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Abolishing the frontier: (De)colonizing ‘public’ education

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, we situate the public university as a frontier where structures of settler colonialism, racialization, and citizen formation are both created and contested. We use the historical-geographical position of the University of Georgia, the first public land grant university chartered in the United States, to consider the broader implications of the settler-native-slave triad in the history of public higher education. We use these historical insights to expand upon W. E. B. Du Bois’ notion of abolition democracy and Indigenous discussions of decolonization. We animate the possibilities of abolition democracy informing public higher education through three interventions that question the ways in which people within public institutions of higher education can destabilize and work to democratize the systems that enclose land, labor, and education as private property.

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Aboliendo la frontera: (des)colonizando la educación ‘pública’

RESUMEN
En este documento se sitúa a la universidad pública como una frontera donde se crean y cuestionan las estructuras del colonialismo, la racialización y la formación ciudadana. Se utiliza la posición histórico-geográfica de la Universidad de Georgia, la primera universidad pública de tierras concedidas designada en los Estados Unidos, para considerar las implicaciones más amplias de la tríada de colonos-nativos-esclavos en la historia de la educación superior pública. Se utilizan estas ideas históricas para ampliar la noción de abolición de la democracia y las discusiones indígenas sobre la descolonización de W. E. B. Du Bois. Se discuten las posibilidades de abolición de la democracia informando la educación superior pública a través de tres intervenciones que cuestionan las formas en que las personas dentro de las instituciones públicas de educación superior pueden desestabilizar y trabajar para democratizar los sistemas que incluyen la tierra, el trabajo y la educación como propiedad privada.

As it is the distinguishing happiness of free governments that civil Order should be the Result of choice and not necessity, and the common wishes of the People become the Laws of the Land, their public prosperity and even existence very much depends upon suitably forming the minds and morals of their Citizens.

– Charter for the University of Georgia, 1785

A person who is not lawfully present in the United States shall not be eligible for admission to any University System institution…

– University System of Georgia Board of Regents General Policy 4.1.6, 2010

In March 2017, the University System of Georgia made national news for a series of decisions that highlighted the historically entrenched, racialized barriers to accessing public, college education within the state. House Bill 37, a state law aimed at stripping state funding from private colleges that adopt sanctuary policies, passed through the legislature and reignited the criticism of immigrant rights advocates working with un(der)documented students, who have since 2010, due to a University System Board of Regents decree, been banned from attending the top three public universities in Georgia (Aslanian, 2017; Redmon, 2017).

These discriminatory policies are the most recent enactment of exclusionary politics in U.S. higher education. While we use Georgia as a case study in this essay, similar national trends and histories require a better understanding of the comprehensive way U.S. institutions of higher education have profited, and continue to benefit, from institutional forms borne in white supremacist logics. These policies cannot be understood without putting them in the context of other distinctive, yet inextricably connected, moments in the historical-geographical processes of racialization, labor, and citizen formation in higher education across the network of U.S. universities. (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014a; Omi & Winant, 2015). To this end, Wilder (2013, p. ii) suggests ‘the academy never stood apart from American slavery – in fact, it stood beside the church and state as the third pillar of a civilization built on bondage.’
For our part, we situate the project of higher education within the settler-native-slave triad relationship of the U.S. that occurred simultaneously with the development of plantation agriculture and Indigenous dispossession. We argue that higher education is central to a system of frontier logic whereby universities were institutionalized to facilitate the integration of state technologies of settler colonialism (Wolfe, 2006) and the proliferation of racial capitalism (Robinson, 2000). We extend the notion of public education as a frontier project, as discussed by Giroux (1982, p. 87), who engaging Bowles and Gintis (1976), argues,

As the Western frontier lost its innocence to the logic of capitalist industrialization and expansionism, the public school became the new birthplace for unfettered social and economic opportunities. With state supported education, ‘a new ideology became the order of the day. The folklore of capitalism was revitalized, education became the new frontier’ (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

From this foundation we argue that the university as a frontier has been institutionalized through three intertwined processes: first, university involvement in Indigenous removal and ongoing dispossession through occupation of Indigenous land; second, the advancement of empire-building research and teaching agendas to commercialize and modernize neo-plantation agriculture; and finally, the contribution to shaping a racialized labor system in the exclusion of potential students deemed alien, illegal, or non-citizen. This historical process supports the uneven spatial development inherent in Smith’s (1996, p. xvi) discussion of the frontier when he suggests: ‘The frontier represents an evocative combination of economic, geographical and historical advances, and yet the social individualism pinned to this destiny is in one very important respect a myth.’ Contrasting how the frontier myth of Frederic Jackson Turner was extended by banks and the state as opposed to the ‘rugged’ (or self-determined) individuals that tellings of U.S. history too frequently romanticize, Smith (1996, p. xvi) theorizes instead ‘Economic expansion today no longer takes place purely via absolute geographical expansion but rather involves internal differentiation of already developed spaces.’ Here, the power of institutionalized white supremacy embedded within higher education as the embodiment of past and present forms of exclusion and economic gain are openly expressed through the discriminatory practices that persist today.

The model of the U.S. university traces its roots to Protestant, religious training and the Enlightenment vision of Western modernity. Based on ‘a set of conceptual and political foundations about what it means to educate people about freedom, democracy, and citizenship,’ the public university contributes to the nation-building project of preparing citizens to participate in democratic governance (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014b, p. 30). Shattering the promise of being an egalitarian endeavor, particularly present in the mandates of land grant universities, many U.S. public institutions of higher education have operated within a contradiction that promises education to all students, while educating those who meet admissions requirements and can afford to attend. These standards historically excluded disenfranchised peoples – the landless, women, Indigenous peoples, and people of color (Bascara, 2014, pp. 55–56).

