institutions through Processes of Accumulation and Relations of Conquest’, *Critical Studies in Education* 61, no. 2 (2017): 212–28; Margaret A. Nash, ‘Entangled Pasts: Land-Grant Colleges and American Indian Dispossession’, *History of Education Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2019): 437–67; Robert Lee, Tristan Ahtone et al., ‘Land Grab Universities’, 2020, accessed 18 January 2025, <https://www.landgrabu.org>; Caitlin Harvey, ‘The Wealth of Knowledge: “Land Grab Universities” in a British Imperial and Global Context’, *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 8, no. 1 (2021): 97–105; Caitlin Harvey, ‘University Land Grabs: Indigenous Dispossession and the Universities of Toronto and Manitoba’, *The Canadian Historical Review* 104, no. 4 (2023): 467–93.

from South Dakota State University's earlier establishment of the Wokini Initiative as a reparative project funded by the university's land-grant income.⁸ At the same time, and growing out of a much longer process of activism from First Nations communities, universities in Australia, New Zealand (Aotearoa) and Canada have begun to reckon with their historic relationship to Indigenous peoples. Recent interpretations of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi have led several New Zealand universities to commit themselves to a 'Treaty partnership' with Māori who hold local territorial authority.⁹ In Canada, in the wake of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, universities have issued apologies for their involvement in the Indian Residential Schools system and invested in forms of acknowledgement and redress.¹⁰ Among these initiatives, the University of Melbourne's remarkable *Dhoombak Goobgoowana*, which encompasses not only dispossession, but also the trade in human remains, racial science, eugenics and appropriation of Indigenous knowledge, stands out for its comprehensive coverage.¹¹ It is no longer possible for universities and their historians to cast higher education institutions as purely progressive institutions, detached from international capital and empire.

It is striking, however, that neither the second wave of new university historians, nor most of the reckoning initiatives of universities themselves, have positioned themselves in relation to intellectual history. In general, both departures have been reluctant to think about the material foundations of ideas on the one hand, and hesitant to see ideas as part of institutional history, on the other. Recognition of the physical and social architectures and infrastructures that direct and shape the production of ideas has more generally been found outside the history of higher education: in the history of science and medicine, sociology of knowledge, and African-American, Indigenous, post-colonial and feminist studies.¹²

⁸Barry H. Dunn, 'The Wokini Initiative: A Strategic Investment to Better Serve the Dakota and Lakota Residents of South Dakota', South Dakota State University, 2 January 2017, accessed 18 January 2025, <https://www.sdstate.edu/wokini-initiative/wokini-initiative-white-paper>; Jon Parmenter, 'Assessing Cornell University's Response to Recent Revelations Concerning the Origins of Revenues Obtained from the Morrill Act of 1862', Cornell University and Indigenous Dispossession Project, 11 August 2022, accessed 18 January 2025, <https://blogs.cornell.edu/cornelluniversityindigenousdispossession/2022/08/11/assessing-cornell-universitys-response-to-recent-revelations-concerning-the-origins-of-revenues-obtained-from-the-morrill-act-of-1862/>.

⁹Miranda Johnson, 'Decolonising Universities? Myth-Histories of the Nation and Challenges to Academic Freedom in Aotearoa New Zealand', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 1, ser. 7 (2023): 329–47; University of Otago, 'Vision 2040', 2022, accessed 18 January 2025, https://www.otago.ac.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/282504/vision-2040-university-of-otago-0241079.pdf.

¹⁰National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, University of Manitoba, 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada', accessed 18 January 2025, <https://nctr.ca/about/history-of-the-trc/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-of-canada/>; The University of British Columbia, 'Apology', 9 April 2018, accessed 18 January 2025, <https://indigenous.ubc.ca/indigenous-engagement/apology/>; Toronto Metropolitan University, 'Ryerson University Changing Its Name to Toronto Metropolitan University', 26 April 2022, accessed 18 January 2025, <https://www.torontomu.ca/media/releases/2022/04/ryerson-university-changing-its-name-to-toronto-metropolitan-un/>.

