

Absent-Minded Forms:
Academic Novels, American Meritocracy, and Other Educational Fictions

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THESIS

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SUMMARY

This dissertation is study of the emergence and proliferation of the American academic novel since the 19th century. I investigate two simultaneous lines of inquiry. First, I consider the social conditions that presided over the birth of the academic novel genre during the last decades of the 19th century. Like all genres, the academic novel emerged as a recognizable literary form in response to specific political and economic conditions, particularly a growing sense that a “good-for-nothing” college education could serve some greater social purpose, above and beyond what it might to for individuals. Second, I inquire into the ideological need to repeat these generic structures in a world where that same condition has long since passed. Indeed, the generic tropes that define the academic novel have proliferated in a world in which the material rewards of higher education have subsumed the institution entirely.

Introduction: *Et in Academia Ego*

“I was educated (as the phrase is) at Bowdoin College. I was an idle student, negligent of college rules and the Procrustean details of academic life, rather choosing to nurse my own fancies than to dig into Greek roots and be numbered among the learned Thebans” --
Nathaniel Hawthorne in *Grandfather's Chair*.

This dissertation considers what it means for contemporary American literature to imagine higher education as an institution of social equality in an increasingly unequal world. My central claim is that while the academic novel has always examined the relationship between social organizations and individual development, the narrative form takes on new significance in a world that understands the college diploma as a necessary technology of social egalitarianism and, simultaneously, an essential marker of class difference. Reading novelists within and against the history of American higher education, I interpret the literary construction of college through its political economy and consider how this representative form both resists and refines the market logics that have come to structure American society.

My interest in academic fiction is somewhat of an anomaly, although it would not be a stretch to say that there is a notable disparity between the way writers and critics have thought about the aesthetic possibilities of academic fiction. Despite being dismissed as a coterie genre by the academic establishment, it is difficult to imagine another narrative form that has attracted such a remarkable range of notable practitioners: Nathaniel Hawthorne, F. Scott Fitzgerald, W.E.B. Du Bois, Vladimir Nabokov, Mary

McCarthy, John Barth, Ishmael Reed, Tom Wolfe, Don DeLillo, Saul Bellow, Joyce Carol Oates, Bret Easton Ellis, and Jane Smiley, to name but a few.

To begin to understand both the significance of the academic novel to literary history and the erasure of the academic novel from that history, consider the eponymous protagonist of Nabokov's 1957 novel *Pnin*, an outsider struggling to survive within a closed world that does not want him in it. The Russian émigré is divorced and friendless, poor and comically bad at his job. At the same time, however, Timofey Pnin's idiosyncrasies make him particularly suited to life in the small New England town if for no other reason than we cannot imagine him surviving very long outside of it. And perhaps this helplessness is why, as a child of the old-world Russian aristocracy, Pnin's most acute desire is to find a place where he belongs—to inhabit the modest position that was promised to him at his birth, complete with property, leisure, and learning:

The sense of living in a discrete building all by himself was to Pnin something singularly delightful and amazingly satisfying to a weary old want of his innermost self, battered and stunned by thirty-five years of homelessness.... With grateful surprise, Pnin thought that had there been no Russian Revolution, no exodus, no expatriation in France, no naturalization in America, everything—at the best, at the best, Timofey!—would have been much the same: a professorship in Kharkov or Kazan, a suburban house such as this, old books within, late blooms without (144-145).

But if Pnin is a character primarily concerned with finding his “discrete” place, what does it mean for the novel that he wants to live in an American “suburban house” in 1957 that is “much the same” as the one he would have owned in Kharkov had the Bolsheviks not

transformed the world, and why is Pnin committed to the belief that achieving an identity between the two divergent realities is one that is “best” suited to his “innermost self”? What, in other words, would it mean to understand Timofey Pnin’s ideal life as one that exists outside history, and what does this particular way of understanding *Pnin* suggest about the field of 20th century American literature?

One way of approaching those questions is to see Pnin’s fantasy as emblematic of Nabokov’s literary project writ large—a project committed to aesthetic rather than historical concerns. As Eric Neiman argues, Nabokov is less interested in exploring Cold War McCarthyism than he is in narrative point of view. According to this position, *Pnin* is “very much about surveillance, observation, infiltration, and exposure” in that as a character Pnin “is always being mocked, imitated, watched, talked about, narrated” (77). But rather than seeing “the novel as part of a project to seduce the reader into participating in a diffuse network of surveillance” (78) and thus bringing “to the reader’s consciousness his own status as an agent of political surveillance” (79), the text instead makes the reader aware of how “the only way we can appreciate discrete individual consciousness in fiction is by painfully encroaching upon that consciousness” (79-80). As a result, even as Pnin’s painful awkwardness makes the reader alert to the poor fool’s suffering, Pnin’s true “condition is ultimately diagnosable: it comes from being a character in a text, from being exposed not so much to the gaze of society as to the eyes of author and reader alike” (79).

Perhaps Nabokov’s myopic focus on narrative point of view is why it is so crucial to Neiman’s analysis that *Pnin*’s central themes are expressed through the “intensely personal and vastly reduced genre of campus fiction” (76) since, confined to the groves

of academe, the “characters’ fates will not be affected by the intrusion of forces extrinsic to the novel itself” (75). By enclosing the émigré within a small provincial campus, the immediacy of “world politics and national politics is replaced by university politics: all of this is a matter of private interest, part of the relative security of college life.” Seen from this perspective, the great irony of the novel emerges from both enacting and violating the novel’s generic demands—abandoning the home of his dreams becomes the very source of Pnin’s salvation. As Pnin is exiled in the novel’s penultimate scene, Nabokov suggests escaping from the necessary cruelty of narrative surveillance is preferable to the vastly reduced version of life that Waindell College offers all who might inhabit it. Put differently, we might say that the novel’s central question is whether the violence enacted upon Pnin by his colleagues really makes life at Waindell College an escape from history, or whether such cruelty is the continuation of cruelty in another, institutional form?