The contemporary politics of the ‘neoliberal university’ have evolved out of this ethos of educational disenfranchisement and loom large in geographical discussions of higher education (see Castree & Sparke, 2000; Dowling, 2008; Mountz et al., 2015). We take
seriously these contemporary crises facing higher education, yet situate them within a
deep historical-geographical perspective, which offers necessary insights about those
who have always been excluded from accessing institutions of public higher education
by not existing within ‘the public.’ In so doing, we name past exclusionary practices and
recognize their resonance in the present U.S. public university system to help build new
modes of solidarity within contemporary struggles to accessing higher education.

Universities across North America have begun to acknowledge the Indigenous lands
which they occupy, their involvement in slavery and the slave trade, and the way these
histories connect to contemporary racialized and classed exclusion (Svrluga, 2018;
Wilkes, Duong, Kesler, & Ramos, 2017). Yet, the politics of recognition are fraught and
prone to cooptation that can further the colonizing practice of universities as Coulthard
(2014) shows. Further, progressive, anti-racist organizing on university campuses can
also reinforce invisibility or silence people of color (Brasher, Alderman, & Inwood, 2017)
indicating that simply naming these spatial practices is not enough. Recovering these
historical processes from their institutional erasure and despatialization (McKittrick,
2006) to lay the groundwork for de-colonial and abolitionist interventions that questions
how a future university could look is crucial moving forward.

This case study of the University of Georgia challenges scholars at other institutions of
public higher education within North America, and beyond, to interrogate their respec-
tive universities as frontiers and seek political interventions to disrupt the structures that
have made and continue to reproduce racialized and colonial privilege. ‘Progress’ over
the history of higher education is often touted, and is real in important ways, however,
at UGA, a ‘campus climate’ survey open to all faculty, staff, and students conducted in
fall 2015 found that ‘members of several constituent groups were differentially affected
by exclusionary, intimidating, offensive, and/or hostile conduct’ (Rankin and Associates,
Consulting, 2016), indicating that much more work remains to be done.

As such, we, as two settler employees of the University of Georgia, set out to imagine the
ways ‘abolition democracy,’ as envisioned by W. E. B. Du Bois (1935), can be mobilized to
ameliorate colonial and oppressive historical processes. We bring into conversation settler
colonialism, plantation epistemology, and abolition democracy to trace the lasting imprint
of the settler-native-slave triad and to illustrate how racialization and citizen formation have
interacted in the patterns of exclusion from state services with a specific focus on higher
education. We recognize the impossibility of decolonizing public higher education under
the contemporary political-economy in North America where the state is engaged at
multiple levels in the dispossession of Indigenous lands and has never been democratic
for all. We aspire to a collective and democratic university, which denies also education and
intellect as property. Across three case studies, we share intermediary politics that can
facilitate forms of teaching and learning aimed at reworking the institutions, structures, and
ideologies that limit the ‘publics’ who can flourish at contemporary public universities.

Settler colonialism and the plantation on the frontier

Du Bois opens Chapter XIII of Black Reconstruction entitled ‘The Duel for Labor Control on
Border and Frontier’ (1935, p. 526) by arguing that ‘in North Carolina and Virginia, in the
Border States and on the southwestern frontier, the dominant white worker after the war
sealed the fate of his black fellow laborer.’ Du Bois notes here, and throughout the text, that
The territorial colonization of the U.S. South was not only a matter of an ‘outside’ imperial imposition of force but was as much an internal endeavor that was explicitly racialized. On the frontier, a new social order was, and continues to be, forged through the simultaneous forced removal of Indigenous peoples and the reconfiguration of labor practices, public institutions, and land use patterns (see also Cattelino, 2010; Safransky, 2014; Smith, 2016).

In the southern U.S., European settlers exterminated and forcibly removed Muscogee (Creek), Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Choctaw peoples onto reservations. Land was enclosed and repopulated with the deliberate goal of producing a new public citizenry through the chattel slavery plantation system, which was ‘used as a settlement institution to secure the firm establishment of modern capitalist slavery on the Old Southwest frontier’ (Woods, 1998, p. 48). The plantation functioned ‘as both a military form of agriculture’ in the conquest of wilderness by productive farmland and ‘as a capitalist settlement institution having extensive land requirements, intensive capital and labor requirements, and internal forms of governance’ (Woods, 1998, p. 6).

To fortify this history of colonial settlement on terra nullius required the erasure of Indigenous sovereignty, which Wolfe (2006) terms ‘the logic of elimination.’ Moreton-Robinson (2015, p. 51) draws together the distinct regimes of racialization reflective of the needs of white settlers in explaining that ‘the question of how anyone came to be white or black in the United States is inextricably tied to the dispossession of the original owners and assumption of white possession.’ Indigeneity or tribal affiliation was defined through blood quantum, which meant that Indigenous peoples who impeded settler access to land could be ‘bleached’ white if not removed (Deloria, Jr., 1988, p. 27; Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). In contrast, the notion of blackness was expansive. The one-drop rule, which defined a person with any African ancestry to be black, upheld white racial purity and guaranteed reproduction of the labor force under a plantation agriculture system that depended upon chattel slavery. Racial formation adhered to the logics of profit that depended on making ‘property out of the land, as well as out of the body of the slave’ (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013, p. 12). These racialized definitions of citizen/subject and laborer/owner constructed on the frontier intended to impose order at the geographic edge of settler colonial expansion where Indigenous, black, and white populations intersected (Woods, 1998). In the language of Turner’s (1893) frontier myth, the frontier is the spatial ‘meeting point between savagery and civilization.’

