

## ACME

An International Journal for Critical Geographies  
Revue internationale de géographie critique  
Revista internacional de geografía crítica



# Good Intentions are Not Good Relations Grounding the Terms of Debt and Redress at Land Grab Universities

Meredith Alberta Palmer

Volume 22, numéro 4, 2023

Departures, Arrivals, and Encounters: Feminist Understandings of Borders and Human Im/mobilities

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106683ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1106683ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Centre for Social Spatial & Economic Justice at the University of British Columbia

### ISSN

1492-9732 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Alberta Palmer, M. (2023). Good Intentions are Not Good Relations: Grounding the Terms of Debt and Redress at Land Grab Universities. *ACME*, 22(4), 1239–1257. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1106683ar>

### Résumé de l'article

As part of a violent project US imperial expansion into Indigenous lands, the 1862 Morrill Act endowed and continues to accrue lasting benefits for Land Grant/Grab Universities (LGUs). The last three years have seen a surge in nationwide attention and mobilization for redress and calculations of debts owed to Indigenous Peoples for the land dealings of the 52 original LGUs. This article intervenes in the LGU question in two parts. First, I demonstrate culpability of LGUs by illustrating how the Morrill Act was part of a set of US imperial policies that expanded jurisdiction into Indigenous territories through violent and imperial acts of dispossession which are maintained today. Second, I argue that any terms of debt and redress for this dispossession must be framed within Indigenous and Indigenous feminist analytics of land and territory. Restitution cannot occur on the same terms as dispossession and instead must be built through repairing and maintaining good relations within specific Indigenous protocols. These interventions inform my concluding analysis of university administrations' responses to growing advocacy around LGUs, with a focus on Cornell University where I am situated as a researcher.

© Meredith Alberta Palmer, 2023



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>



# Good Intentions are Not Good Relations: Grounding the Terms of Debt and Redress at Land Grab Universities

Meredith Alberta Palmer

Department of Science and Technology Studies, American Indian and  
Indigenous Studies Program, Cornell University  
[meredith@cornell.edu](mailto:meredith@cornell.edu)

---

## Abstract

As part of a violent project US imperial expansion into Indigenous lands, the 1862 Morrill Act endowed and continues to accrue lasting benefits for Land Grant/Grab Universities (LGUs). The last three years have seen a surge in nationwide attention and mobilization for redress and calculations of debts owed to Indigenous Peoples for the land dealings of the 52 original LGUs. This article intervenes in the LGU question in two parts. First, I demonstrate culpability of LGUs by illustrating how the Morrill Act was part of a set of US imperial policies that expanded jurisdiction into Indigenous territories through violent and imperial acts of dispossession which are maintained today. Second, I argue that any terms of debt and redress for this dispossession must be framed within Indigenous and Indigenous feminist analytics of land and territory. Restitution cannot occur on the same terms as dispossession and instead must be built through repairing and maintaining good relations within specific Indigenous protocols. These



interventions inform my concluding analysis of university administrations' responses to growing advocacy around LGUs, with a focus on Cornell University where I am situated as a researcher.

## Keywords

Indigenous dispossession, redress, Land-grant University, Indigenous feminisms, Morrill Act, Cornell University

---

## Introduction

Land Grant Universities in the United States, originally funded largely by monies made from the sale of seized Indigenous land, are now referred to by activists and advocates for redress as Land Grab Universities (LGUs). The February 2020 *High Country News* (HCN) report "Land-Grab Universities", supported by the Pulitzer Center, emerged in the context of nationwide attention and reckoning with racism and anti-Black racist violence. Until these recent mobilizations the Morrill Act has commonly been framed as beneficial, or at least not egregiously violent enough to warrant redress. The HCN report maps precisely what tracts of land each of the 52 original LGUs sold,<sup>1</sup> and details and ranks how much of each institution's original endowment came from Indigenous land seizure and sale. Since its release three years ago, a range of responses, including publications, campus working groups, grants, and curricular interventions have emerged. In critical debate now are the terms and forms of redress and debts owed by these universities for the role their founding played in, and benefits they

---

<sup>1</sup> The original 52 land grab universities funded through the first Morrill Act in 1862, and which the 2020 *High Country News* report exclusively reports upon, did not include the 21 Historically Black Land Grant Universities (HBLGUs) that were funded in part by the second Morrill Act of 1890, nor the tribally controlled colleges included as LGUs in 1994. HBLGUs had differing allocations of funds and lands that often disadvantaged them. Also, the 1862 Morrill Act was only able to pass after Southern US states seceded from the Union in 1861, as Southern Democrats voted consistently against any form of Western expansion in order to maintain slave-holding states. These post-civil war agrarian dynamics of US racial empire and how they carried forward to enroll other racialized peoples such as Filipino and Latino/a are a vital area for future engagements amidst their tensions and affinities.

have accrued from, this violent and duplicitous seizure and ongoing occupation of Indigenous land and territory.