¹¹Ross L. Jones, James Waghorne, and Marcia Langton, eds, *Dhoombak Goobgoowana: A History of Indigenous Australia and the University of Melbourne, Vol. 1: Truth* (Melbourne University Press, 2024). In Australia, work is currently underway at the University of Sydney. See also B. Griffiths, H. Forsyth, T. Pietsch, C. Barker, and M. Poll, 'An Aboriginal History of the University of Sydney', Unpublished report for the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Strategy and Services), University of Sydney, 2015, accessed 18 January 2025, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14194701>; Raymond Evans, 'Friday Essay: Neither a Monster nor a Saint ... Sir Samuel Griffith, Queensland's Violent Frontier and the Rigours of Truth-Telling', *The Conversation*, 22 February 2024, accessed 18 January 2025, <http://theconversation.com/friday-essay-neither-a-monster-nor-a-saint-sir-samuel-griffith-queenslands-violent-frontier-and-the-rigours-of-truth-telling-222262>.

¹²Examples include Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (SAGE Pub-

There are, perhaps, good reasons for this.¹³ Writing in a recent volume that seeks to buck this trend by focusing on ‘the life of ideas in a university and the relationship of those ideas to the place within which they are formed’, Stuart Jones has suggested that ‘intellectual histories are not readily confined within the boundaries of institutions, and university archives seldom give more than a fleeting glimpse of the clash of ideas’. Moreover, the dominance of the Skinnerian framing within the anglophone study of the history of political thought, with its focus on ideas (or what Skinner referred to as ‘utterances’) within the context of other contemporary ideas, does not speak (nor attempt to speak) to their material and political entanglements.¹⁴

The failure of historians of higher education and intellectual historians alike to embrace an institutional history of ideas points to a more fundamental elision that sits at the heart of the modern university. As Martin Reinhold has recently argued, one of the ways that universities and those who work in them assert their modernity is by boundary-making and boundary-marking: by performing separation from the material and social conditions in which they are fundamentally entangled. Like the pastoralists and surveyors who alienated Indigenous land, they fence off what counts as knowledge, culture and civilisation, separating it from the world of material and social relations in which it is embedded.¹⁵ One of the many reasons *Dhoombak Goobgoowana* is so important is that, in showing that institutional history, the history of dispossession, land transformation and race science, and the history of knowledge production are all inextricably entangled, it sets a new standard both for reckoning initiatives and for university history more broadly.

Or, to put it another way, by co-opting Bruno Latour’s classic formulation: in unmasking their claims to modernity, *Dhoombak Goobgoowana* shows that universities and their academics have never been modern.¹⁶ They have always been entangled in the world even as they pretend to be neutral observers standing outside it. What would it mean for universities (and university historians) to recognise this? How might it change their orientations not only to the past, but also to the social and political imperatives of the present and the pressing necessity to secure the conditions that will sustain human life in the future?¹⁷

lications, 1979); Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness, Science, Health, and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Duke University Press, 2002); Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (University of California Press, 2002); Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Cornell University Press, 2015).

¹³Heather Ellis, ‘Editorial: Science, Technologies and Material Culture in the History of Education’, *History of Education* 46, no. 2 (2017): 143–46.

¹⁴Stuart Jones, ‘Introduction’, in *Manchester Minds: A University History of Ideas*, ed. Stuart Jones (Manchester University Press, 2024), 5; and personal correspondence with the author. See Quintin Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’, *History and Theory* 8, no. 3 (1969): 3–53; Quintin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁵Martin Reinhold, *Knowledge Worlds: Media, Materiality, and the Making of the Modern University* (Columbia University Press, 2021), 19, 47.

¹⁶Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Harvester Wheatsheaf (Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁷Tamson Pietsch, ‘Universities, Publics, and the Social Contract’, in *Australian Universities: A Conversation About Public Good*, ed. Julia Horne and Matthew A.M. Thomas (Sydney University Press, 2020), 241–50.

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