This frontier logic naturalized the advance of U.S. democracy through the violent destruction of Indigenous grouphood and glorified U.S. exceptionalism through the parable of Manifest Destiny. Byrd (2011, p. 192) situates this violent process of ‘carving democracy out of the wilderness’ as fundamental to U.S. identity with the ‘frontier as the site of exception that proves the norm for US colonial democracy and at the same time enacts in microcosm the progressivist history that leads civilization out of savagery.’ The erasure of Indigenous land claims and the exploitation of black labor through plantation agriculture made possible this imagination of a white citizenry. Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill (2013, p. 12) explain:

The triad relationship among the industrious settler, the erased/invisibilized Native, and the ownable and murderable slave is evident in the ways in which the United States continues to exploit Indigenous, black, and other peoples deemed “illegal” (or otherwise threatening and usurping) immigrants, which is why we describe settler colonialism as a persistent structure.
Although westward expansion closed in 1892 (Turner, 1893), the logic of the frontier persists as a ‘necessary condition of settler colonial sovereignty’ that determines who is inside/outside, citizen/non-citizen, and white/non-white (Byrd, 2011, p. 27; see also Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Cooper, 2007; Haney Lopez, 2006; Stoler, 1992; Tuck & Yang, 2012). In practice, frontier logics intercede in constantly evolving forms to exclude racialized and alien bodies from the polity or restrict their level of participation.

Asian-American, Chicana/o, and Indigenous studies scholars analyze the claims of belonging and citizenship in settler colonial societies and complicate the notion of black/white racial binaries commonly deployed in U.S. scholarship (Pulido, 2018). Indigenous scholars highlight this contradiction within the subtractive designation of ‘American Indians’ as a single racial category that repositions Native people as a racial minority in the U.S. without acknowledging their membership in diverse tribes and antecedent claims to land as members of sovereign nations. The erasure of Indigenous nationhood reinforces this ‘profound epistemic, ontological, [and] cosmological’ violence enacted on the frontier when relationships to the land are severed; conquest ‘is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 5).

Scholars working within Black Geographies theorize the boundaries that restrict the full practice of citizenship by people of color in different ways (McKittrick, 2006; McKittrick & Woods, 2008). Marginalization and state violence experienced behind the color line (Douglass, 1881; Du Bois, 2008), in prison (Alexander, 2012; Gilmore, 2007; Shabazz, 2015), in urban neighborhoods (McKittrick, 2011; Safransky, 2014; Wacquant, 2007), and at the border (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bauder, 2017) employ myriad barriers to exclude people of color from state services. McKittrick (2013, p. 3) traces how each of these spaces manifest as ‘the protracted colonial logic of the plantation [that] came to dominate many aspects of postslave life.’ Across these contexts, the frontier thus implies the violence of disenfranchisement and the limits of citizenship and belonging (Olson, 2004).

To frame the university as a frontier is in part a logical cum metaphorical designation of the boundaries of who does and does not exist within the public realm. It simultaneously serves to identify how universities contribute to the formation of racialized labor systems given the central importance of a college degree to employment outcomes and economic mobility. Recent state measures to bar unauthorized immigrants and restrict affirmative action programs intended to increase racial, ethnic, and gender diversity indicate a reversal of historic efforts to address uneven educational outcomes. Yet, there have never been significant efforts to compensate former Indigenous residents of Georgia who were displaced, nor those whose ancestors labored under slavery for the University, in relation to educational opportunity. As a state institution that defines the ‘public’ through inclusion/exclusion and functions as ‘the model of the social bond that ties individuals in a common relation to the idea of the nation-state’ (Chatterjee & Maira, 2014b, p. 21), the University thus becomes an important site to contest and transform.

**The frontier university**

In 1785, the University of Georgia was the first public land grant college chartered in the U.S. The opening statement of the charter, excerpted at the beginning of this paper, is reproduced at length here given its historical significance to U.S. public higher education:
As it is the distinguishing happiness of free governments that civil Order should be the Result of choice and not necessity, and the common wishes of the People become the Laws of the Land, their public prosperity and even existence very much depends upon suitably forming the minds and morals of their Citizens. When the Minds of people in general are viciously disposed and unprincipled and their Conduct disorderly, a free government will be attended with greater Confusions and with Evils more horrid than the wild, uncultivated State of Nature. It can only be happy where the public principles and Opinions are properly directed and their Manners regulated. This is an influence beyond the Stretch of Laws and punishments and can be claimed only by Religion and Education. It should therefore be among the first objects of those who wish well to the national prosperity to encourage and support the principles of Religion and morality, and early to place the youth under the forming hand of Society that by instruction they may be moulded [sic] to the love of Virtue and good Order (“The University of Georgia Charter, 1785,” 2017).

The charter presupposes a public need for training the ‘minds and morals’ of the citizenry to ensure ‘civil order’ under a ‘free government.’ University education serves to tame the ‘wild, uncultivated State of Nature,’ alluding both to the possibility of a Hobbesian (1991) breakdown of democratic government in the new state and the danger of the unsettled lands on the western frontier. To build the institution, the University was granted the right to sell, lease, purchase, and hold ‘Lands, tenements, hereditaments, goods, Chattels, or other estates’ as necessary.

Oriented to educate a specific racialized and classed population from its earliest days, UGA, as a ‘frontier university,’ also acted as a land broker that actively contributed to European settlement pushing at the edges of the Cherokee Nation by selling its holdings outside of what became Clarke County and leasing acreage to raise funds for the school (Hull, 1894, p. 29; Coulter, 1928). Hull (1906, p. 36) notes two Cherokee students who attended classes at the invitation of UGA’s second President Josiah Meigs, yet left before completing degrees given their ‘unsatisfactory’ performance. Meigs was also removed as President in 1810 and no further mention is made of Indigenous students. By 1819, the frontier had pushed fifty miles west of Athens (Coulter, 1928, p. 35), and by 1835 remaining Muscogee and Cherokee people had been forcibly relocated in the Trail of Tears (Weaver, 2014). As Coulter (1928, p. 39) describes: ‘every red Indian had been cleared out of Georgia to make room for black negroes and white cotton. Athens was in this broad sweep westward of cotton plantations.’