The overarching goal of this essay is to situate analyses of LGUs and redress in an Indigenous and feminist analytic of land and territory. I argue that any project calculating debts owed, or any program engaging redress in this context cannot proceed on the same terms by which Indigenous dispossession occurred and is maintained. Advocates and university leadership should recognize the multiplicity of Indigeneities and Indigenous Nations who must be involved in a given project of redress, as each LGU has benefitted from the dispossession of multiple Indigenous Nations and Peoplehoods. This essay avoids devising a portable “model” of redress. Instead, I draw from multiple works of Indigenous and Indigenous feminist scholarship to denaturalize land-as-property as the basis of redress and repair, through Indigenous conceptualizations of land, territory, and good relations in the process. In this sense, the work of repair and redress requires both repairing harm in the sense of restitution, and repairing relationships between involved Peoples and institutions. Centering Indigenous land ethics addresses both, bringing both place and process to the fore.

Consisting of three parts, this article first critically situates the historical provenance of LGUs and the 1862 Morrill Act as integral parts of an ongoing violent imperial project rooted in a utopian US agrarian democracy and in policies that worked to expand US jurisdiction into Indigenous territories. It also addresses the recent surge in interest in their role in ongoing maintenance of US colonial power. Second, I bring an Indigenous and feminist analytic to intervene on mainstream conceptions of land and territory to redirect discussions of debts and redress for Indigenous dispossession towards return of land and governance and Indigenous flourishing. Last, I conclude by detailing and analyzing official responses from Cornell, and some general paradoxes that come up during this work, to highlight common roadblocks to moving LGU work forward. Throughout, the focus is on the case of Cornell University in New York, the single largest beneficiary of the seizure and sale of Indigenous lands through the Morrill Act and the only “Ivy League” LGU. In addition to my status as alumni and current employee of Cornell University, it is situated on Gayogohó:n? lands, with whom my People, the Tuscarora, are in confederacy. Beyond

being exemplary, my responsibilities personally and institutionally draw me to address Cornell's role in Indigenous dispossession.

### **Situating Land Grab Universities in US Imperialism**

Land Grant Universities were part of a range of policies in the mid-1800s through which Euro-Americans systematically forced Indigenous Peoples from their homelands with the aim of elimination, thus expanding the US's territory into their lands through imperial tactics and laws. Elimination took multiple tacks: either corporeally through massacres and raids, or as a People through Native title, or by carceralizing them onto reservation lands. These imperial politics emerged not only through racialized notions that linked agrarian democracy with Anglo-Saxon lifeways imagined superior but were the legal basis for allowing the US government to expand jurisdiction into Indigenous lands (Duthu 2013, Park 2023). The role of the 1862 Morrill Act in this project of US empire can be traced through several preceding events including the 1830 Indian Removal Act, the Gold Rush in California, and the US-Mexican War. In these decades, the US government and individual states waged war on Indigenous Peoples across the Great Lakes, the Southwest, and the Northwest Plateau, ending these wars with massacres, treated land cessions made under extreme duress, and incarceration on reservation lands (Kerteš and Gonzalez 2021). The spoils of this violence were the lands which had long been home and jurisdictional territory to hundreds of Nations of Indigenous Peoples, which came to be labeled as "Discovered" or "public" and available for white, male, US citizens to take as property (Horsman 1981). Despite its violent basis, this seizure and occupation of Indigenous lands is maintained today.

By the mid-1800s, the US federal government was cash poor but rich in land. That land would fund a new network of Land Grant universities for one reason: because of the violent dispossession, displacements, massacres, and outright genocides of Indigenous peoples. Despite some contemporaneous political narratives that framed displacements and removal as a life-saving relocation of Indigenous people, the policies and actions of politicians and other settlers laid out a clear track towards the attempted wholesale extermination of Indigenous Peoples (Ostler 2019). The Morrill Act was also framed in a narrative of benevolence. Named after Vermont representative Justin Smith Morrill and passed into law by President Lincoln, the Act was officially titled "An Act Donating *Public Lands*

to the Several States and Territories which May Provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts" (emphasis mine). While modern scholarship and popular sentiment continue to characterize LGUs and the Morrill Act as universally well-intentioned for general and democratic education for laboring and rural classes (see Gavazzi and Gee 2018), the Act is inseparable from US imperial expansion and Indigenous genocide and dispossession.

Urging Euro-American settlers onto recently seized Indigenous territories was how the US federal government could by their own legal systems expand their sovereign claim to these lands. The aim of this project of expansion and land seizure was to support white farmers and tradespeople who would purchase tracts of seized Indigenous land and then register title to this land thus legally place it under US jurisdiction: a tactic learned by US officials from other empires around the world (Park, 2023). Bolstered by an overarching mythology that Euro-American settlers were expanding an agrarian representative democracy, this was conducted with a distinctly Imperial legal and spatial practice. This agrarian imaginary linked a form of governance, a spatial division of land-as-property, and a particular kind of production of goods for a capitalist market (Palmer 2020). The Morrill Act was passed alongside both the Homestead Act which deeded over 270 million acres of lands West of the Mississippi mostly to Euro-American settlers to encourage Western migration, and the Pacific Railroad Act. These three acts were central to coordinating the claims to Discovery of land that the US adapted from other empires, and worked to assuage settlers that their claims to land would become real property with value.