The consolidation of the plantation agriculture system in Georgia policed the rigid color line between white and non-white peoples (Woods, 1998). In contrast to the early depictions of Cherokee peoples coexisting (to a certain degree) with white Athenians, University histories erase the presence of slavery despite the University dependence on the labor of slaves rented from local residents (Shearer, 2017). Only Coulter (1928, p. 106) notes that while there is no record of it owning slaves, ‘the University generally hired its servants from their Athens owners at $100 each a year.’ Otherwise, ‘Negro bell-ringers and other slaves were the only negroes allowed on campus […] The rule barring negroes from the campus was most likely the only one the students assisted the faculty in enforcing.’ Faculty and academic senate minutes report both the active involvement of students in ‘chasing’ black people from campus as well as student punishments for interacting with or harassing enslaved peoples (Coulter, 1928, pp. 106–7).

Racialized exclusion from the University did not change in the era after the Civil War when free black people evicted from or fleeing plantations moved into Athens, yet
received little to no support from the town. General Tillerson, head of the Freedman’s Bureau in Georgia, announced to emancipated black people gathered at the college chapel on 25 December 1865 that ‘there would be no Christmas present … of “forty acres and a mule”; instead, he presented an ultimatum of finding work or being forced into it (Coulter, 1928, p. 326). When the University reopened in 1866 after two years of closure during the War, black ‘educational warriors collected on the edge of the campus and began to jeer their more fortunate white brothers’ (Coulter, 1928, p. 334). In 1867, when a group of free black men stormed the campus and attempted to seize academic buildings, they faced a stand-off with white students baring ‘the guns they had carried through the Civil War’ (Boney, 1984, p. 46).

The exclusion of black students is in line with the second-class citizenship into which black people were slotted during Reconstruction. Following the adoption of the 13th Amendment ending slavery in 1865, Congress debated for two years to what degree emancipated slaves would be included in the citizenry (Epps, 2007). In the mean time, the Dred Scott v Sandford decision stood as law. In his 1857 opinion that denied citizenship to African Americans, Chief Justice Taney situated Indigenous peoples as citizens of free and independent foreign governments able to be naturalized as citizens of the U.S. This argument is laid out, as Byrd explains (2011, p. 169):

not to recognize Indian nations but to reprehensibly secure and cohere white supremacy by distinguishing African Americans as [quoting Taney’s opinion] ‘a subordinate and inferior class of beings, who had been subjugated by the dominant race, and, whether emancipated or not, yet remained subject to their authority, and had no rights or privileges but such as those who held the power and the Government might choose to grant them.’

In juxtaposing Indigenous and black personhood, the Dred Scott decision inaugurated ‘the construction of politically unequal spaces, including states, incorporated and unincorporated territories, and Indian reservations. Clear and stable demarcations between metropole and colony, domestic and foreign, citizen and subject, and colonized and other imperial subjects proved impossible, made impossible by the very efforts to stabilize them’ (Left Quarter Collective, 2009, p. 189).

The 14th Amendment, adopted in 1867, nevertheless tried to codify the categories of the citizenry redefined to encompass ‘All persons born or naturalized in the U.S., and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the U.S. and of the state wherein they reside’ (“U.S. Constitution,” 2009). Yet, the second sentence of the Amendment opened the gates for the former confederate states to ‘oppress the ex-slaves and others [b]y means of legislation denying to some of its citizens one of more “privileges” […] or “immunities”’ (Perry, 1999, p. 57). Both legal statutes and extra-legal violence were used to prevent black people from voting (Du Bois, 1935). Only white men were seen as “fit to perform the supreme function of citizenship” (Woods, 1998, p. 89). Indigenous peoples remained outside the state and were not granted citizenship until 1924 (Securing Indian Voting Rights, 2016; Svingen, 1987).

Georgia thus deliberately maintained the power to exclude black people from ‘privileges’ such as education and did so readily at UGA (Boney, 1984). The University effectively closed to those without the full rights of citizenship defined through the racialized legacy of slavery and the Dred Scott decision. The contradictory definitions of race, citizenship, and nation that defined higher education as a ‘politically unequal
space’ of the state is echoed in the patterns of who was admitted to UGA. The class rolls record Jewish students and Eastern European immigrants able to ‘pass’ as white (Boney, 1984; Coulter, 1928; Dyer, 1985; see Roediger, 2005). In line with the image of the University as provider of the requisite training for citizens, UGA began to admit white female students in 1918, just before the adoption of the 19th Amendment. With the spatial dispossession of potential Cherokee and Muscogee students accomplished, UGA had defined its ‘public’ for much of the twentieth century.

UGA was slow to integrate African American students through prolonged tactics of de jure segregation (see Hunter-Gault, 1992; Inwood and Martin, 2008). Racial desegregation did not occur until 1961 after years of petitions and a court case filed on behalf of the first two undergraduate African American students, Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes (Dyer, 1985, p. 329). Initially met with violence and protest, the integration of the University continues to be a slow process. In 2015, African American or black identifying students accounted for only 8% of the student population, despite constituting 31.7% of the state population and 27.5% of the Athens-Clarke County population (“Demographics,” 2017; Moore, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Further, 0.1% of the total student population identifies as American Indian, 10% as Asian, and 5% as Hispanic, making UGA a ‘predominately white institution.’

The underrepresentation of black students at UGA follows a distinctly different pattern than that seen in the workforce as we observed in the UGA Fact Book. The 2016 Fact Book reports that 12.6% of employees identify as African American or black. These employees span different occupational classifications, comprising 7.4% of executive/administrative officials, 5.3% of faculty, and 46.7% of service/maintenance workers. In contrast, the percentage of white workers filling these positions are 81.7%, 76%, and 39.3%, respectively (Moore, 2016, p. 77). While black student enrolment remains low, black workers constitute the largest share of low-wage employees. Frontier logics create and normalize this racialized employment distribution. We return to this distinction between the right to study at the University and the right to work for it below, but first turn to a third section of the Fact Book: land holdings.

The agricultural frontier and un(der)documented students at the university of Georgia

In Development Arrested, Clyde Woods traces the evolution of the plantation economy from colonial settlement to the Clinton Administration over twelve distinct periods that showcase the ‘capitalist dynamism, adaptability and innovation in plantation regimes’ (Woods, 1998, p. 6). Woods (1998, p. 7) continues that this ‘drive to innovate is in many ways a product of the construction of an explosive social order.’ The plantation bloc, defined as the planter class who owned slaves and continued to control state governments and agricultural industry after the Civil War, manipulated political and legal structures to preserve historical, racialized structures of labor control that benefited Southern agricultural monopolies. In the Reconstruction and Progressive Eras, social science contributed to the ‘institutionalization of the plantation bloc’s view of economics, history, biology, psychology, and sociology’ through academic discourse that created the “Negro problem” (Woods, 1998, p. 96).
‘Racial science’ was a central project of institutions of higher education in the U.S. during the nineteenth century. Nationally, Farrow, Lang, & Frank (2005, p. 182) illustrate the economic expansion through and complicity of the U.S. North in Southern slavery. The University of Pennsylvania, for instance through the work of Samuel George Morton, played a crucial role in racial science, which codified notions of racial purity and supported the self-understanding and self-assurance of the U.S.’s white supremacist majority. In addition to the damaging work of social science, we extend Woods’ argument to situate the central role of the land grant university in the frontier logics of nation-building through its contributions to scientific innovations in industrial agriculture that consolidated the ‘neo-plantation’ (Woods, 1998, p. 159). These technologies reinforced white land ownership and a racialized labor hierarchy for which migrant laborers would come to form an important part.

Adding to UGA’s long history of land appropriation, its position as an agricultural research facility was consolidated after the Civil War. In 1866, when the University reopened, the financial problems that had beset the school since its foundation resumed, exacerbated by the devaluation of Confederate bonds in which the institution’s limited financial reserves had been invested (Boney, 1984, p. 49). Federal funding furnished through the sale of lands scrip provided under the Morrill Act of 1862 saved the University. Enacted when African Americans were still enslaved alongside the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railway Act, and the establishment of U.S. Department of Agriculture, the combination of these programs extended the settler colonial reach of the U.S. through a progressivist, and racialized, regime designed ‘to make American agriculture a profitable enterprise’ (Harris, 1990, p. 85; Johnson, 2011; Phillips et al., 2013). The Morrill Act dispensed federally held land to state legislatures to sell for the establishment of agriculture and mechanical arts colleges to expand research and student training (Harris, 1990; Harris & Hyden, 2017), replicating the processes of Indigenous removal for institutions of higher education across the U.S.

The State College of Agriculture founded at UGA in 1872 under this mandate departed from the University’s classical curriculum to offer ‘practical’ industrial and agricultural skills. In incremental steps as the program developed, the College opened access to the University for ‘ordinary people (as long as they were male and white)’ (Boney, 1984, p. 105). In 1890, the second Morrill Act authorized the creation of separate, black land grant colleges, yet these institutions were and continue to be marginalized and underfinanced (Harris, 1990). As Harris and Hyden (2017, p. 55) assert: ‘Black-slave spaces are embedded within and in turn give shape to geographies of power and experiences driven and enforced by legal codes/legal landscapes such as the legislation creating historically black land grant institutions in 1890, accommodating the separate-but-equal prescriptive of Jim Crow.’

Frontier logics manifested not only in the exclusion of black students from the State College of Agriculture but also in the extractive system of industrial, chemical agriculture the College advanced as its position within the state was cemented (see Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). State agricultural interests, representing Woods’ plantation bloc, influenced the College structure, which was formally consolidated into the University in 1933 (Dyer, 1985). Boney (1984, p. 104) effused that the new College of Agriculture was ‘dedicated to the modern science and technology that would soon push Georgia and the South forward and project the American nation into a position of world leadership.’ By this
time, offices of the Cooperative Extension Service housed in the College of Agriculture had spread throughout the 159 counties of the state (Boney, 1984; Dyer, 1985). The Cooperative Extension Service assisted in the administration of federal farm assistance programs available under the New Deal; however, many programs precluded or restricted black access to loans and technical assistance (Johnson, 2011). The public service initiatives and research programs that originated with the College of Agriculture also expanded the University footprint. New facilities added included the research station at Sapelo Island, a former plantation that was donated to the University in 1953 (Dyer, 1985). The land holdings of the University still continue to grow, expanding 25% from when the first Fact Book was published in 1969 to 39,743 acres in 2016 (Moore, 2016, p. 99; Stock & Keith, 1969, p. 88).

The changes in agriculture advanced by the land grant system are also important in their relation to the emergence of a new, disenfranchised population of migrant workers. Immigrants to the U.S. migrate for a broad range of reasons that, since the second half of the twentieth century, have often been linked to U.S. imperial involvement in the Global South. In Georgia, immigrants often slot into a racialized labor system and are over-represented in seasonal agricultural positions as well as manufacturing and construction work (Boyle, 2009; Lynn, 2015; Nelson, Trautman, & Nelson, 2015; Woods, 1998). One quarter of immigrants to Georgia come from Mexico (American Immigration Council, 2017). In Athens, the U.S. Census reports that the Latinx share of the population increased from 2% in 1990 to 11% in 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2017), while a report completed by the UGA Latino American and Caribbean Studies Institute indicates that the Census may underrepresent Latinx Athenians given that Latinx students comprise 22.5% of Clarke County School District enrolment (PORTAL, 2016, p. 3). The educational system has adjusted poorly to these demographic changes (Bohon, Macpherson, & Atilies, 2005; Lyubansky, Harris, Baker, & Lippard, 2013).