This point is central and often missed in evaluations of the Morrill Act. As written in the 1831 Marshall Trilogy of US Supreme Court decisions, it was only the act of settlers claiming and titling land, or consummating their title, that gave the US government the right to claim sovereign rights to govern land, and jurisdiction over that territory on behalf of a non-Indigenous collective (Park 2023). Explicitly a racist hierarchical ordering of jurisdiction, Chief Justice John Marshall declared in this seminal trilogy that US sovereignty by so-called conquest was a "superior jurisdiction" to that of Indigenous sovereignty. Ensuing these court decisions, drawing settlers to this land was of vital importance to US government officials. It was through this triad of acts, the Morrill Act included, which explicitly facilitated and

enabled homestead, preemption, and land title, that the US was able to legally extend its jurisdiction into these western Indigenous lands. It is because these lineages of land title exist, post “discovery” claims, that land-as-property maintains its value and place under US property law. In other words, this is a key aspect of how US colonialism is maintained. Figure 1 below is an 1889 poster run by Kansas City, Lawrence and Southern Railroad Co., advertising Indian Territory as a “garden of the world,” open for “homestead and pre-emption.”<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1.** Poster advertising land in current-day Oklahoma. Records of US Army Continental Commands. Record Group 393. NAID 4662607. 1989[ca. 1880].

In all, the Morrill Act allowed the US federal government to monetized 10.7 million acres of land which had been variously and often

---

<sup>2</sup> Pre-emption refers to the 1841 preemption act which granted the right of squatters to purchase lands cheap from the federal government once surveyed, largely establishing the “manifest destiny” ethos into policy.

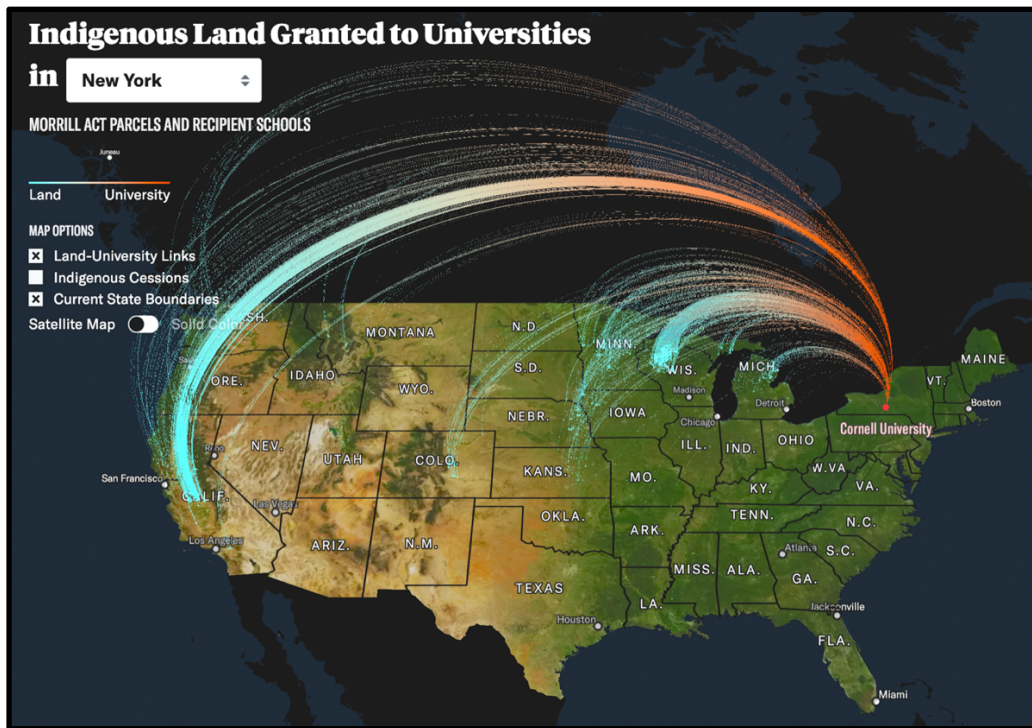
violently seized or duplicitously obtained under conditions of extreme duress from hundreds of Indigenous and tribal Nations. University founders used these funds as seed money for the federal program of higher education in agriculture, military pursuits, and mechanics. The project of US expansion and settlement behind the Homestead Act, today critically understood as a blatant act of violent and duplicitous dispossession (Ostler 2019), was not practically tenable without a network of educational and research centers that orchestrated centralization. This infrastructure bolstered and offered support to the yeoman farmers and tradespeople who took plots of seized Indigenous lands as private property.