In October 2010, the Board of Regents for the University System of Georgia adopted general policy 4.1.6 that prohibited undocumented students from attending the top-five universities, including the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, Georgia College & State University, Georgia State University, and Augusta University if the school rejected academically qualified applicants for the prior two years due to enrolment limits or other issues. Further, policy 4.3.2.3 makes undocumented students ineligible for in-state tuition, including those granted work permits under DACA or TPS (University System of Georgia, 2017). In combination, both policies serve as an effective ban on undocumented students receiving public education. Enacted after an undocumented student at Kennesaw State University was arrested for a traffic violation and college officials revealed that she received in-state tuition, the ban is based on an over-determined notion of criminality intended ‘to assure taxpayers that students applying to the state’s most prestigious colleges are not displaced by illegal immigrants’ (Diamond, 2011). The ‘public’ that the public university serves are thus only those legally defined as citizens, permanent residents lawfully present in the U.S., or international students with acceptable visas.

In contradiction to the ethic of federal regulation that has, until recently, protected DACA recipients and the Supreme Court decision in Plyler v Doe that mandates K-12 education be accessible to all children, regardless of immigration status, the ban on undocumented students at Georgia universities utilizes a racialized definition of
belonging to restrict access to higher education. The affected population is small. At each of the 35 schools in the University System of Georgia that were subsequently required to verify ‘lawful presence’ for in-state tuition, 470 students out of more than 310,000 were unable to produce required documentation when the ban was enacted. A further 29 undocumented students at the top-five schools would have been barred from even applying (Diamond, 2010).

On 6 April 2017, Laura Soltis, the Executive Director of Freedom University, an organization founded in Athens following the initial adoption of the ban, explained the operation of frontier logics at work in Georgia’s higher education system, staged as a ‘pioneer’ in racial discrimination:

> the Georgia General Assembly recently passed two bills that reveal a dark truth about the state of higher education in the Deep South. It passed HB 280, which permits concealed weapons on public university campuses, and HB 37, which punished private universities that adopt sanctuary policies to protect undocumented students. In other words, Georgia would rather have guns than undocumented students at its institutions of higher learning. (Soltis, 2017)

In the same session that sought to close the few remaining options for un(der)documented students to access higher education, the citizenship of white men for whom ‘the right of keeping and baring arms are what still tightly bind sovereignty and subjectivity’ is affirmed (Luke, 2014, p. 13).

In the ‘Nueva Frontera’ of Georgia (Davis, Deaton, Boyle, & Schick, 2009), the ban enrolls un(der)documented students into a racialized labor system. Replicating historic barriers that developed under a frontier logic and denied access to higher education to those deemed non-citizen, alien, or illegal, un(der)documented students in receipt of DACA or TPS have papers to work, yet remain disallowed from participation in state institutions.

**Abolishing the frontier and decolonizing public higher education**

We want to look forward toward the realization of what Du Bois (1935) called ‘abolition democracy’ as a logic through which we can better imagine democratizing higher education, abolishing its white supremacist and neoliberalized elements, and working toward decolonization. In *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois (1935) illustrates how enslaved people struggling for freedom recognized that the self-determination they sought would not be possible unless the false democratic fabric of the U.S. rooted in racialized and propertied notions of citizenship was simultaneously abolished along with slavery. Du Bois calls this political vision ‘abolition democracy’ (also see Davis, 2005; Foner, 1990; Gilmore, 2017; Lipsitz, 2004).

Olson (2004, p. 136) suggests: ‘There are three elements of abolitionist praxis that are particularly relevant for today: their model of the political actor as agitator, their emphasis on freedom, and their willingness to follow radical implications of their demands.’ Moten and Harney (2004, p. 114), drawing from Gilmore (2002), position the object of abolition as the destruction of the conditions of possibility for state and extra-legal institutions and societal relations that enact racism and allow violence, ‘therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society.’ The notion of abolition democracy resonates with decolonialization as a historical process that breaks
down violent systems of settler-colonial domination based on ‘settler property rights and settler sovereignty,’ as Tuck and Yang (2012, pp. 26, 28) continue:

In contrast to the settler labor of occupying the commons, homesteading, and possession, some scholars have begun to consider the labor of de-occupation in the undercommons, permanent fugitivity, and dispossession as possibilities for a radical black praxis. Such ‘a labor that is dedicated to the reproduction of social dispossession as having an ethical dimension’ (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 110), includes both the refusal of acquiring property and of being property.

By locating the university as a frontier of the U.S. nation-building project endowed with the purpose, ‘to make the commons, make the public, make the nation of democratic citizenry’ (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 105), we seek to identify the iterative modalities of settler colonial and racial capitalist structures of dispossession that define that ‘public.’ Action must move beyond ‘recognition and acknowledgement generated by the very system that denies […] that anything was ever broken and [Indigenous peoples, people of color, queer people, and poor people] deserved to be the broken part’ (Halberstam, 2013, p. 6). At the same time, as Coulthard (2014) and others make clear, transformative successes, big or small, in dismantling mechanisms and intuitions of white supremacy and market logic are prone to cooptation that can often be re-routed back toward regressive and oppressive ends.

How then can students and employees of institutions of public higher education foster an abolitionist, democratic, and decolonial praxis? Moten and Harney (2004) identify an important contradiction of working toward abolitionist politics within the university, given its historical and multidimensional role in both imperialist and emancipatory projects. Building from their concluding call to cooperation and solidarity with struggles inside of and against the university, we argue that as a frontier of knowledge creation and dissemination, the university remains an important site of political engagement. Importantly, our positionality informs our responses to this question. We are both white scholars employed by institutions of public higher education who are complicit in settler logics of occupation and racial capitalist systems of white privilege and class privilege that higher education perpetuates. We are committed to the university as a site of teaching and learning. In our practices of teaching, we elevate these histories and others expunged from the university record and engage outside of the classroom to increase access to education and the public resources of the university (see also Derickson and MacKinnon, 2015).