Before the crucial “Land-Grab Universities” report was released by HCN, scholars who give critical attention to Indigenous North America already recognized that Indigenous dispossession was intimately related to the history of LGUs. In 2019, Margaret Nash published the first article-length analysis arguing that though LGUs, despite being touted as “democratizing” institutions, were founded at the expense of Indigenous peoples (Nash 2017). The in-depth and national scope of the 2020 LandGrabU.org project helped the issue gain traction. In it, visitors can find an extensive bibliography, and interactive visualizations of Indigenous land dispossession that allow users to search by state, by institution, or by tribal or Indigenous community. The project compellingly maps the tracts of land that LGUs profited from, indicating the original sale price and current valuation of the land, and ranks the universities according to their profits among other factors.

Cornell University received a front-and-center focus in the *High Country News* article because it is by far the largest beneficiary of this land grab. As the only “Ivy League” LGU, Cornell touts its informal tagline “We Grow the Ivy.” Figure 2 below shows the specific tracts of land that were taken from Indigenous jurisdiction and turned into private US property, funding Cornell University’s endowment. In total, 977,909 acres from over 230 different Indigenous Peoples were seized.

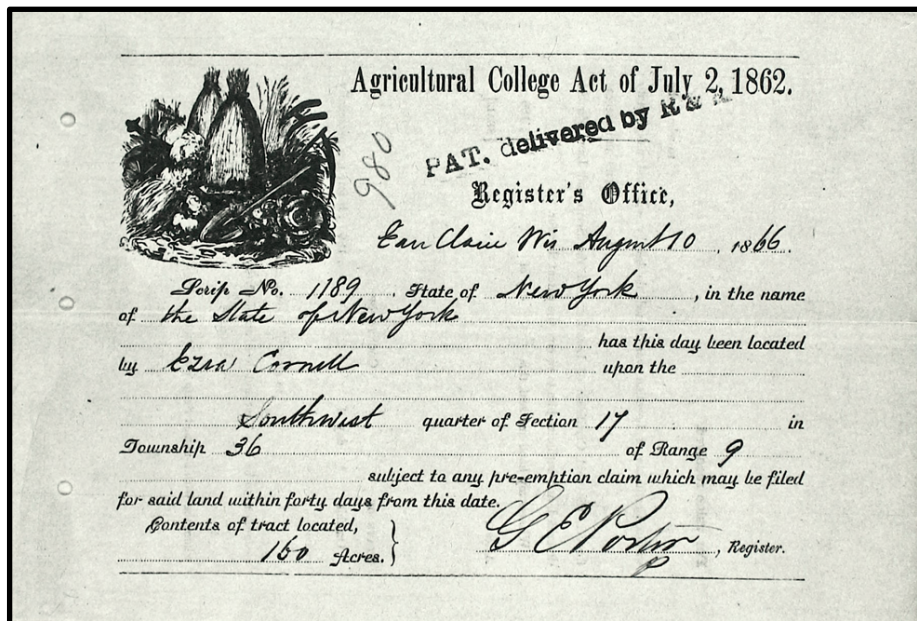
The Morrill Act granted each state “scrip,” which were pieces of paper that allowed the bearer to claim any 106-acre surveyed section of so-called “public land,” similar to the Indigenous-turned-“public” land granted to settlers in the 1862 Pacific Railroad Act. As Cornell University was located





**Figure 2.** Image of an interactive map from the Land Grab University project. [www.LandGrabU.org](http://www.LandGrabU.org).

in the east and New York State had already occupied much of Haudenosaunee (often anglicized as Iroquois) lands, founder Ezra Cornell received scrip, shown in figure 3 below, on behalf of the university to claim and sell land further west. According to their real estate website FAQ Cornell University holds 11,000 acres within Tompkins County, 6,000 acres elsewhere in the state, 2,000 acres elsewhere in the country, and 420,000 acres of mineral rights in central and southwestern states (Cornell Real Estate, 2005). Because universities were not allowed to directly purchase land in a different state than their own, each university's founders sold the scrip to individuals and then invested those profits for the endowment of the university. Cornell received a significant amount of scrip because each university was given 30,000 acres per member of congress, and at the time, New York had many congressional seats (Parmenter 2020). These profits became the foundational endowments for each of the 52 original LGUs.