We can also look to Coulthard’s (2014, p. 159) theses on decolonization that advocate for Indigenous peoples to ‘enact or practice our political commitments to Indigenous national and women’s liberation in the cultural form and content of our struggle itself. Indigenous resurgence is at its core a prefigurative politics – the methods of decolonization prefigure its aims.’ In the context of the university, to dismantle the never-complete processes of white supremacist settler colonialism requires educational praxis that opens access and prefigures the curricula, methods of teaching, and forms of participation a democratic and collective university could bring into existence. This ethos is reflected in the announcement of the creation of the UGA Institute of Native American Studies, for which Director Jace Weaver (2004) offered a statement of educational praxis to ‘treat Native American Studies as a “borderless” discourse.’ This notion of being without
borders defies the maintenance of racialized and colonial privilege on the university frontier and echoes Du Bois’ identification of education as a central tenet of abolition democracy. Here, we discuss three very specific ongoing, organizing efforts that are working toward abolition democracy within the University of Georgia. While local, they offer insights for scholars at other institutions of public higher education already doing similar work or wanting to initiate such praxis.

While the large majority of Cherokee were driven from Georgia through the genocidal Trail of Tears in the 1830s, a small band resisted displacement and re-established themselves in North Carolina, eventually founding the federally recognized Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indian (EBCI) (see Finger, 1991). Over time, the EBCI established the Qualla Boundary and have grown as a Nation. More recently the EBCI established memorandums of understanding with numerous universities, including University of Tennessee, East Tennessee State University, Lincoln Memorial University, and Mars Hill University, who, in recognition of the EBCI’s forced removal from historical territorial claims, offer tuition remission and scholarship arrangements for enrolled members of the EBCI. UGA has no such MOU.

Starting in fall 2014, Nik began to work to establish a similar MOU between UGA and the EBCI. This effort included meetings with the then-Chief of the EBCI, Michell Hicks, and discussions with EBCI staff most heavily associated with educational outreach and student achievement. Nik collected and shared texts of the existing MOUs with administrators at UGA. After outlining a framework across lower administrative levels between UGA and the EBCI, Nik secured an invitation from the EBCI Chief to have the UGA Provost come to Qualla Boundary, discuss the MOU, and work to establish the necessary conditions and appropriate connections that would allow for the development of an MOU. The Provost did not take the invitation, perpetuating a colonial logic of exclusion. Efforts continue with mid-level administrators to establish a meaningful MOU between UGA and the EBCI that would not only recognize the territorial claims to the land UGA is built upon, but would also establish some form of financial support for UGA students from the EBCI. The MOU would constitute a small contribution to realizing abolition democracy. At the same time, we recognize that ultimate success of establishing the MOU and using it as a foundation from which to seek other decolonial steps could very well be mobilized as an effort at assimilation or simply used as a token public relations effort. An ongoing part of the struggle to make these efforts substantive is to put university resources in support of other Cherokee claims. These measures are taking place alongside other demands of Athens residents to offer tuition remission to the descendants of enslaved people who worked at the University (Reilly, 2017). Going beyond acknowledging historic wrongs, both efforts open a dialogue about the ongoing peripheralization of Indigenous and black peoples within the University and the possibilities of refusing labor, land, and educational credentialing as property.

In 1802, one year after classes began at UGA, the first slaves were brought to Sapelo Island on the Georgia coast. Today, the descendant residents of Sapelo Island, whose ancestors labored under slavery, are the largest remaining Gullah/Geechee community in the Atlantic Coastal Sea Islands. These descendants share Sapelo Island with UGA’s Marine Institute (UGAMI). UGAMI was created in 1953 after R. J. Reynolds, Jr., who came to own most of the Island after the Great Depression and consolidated numerous Gullah/Geechee settlements into the present-day community of Hog Hammock, negotiated his donation of a large tract of the island for UGA with UGA ecologist Eugene Odum. This expansion of UGA to the coast,
establishing the research station which later earned the University the designation of being both a land grant and ‘Sea Grant Institution,’ replicates processes of white supremacy and settler colonialism in another geography (see Walker Bailey & Bledsoe, 2001).

Historically, UGA put little effort into developing formal relations with the Gullah/Geechee community on Sapelo beyond occasional low-pay employment. Since UGAMI’s founding, these limited relations have often been antagonistic. Because of this history, when the current director of UGAMI assumed the position in 2013, she recruited Nik to commence community-based research intended to begin to build trust between UGAMI and the residents of Hog Hammock. Part of the intent of building this working relationship was to allow UGA students to learn about this community in exchange for contributing in meaningful ways to their cultural preservation, including ongoing projects to conserve cultural traditions connected to their West African heritage. Four years into this process, UGAMI and the Sapelo Island Cultural and Revitalization Society (SICARS) have established several formal measures, including the creation of UGA’s new Cornelia Walker Bailey Program on Land and Agriculture. The Program is co-directed by Nik and Mr. Maurice Bailey, a Saltwater Geechee descendent resident of Hog Hammock and son of the recently deceased Mrs. Cornelia Walker Bailey, a historian of Sapelo Island and founder of SICARS. Further, the Program has undertaken efforts to extend SICARS’s agricultural/economic development plan that is based in cultivating heritage crops for economic development, including working to establish an internship program for UGA students and a paid, youth agricultural training program for Island residents. Sugarcane under cultivation was first planted and harvested two centuries earlier by residents’ ancestors who provided the agricultural knowledge and labor under slavery when Sapelo Island was a plantation. The agricultural initiative was highlighted by CNN in 2016 as part of a story titled, ‘An Island’s Future Tied to Farming Crops from the Past’ (also see Carney, 2001).