**Figure 3.** Image of original scrip received by Ezra Cornell. Parmenter 2020.

The US federal government created a total of 79,310 pieces of scrip, each for 160 acres, to found these 52 schools. Although Ezra Cornell visited and dealt in the sale of more western lands, Cornell University's Ithaca campus itself occupies on the lands of the Gayogohó:n? (the Cayuga Nation of the Haudenosaunee confederacy). The Gayogohó:n? were primarily dispossessed by the US federal government following the Clinton-Sullivan campaign of genocide as ordered by then-General George Washington, and further by New York State, in the eventual benefit of Cornell University and its founders (Jordan 2022). Haudenosaunee homelands, or those lands to which Haudenosaunee Peoples are responsible to, extend from what is today called Lake Erie, up into parts of Ontario, throughout New York State, down slightly into Pennsylvania, and over towards Quebec. In their analysis of Cornell's Land Grab, Dr. Jolene Rickard and other members of the Cornell University Indigenous Dispossession Working Group include the Haudenosaunee peoples whose land Cornell occupies, not only Morrill Act lands.

Although each LGU is the responsibility of its respective state, LGUs are part of a federal project of land acquisition that underlines the US government's imperial push into Indigenous lands, which remain occupied today as the US government maintains the subordination of Indigenous

Nations and peoples. The mythology of LGUs, which portrays intrepid yeoman farmers and pioneers whose chances at gaining a foothold in the US were generously aided by these “democratizing” universities, is steeped in Indigenous erasure and a blatant ignorance of the project of Indian removal and genocide. These institutions, driven by this utopian mythos and imperial policy, made their place and built their legacies on and with Indigenous lands. What is ostensibly “good” for the population of a nation such as the United States is not necessarily good for those Indigenous Peoplehoods who hold and claim a distinct sovereignty. As the next section will detail, moving beyond this erasure will mean moving into Indigenous protocols, and analytics of land and territory.

### **What can be Owed for Indigenous Dispossession?**

This section will discuss how any given project of redress for LGUs’ role in Indigenous dispossession is one of repair of relationships, as much as it is about repair of harm through restitution.<sup>3</sup> This redress can’t be reduced to calculable monetary repayments or to inclusion of Indigenous people in the universities alone. As Red Shirt-Shaw lays out in her policy brief, returning land, resources, and governance should be prioritized over tuition waivers and scholarships or giving tribal citizens access to certificates or other courses (Red Shirt-Shaw 2020). While some advocates use various calculations of monetary gains from Indigenous lands ([www.landgrabu.org](http://www.landgrabu.org)) and the exclusion and systematic under-serving of Native American students at these institutions (Feir and Jones 2021) to communicate the magnitude of the debts to a broad audience, monetary payment or inclusion in institutions constitute are not the sole means or mode of redress. Moreover, the Morrill Act’s use of scrip sold to Euro-American settlers, as described in the section above, means that LGUs do not “own” the tracts of land-as-property that funded their endowment, though some do still own mineral and other resource rights. In the context of Indigenous calls for #LandBack, this means that most LGUs hold no Morrill Act lands to return, and demands for restitution must be channeled to other modes redress and to relations

---

<sup>3</sup> See Táíwò (2022) for a concise analysis of the necessity for concurrent repair of relationships and harm.

with the Peoples whose lands the universities physically occupy.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, a more distinct analysis of land and land relations are necessary for addressing the LGU question.

Indigenous dispossession is a broad and often simplified term for a long, varied, and ongoing process in which Indigenous lands—discussed here in the United States context—came to be governed as capitalist, commodified property or, as its corollary, so-called “public” lands. Geographically varied socio-historiographic fabrications of Euro-American settler belonging underpin the maintenance of US colonial relations to land on Indigenous territories. Settler relations to land, which include both private and public lands as *relations* under capitalism, are upheld everyday through the practices and performances of enforcement and affective myths and mistruths of conquest and right. These are materially backed through land measure and mapping, valuation on a market, legal systems of property register and patriarchal inheritance of title, militarism and policing (Ostler 2019, Palmer 2020, Park 2023). Although while what we term “the United States” may appear to be a geographically contained entity with scaling levels of governance, the construction of a seemingly uniform US settler sovereignty is constantly negotiated and remade (Goldstein 2008). US state space has been constructed overtop and in relation to particular and varied Indigenous governance systems and relations of land ethics.

Indigenous and Indigenous feminist analytics of land and territory are key to approaching the question, “what can be owed for Indigenous dispossession?” Lenape scholar Joanne Barker asks, “[w]hat difference does Indigenous territory make in political organizing and intellectual work...addressed to imperialism, racism, and debt?” (Barker 2018, 20). Barker’s argument asserts that Indigenous territory as a *relation* is distinct from capitalist Nation-State territory, and addressing this difference impacts social movements and critical theory together. Her framework illustrates how Indigenous dispossession is a present and active mode of imperialism rather than a single historic event. Importantly, Indigenous sovereignties and relations to homelands themselves are not extinguishable through US law or even through removal. In the contested landscapes of US occupation,

---

<sup>4</sup> In the case of Cornell University this includes not only the Haudenosaunee, but other Indigenous Peoples whose lands are occupied by Cornell’s Weill Medical School, and other out-post research stations.

sovereignties, governance, and senses of belonging overlap, as Indigenous territorial relations are *overlaid* by US settler sovereignty and geographies. But they are not extinguished. Processes of redress must avoid recapitulating the subordination of Indigenous jurisdiction and governance upon which Indigenous land seizure and dispossession is founded and sustained. In particular, Indigenous Peoplehoods whose seized lands were sold to become the seed monies of LGUs cannot be repaid on the same terms by which their dispossession – and attempted severing from their homelands – has occurred. On this basis, a dedication to redress for LGUs must be a dedication to Indigenous flourishing.

Flourishing as Indigenous Peoples means continuing and building our political cultures and governance, languages, spiritual worlds, and traditions including decision-making processes. This flourishing occurs outside of conventional educational systems (L Simpson 2014). This analysis forms the basis of Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's concept *land as pedagogy*, demonstrating how land provides context for meaning-making of worlds, and is where intergenerational knowledge transfer occurs. Mohawk scholar Susan Hill (2017) asserts that collective responsibility to other beings and to land are integral to Haudenosaunee and other Indigenous systems of governance. Our very bodies are made from the land, which also serves as the foundation for our medicines, languages, intellectual lives, and governance practices. Monetary land valuations and invitations to inclusion within academia cannot replace the central need for a place to flourish and govern as Haudenosaunee or other Indigenous Peoples (A Simpson 2019; Hill 2017). Dispossession, through military campaigns, removal, environmental contamination, impoverishment, and forced assimilation through schooling, are all direct attacks on the continuity of various Indigenous intelligences as much as life itself. Therefore, the context for flourishing Indigenous relations and responsibilities is centrally land, and the practices of diplomacy and governance that emerged through relations with land and other multispecies beings (L Simpson 2014; Barker 2018; Hill 2017).

Redress, then, for LGUs' unearned and violently obtained advantages through a lens of Indigenous territory and flourishing requires moving into Indigenous protocols. Firstly, this involves being in conversation with Indigenous-led and Indigenous-focused campus units, providing them

proper resources, and genuinely following their guidance. Secondly, this entails connecting with Indigenous National and tribal government leaders to whom one's institution is historically responsible and in bad relation, approaching them with humility and respect as leaders of sovereign nations. Institutional spokespeople cannot assume that opening their doors to more Indigenous students is necessarily an Indigenous Nation's objective. Consequently, offering admission to Indigenous students, particularly if a university is lacking good training and support systems for those Indigenous students, is not a singularly appropriate mode of restitution. This does not mean that forms of restitution such as tuition and fee waivers, grant monies, and program funding are not beneficial to those Indigenous people who will choose to participate. However, for example, the terms of land held as fee-simple property or any kind of monetary compensation or inclusion of Indigenous people within the institution cannot be assumed to be adequate or suitable for all Indigenous nations involved and affected by LGUs. Any means of redress would need to be done on the terms of Indigenous peoples through proper consultation with the administration of a given university. Redress must primarily involve a respect and return of governance, jurisdiction, and land itself.

The first section of this essay analyzed how LGUs are a facet of an imperial land grab, representing an historical and ongoing attempted decimation of Indigenous territory, of the people and their governance and jurisdiction, and of their long-standing relations and responsibilities to their lands. As such, when discussing redress for LGUs and the debts owed by these universities to Indigenous Peoples, the measures of this debt and means of its repayment (if it is indeed repayable or bad relations reparable) cannot be determined by the same terms through which dispossession occurred and is maintained. This section has briefly outlined why these efforts must prioritize the dedication to Indigenous Peoples' flourishing within their territories. The critical lesson is that LGUs must invest serious time and resources in learning and following Indigenous Nation-specific protocols of negotiation and governance throughout what may be a lengthy process of relationship-building leading towards restitution.

### **Redress' Possibilities and Paradoxes**

Understanding Indigenous territory as an ongoing relation overlapping with US settler sovereignty highlights the occupation of

Indigenous lands as unrectified, ongoing violence. LGUs continue to benefit from accumulated advantages, and thus are for the most part in bad relation with those Indigenous Nations whose lands funded their endowments and founding. Notably, the Morrill Act was never repealed or corrected. Until recently, it was seldom considered part of a project of violent Indigenous dispossession. Even in recent critical works, LGUs are lauded as a successful project of democratized education, and suggested reforms often omit their provenance (see Sternberg 2014; see Gavazzi and Gee 2018). Ignoring an institution's provenance perpetuates long-standing bad relations between LGUs and Indigenous Nations.