Beginning in October 2016, Nikki began working with U-Lead Athens founded by Athens-Clarke County high school teachers and UGA professors in response to the ban on un(der)documented students. U-Lead supports high school students who are immigrants or the children of immigrants criminalized by the State of Georgia with tutoring, college application assistance, and scholarships for higher education. Since 2014, U-Lead has helped more than 60 students secure admission and either full or partial funding to two-year and four-year programs in Georgia and in other, less hostile states. At U-Lead each week, approximately 100 students and volunteers come together to share a meal and work on homework. As a volunteer coordinator, Nikki provides a weekly orientation for new volunteers about the history of the ban and the financial burden placed on un(der)documented students. The majority of volunteers are affiliated with UGA as professors, graduate students, alumni, or undergraduate students, who often attend school for a reduced cost having received either the HOPE or Zell Miller Scholarship offered to citizens and lawfully present students that graduate from a Georgia high school with a minimum GPA. U-Lead volunteers put the lie to UGA’s core commitments to excellence in teaching, research, and ‘public service, economic development, and technical assistance activities designed to address the strategic needs of the state of Georgia’ (The Mission of the University of Georgia, 2011). Through the direct provision of services that the state refuses to provide, U-Lead rejects the settler colonial and white supremacist basis of the state’s strategic needs and pursues excellence in education for all residents – regardless of race, language, or immigration status.
In Georgia, public services are largely closed to un(der)documented immigrants, and K-12 schools bound by *Plyler v Doe* are disallowed from asking about the immigration status of their students, and thus often fall short in providing college counselling applicable to those either directly prohibited or effectively barred due to cost from in-state colleges. Community, school, and UGA-affiliated volunteers work around this system to dismantle the racist exclusions that make higher education contingent on citizenship or legal status. As a UGA affiliate, Nikki has played an auxiliary role to other events that are not always a space for her to participate, providing food and offering rides, to initiatives that U-Lead students and alumni who have returned on school breaks organize. Students have led events and workshops on story-telling, Chicana/o art and history, and activism. In the documentary, *The Unafraid* (2018), three students, two of whom helped to found U-Lead, narrate their stories of seeking higher education and also discuss their involvement in youth organizing within and outside of Athens as it relates to the histories of Indigenous, African American, anti-colonial, and feminist struggles (see also Pulido, 2018). Student organizing, in coalition with other advocacy groups, multiplies the limited reach of a small group of volunteers in addressing higher education access in Athens where African American and Latinx enrolment at UGA does not represent the neighboring community. Studying together in solidarity, volunteers and students reject the exclusionary culture that imbues the University of Georgia and move to democratize education.

The interventions we have discussed, and other efforts initiated by other employees at UGA as well as at universities elsewhere, shine light on the historical and contemporary structures that make invisible Indigenous people, enslaved or disenfranchised African American people, and criminalized immigrants (see Black, Milligan, & Heynen, 2016). Together, these efforts contribute to anti-racist and anti-colonial activism, teaching toward the abolition of exclusionary geographies of frontiers and borders that define and restrict inside/outside, citizen/non-citizen, and white/non-white within contemporary neoliberalized universities. They also all raise situations that could be institutionally manipulated and co-opted.

This article has endeavored to illustrate how the social order of ‘the frontier’ was constructed and persisted around the walls of the university. These are mechanisms of higher education present at many, if not all, universities across North America which evolved out of variable histories of settler-native-slave that shaped the processes of settler-colonial expansion on the frontier and continue to reverberate through white supremacist and settler colonial structures. To stage the university as a frontier may in part be a metaphorical device, yet the process of decolonization cannot be (Tuck & Yang, 2012). To break down the material and discursive frontier around higher education requires dismantling the structures of admission, ways of teaching and researching, compensation for university employees, patterns of land dispossession and occupation, and other measures that operate through racialized notions of difference. Du Bois’ notions of abolition democracy have much to offer this project. Moten and Harney’s (2004) call to figure out ways to destroy the conditions that allow the state and extra-legal institutions to enact racist, heteropatriarchal, and settler colonial patterns of the frontier also has to be a central logic of an emancipatory project to democratize the university. Recognizing and revealing the logics at work in higher education force us to commit to nothing short of building a new society in which it is not possible to ban anybody from the university and the university is free to all.
Notes

1. We use the term un(der)documented throughout the text to refer to individuals who are not citizens, permanent residents, or on a work, student, or spousal visa to the U.S., but may fall within a range of other immigration statuses. In 2012, President Obama created the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that allows individuals who were brought to the U.S. as minors to apply for a two-year, renewable program that defers action on deportation and provides a work permit, but does not offer a pathway to citizenship. The University System of Georgia Board of Regents does not recognize DACA as a valid immigration status and classifies undocumented people, DACA recipients, and those with temporary protected status (TPS) as international students not lawfully present in the U.S. DACA, TPS, and undocumented students are also ineligible for federal financial aid (Jaimes Perez, 2014).

2. The Fact Book has been compiled annually by the Office of Institutional Research to record information on UGA affiliates, as well as University property holdings, research awards, and its strategic mission. While the Fact Book is most often used as a promotional tool, we see our use as complicating its purpose.

3. The policy was lifted in 2016 at Georgia State and Augusta University.

4. This history intersects in name and land with former Indigenous residents of the Island also informing the settler-native-slave triad. The Indigenous group most associated with Sapelo were Muskogean-speaking people known as Guale, who were a historic Native American chiefdom of Mississippian culture, and left Sapelo for unknown reasons preceding the nineteenth century that may have been the result of Spanish contact. Guale is sometimes suggested to be the origin word for the Gullah/Geechee people brought to Sapelo and across the U.S. Southeast under slavery.

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