While some inroads have been made, most LGUs have yet to contend with their complicity in violent dispossession, Indigenous erasure, and maintenance of bad relations. A key example of redress is South Dakota State University, where pressure for more concrete responses led to a 2017 white paper monetarily accounting for the university's Land Grab history and allocating those funds to build Indigenous programming. Authors calculated that the university generates \$600,000/year in today's money from the original land dispossessed of the Lakota, Dakota, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe Peoples (Dunn 2017). The University has transferred some of these monies into their *American Indian Studies Department* and infrastructure on campus. The University of California system recently offered free tuition for all California-based federally recognized tribal members to the exclusion of state-recognized tribal members, and projects continue at UC Davis to return land control to tribes whose land the university occupies. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison a group of faculty, staff, and students were awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant to create educational models about the university's LGU context for an on- and off-campus audience. And at LGUs across the country, faculty, staff, and students continue to pressure their administration and inform their colleagues to promote change.

Cornell University, as the largest Morrill Act benefactor and the only "Ivy League" LGU, has a unique opportunity to be a leader in efforts at redress. However, setting the morality question aside – of being an institution that has profited from the spoils of violence and genocide – university administrators have publicly evaded these historical ties and present-day ties and any debts owed by Cornell to Indigenous Peoples. At

at the time of this article's publication, Cornell administration's response to student, staff, and faculty advocacy has been negligible and evasive at best. Cornell's official historical narrative portrays LGUs, still partially funded by federal departments and run as public or semi-public institutions, as separate from or uninvolved in the violence of dispossession, which is attributed solely to the US federal government as an ostensibly singular and separate entity. This tendentious claim implies that LGUs are secondary or innocent benefactors of the federal government's bad actions rather than recognizing LGUs as directly participating in maintaining Indigenous dispossession.

Since the release of the *High Country News* article in February of 2020, and the convening of the Cornell University and Indigenous Dispossession working group that June, Cornell has issued two public formal responses. On January 26<sup>th</sup> of 2021 Cornell's administration sent an email to all Cornell affiliates, including a paragraph highlighting recent research on Cornell's land-grant history. The announcement fabricates a separation from the US government's seizure of Indigenous land and the monetary benefit gained by the university, stating: "Cornell received appropriated Indigenous land from the federal government under the Morrill Act and accrued significant benefit from that land." Additionally, the land-grant mission page of Cornell's website now reads, "we acknowledge that the commendable ideals associated with the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 were accompanied by a *painful history of prior dispossession* of Indigenous nations' lands by the federal government" (emphasis mine). Attempting to maintain Cornell's innocence or morality, this statement purports a significant temporal distance between Indigenous dispossession and the founding of Morrill Act universities, as if a temporal distance would imply a structural dissociation.

This rhetorical distancing is an institutionally and historically disingenuous move to innocence. First, the timespan between the US government's expropriation and violent dispossession of Indigenous lands, and when the Morrill act was first brought to congress in 1857 and then passed five years later, is extremely short. For example, the 1851 Dakota cession seized over 825,000 acres from Dakota peoples, 1 out of 12 acres of which was used to endow over 35 different universities. The *HCN's* report "Land-Grab Universities" details many other instances such as this one, placing the Morrill Act as part of the US' imperial policy of violent



dispossession of Indigenous Peoples. Second, is the simple fact that these universities would not exist without this seed money. Furthermore, these institutions remain linked to state and federal agencies, receiving funding from states and the USDA.

Cornell's disingenuous displacement of wrongdoing onto the US government is not the only rhetorical move to innocence implied within its formal narrative. The LGU question is not one of a solely "historical" wrong: the land is still occupied, and as noted above, the Morrill Act has never been repealed. The institutions that benefitted from the sale of that land-as-property still function today under the pretense of being universally benevolent institutions. The LGU question also cannot be viewed as a private error of individuals such as Cornell's founder, Ezra Cornell. This was a systematic project of interlocking genocides and dispossession that rest on the dream of an agrarian nation. The LGU was and is an essential institution of that project, which today still presses into Indigenous lands and lives. While advocates and Cornell's American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program's "Indigenous Dispossession Working Group" have begun the process of building good relations, Cornell University as an institution has not.

LGUs, at their founding and today, have long been framed as "democracy's colleges" (Geiger, ed. 2017). Efforts at redress must contend with deep-seated misunderstandings of good intentions and equality, as well as the historical entrapments of liberal democracy in its attempts to reconcile this violence (Coulthard 2007). Utilitarian measures of "general good" play an ongoing role in the attempted elimination of Indigenous governance. As noted above, urging administrators to correct their misunderstandings and obfuscations will mean moving into Indigenous protocols and Indigenous feminist analytics of land and territory. Indigenous Peoples, if they wish and are available, must be play a key role in shaping what this redress looks like and how it pertains to their Nations.

There are paradoxes embedded in this process. People in administrative positions in universities, who may have the means and sometimes the will to address the LGU issue, do not necessarily hold the expertise necessary to know how to present themselves to Indigenous Nations and their leadership, nor what to offer them. This means that the burden of determining what is owed and how to initiate redress may often

fall on Indigenous Nations' employees or community advocates, or on Indigenous staff and faculty within the LGU to calculate and communicate their positions, needs, or demands to the University. The challenge for those situated within LGUs, including Indigenous employees, is to make this as unburdensome as possible for Indigenous Peoples while also demanding and then keeping the attention of university administration: to build and keep good relations. The work of redressing the ongoing violence of LGU's occupation of Indigenous lands is only at its beginning. The doors are both open to either a retrenchment of Indigenous erasure, or to the possibility of genuine and radical engagement.

## Acknowledgements

My deepest acknowledgements go to the Gayogohó:n̓ and the over 240 Indigenous Peoples whose dispossession from their homelands is the basis of Cornell University's existence. I'm grateful to Tristan Ahtone and Bobby Lee of the Land Grab University project, and all who brought the Land Grab University issue to the fore the last three years. This article also would not be possible without the work done by the members of the Cornell University and Indigenous Dispossession Work Group, individually and collectively. The generous and generative edits, comments, and reflections of the DON Writing Group and the WASC Writing Group, and my generous reviewers at ACME Journal are woven throughout this article as well. Any mistakes are mine.

## References

- Barker, Joanne. "Territory as analytic: The dispossession of Lenapehoking and the subprime crisis." *Social Text* 36, no. 2 (2018): 19-39.
- "Cornell Real Estate." FAQ. Cornell University. (2005) Accessed April 26, 2023.  
<[https://realestate.fs.cornell.edu/about/faq.cfm#CP\\_JUMP\\_5682](https://realestate.fs.cornell.edu/about/faq.cfm#CP_JUMP_5682).>

- Coulthard, Glen S. "Subjects of empire: Indigenous peoples and the 'politics of recognition' in Canada." *Contemporary political theory* 6, no. 4 (2007): 437-460.
- Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*. Vol. 3. Beacon Press, 2014.
- Dunn, Barry H. "Wokini Initiative White Paper." South Dakota State University, January 2, 2017. <https://www.sdstate.edu/wokini-initiative/wokini-initiative-white-paper>.
- Duthu, Bruce. *Shadow nations: Tribal sovereignty and the limits of legal pluralism*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Feir, Donna, and Maggie EC Jones. "Repaying a debt? The performance of Morrill Act university beneficiaries as measured by Native enrollment and graduation rates." *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 8, no. 1 (2021): 129-138.
- Gavazzi, Stephen M., and E. Gordon Gee. *Land-grant universities for the future: Higher education for the public good*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.
- Geiger, Roger L., ed. *The land-grant colleges and the reshaping of American higher education*. Routledge, 2017.
- Goldstein, Alyosha. "Where the nation takes place: Proprietary regimes, antistatism, and US settler colonialism." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 4 (2008): 833-861.
- Hill, Susan M. *The clay we are made of: Haudenosaunee land tenure on the Grand River*. Univ. of Manitoba Press, 2017.
- Horsman, Reginald. *Race and manifest destiny: The origins of American racial Anglo-Saxonism*. Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Jordan, Kurt. *The Gayogohó:n? People in the Cayuga Lake Region: A Brief History*. Tompkins County Historical Commission, 2022.
- Kertész, Judy, and Angela A. Gonzales. "'We Grow the Ivy': Cornell's Claim to Indigenous Dispossession." *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 8, no. 1 (2021): 145-150.

- Nash, Margaret A. "Entangled pasts: Land-grant colleges and American Indian dispossession." *History of Education Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2019): 437-467.
- Ostler, Jeffrey. *Surviving Genocide: Native Nations and the United States from the American Revolution to Bleeding Kansas*. Yale University Press, 2019.
- Palmer, Meredith Alberta. "Rendering settler sovereign landscapes: Race and property in the Empire State." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38, no. 5 (2020): 793-810.
- Parementer, Jon. "Flipped Scrip, Flipping the Script: The Morrill Act of 1862, Cornell University, and the Legacy of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Indigenous Dispossession." October 1, 2020. Cornell University and Indigenous Dispossession Blog. < <https://blogs.cornell.edu/cornelluniversityindigenousdispossession/2020/10/01/flipped-scrip-flipping-the-script-the-morrill-act-of-1862-cornell-university-and-the-legacy-of-nineteenth-century-indigenous-dispossession/>>
- Park, K-Sue. "Property and Sovereignty in America: A History of Title Registries and Jurisdictional Power." (2023) *Georgetown Law, The Scholarly Commons*. <https://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/facpub/2487/>
- Red Shirt-Shaw, Megan. "Beyond the land acknowledgement: College 'LAND BACK' or free tuition for Native students." *Policy and Practice Brief* (Hack the Gates, 2020).
- Simpson, Audra. "Reading for Land Susan Hill's *The Clay We Are Made Of*: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River." *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 149-156.
- Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. "Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation." *Decolonization: indigeneity, education & society* 3, no. 3 (2014).
- Sternberg, Robert J. *The modern land-grant university*. Purdue University Press, 2014.
- Táíwò, Olúfemi O. *Reconsidering reparations*. Oxford University Press, 2022.