But in its commitment to understanding the academic novel as a genre that forecloses the narrative to “forces extrinsic to the novel itself,” this dissertation begins with the claim that Neiman’s interpretation of *Pnin* reproduces rather than clarifies the book’s central ideological fantasy: that the American college campus is an institution outside history, while its corresponding generic form—the academic novel—is an aesthetic expression of minor historical concern. Indeed, I claim such a reading of *Pnin* in which the novel’s generic identity is understood to be incidental rather than essential to its meaning is representative of a broader failure to account for the academic novel’s place as a significant part of 20th century American literary history.

We can begin to account for this failure by noting how some of our best literary critics understand the academic novel’s generic identity in relation to what these novels

purport to say about American life. For example, in *The Holocaust of Texts* Amy Hungerford reads Philip Roth's 2000 novel *The Human Stain* as the story of an aging black man named Coleman Silk who, burdened by social expectations, changes his racial identity and furtively lives as a white classics professor until his untimely death at the hands of a jealous rival. For Hungerford, *The Human Stain* is primarily a novel of identity, and its significance to the literary field concerns how the novel reimagines the racial passing narrative such that it is no longer the secret of "passing for white [that] empowers Coleman" but rather "secrecy itself" (144). In Hungerford's reading, Silk's central identity—what he "really was"—is not the immense historical and/or biological prescriptions of blackness, but rather the autonomy of his own consciousness understood against those same overwhelming prescriptions. Central to Hungerford's analysis is the claim that "Roth does not expose and discredit...the essentialist logic of passing so much as he reimagines what the essential identity is that passing defines" (143). In *The Human Stain*, then, insofar as "identity lies in the essential separateness of one's own consciousness from all others, in the separateness epitomized by the idea of a secret... Coleman 'really was' the fact of the secret itself not the content of it, the possibility of secrecy not the substance of the secret" (145).

And yet to imagine *The Human Stain* as a 21st century novel of passing—a novel which explores the transformation of racial essentialism into the essentialism of consciousness—is to ignore the other historical condition that made Coleman Silk's passing both possible and meaningful to the novel as such. That is to say, Silk neither becomes white simply because he chooses a new identity, nor does he protect what he "really was" by preserving the secrecy of his consciousness against the intrusion of other

minds; rather, it was Silk's education that had "empowered" the central transformation of the novel. Indeed, as Hungerford herself argues, "Coleman presents his degree in Classics to the white academic establishment, embodied in Athena College, and once admitted by that establishment becomes fully white, even to the degree that he is accused of being a white racist" for calling his absentee black students "spooks" (143). In that sense, we can see that *The Human Stain* is not primarily a novel of passing at all but rather an academic novel committed to the idea that the historical prescriptions of race can be undone through the earned benefits of higher education. After all, an occupation is not an identity, and although it's unclear what it would mean for Coleman to "pass" for an accomplished professor of Classics, it is certainly true that he can both secure and be stripped of that title. Athena College thus functions as fundamental symbolic structure in *The Human Stain* because while the secrecy of Silk's consciousness—understood here as his identity—is something he is necessarily born with, his whiteness—understood as a byproduct of his education—is something he earns. It was only after Silk ceased to be marked by racial difference that he could achieve his desires, and it is no accident that the institution that undoes his racial destiny is the integrated New York University rather than the homogenously black Howard University, where a diploma would have marked Silk as black for the rest of his life. The novel's distinction between inherited identity and earned equality is precisely why, when Silk becomes dean of the faculty and remakes Athena College in his own image, he takes "an antiquated, backwater, Sleepy Hollowish college and, not without steamrolling, put an end to the place as a gentlemen's farm" and instead "made the place competitive" (Roth 5, 9). So when "educated people with Ph.D.s, people [Silk] had himself hired because he believed that they were capable of thinking

reasonably and independently, had turned out to have no inclination to weigh the preposterous evidence against him,” the force of the novel’s critique emerges not so much from the fact that a black man is fired for anti-black racism (indeed, that could happen in any novel), but rather from the fact that a distinguished professor of classics would be stripped of his social position by the very thing that built the institution in the first place—a commitment to finding meaning and a corresponding value in the “scrutinization of language” (84, 174).

Likewise, it is no coincidence that the sovereign nation Sutton Griggs imagines in his 1899 novel *Imperio in Imperium* exists beneath the campus of Jefferson College. Griggs conspicuously literalizes the narrative of African American racial uplift by making schooling a necessary precondition to inclusion within the Imperium such that “a campaign of education...*in every case preceded* an attempt at securing members” into its ranks (130, emphasis mine). Indeed, “[i]t was the school of the Southerner that has builded [*sic*] the Imperium which now lifts its hand in power and might to strike a last grand blow for liberty” (158). But although critics like Caroline Levander acknowledge “*Imperium* has become a significant object of study, especially for its commentary on race relations in an imperializing late-nineteenth-century US” (60), the relevant detail about the Imperium’s location isn’t its foundation beneath an institution of higher education but rather its distance from the US-Mexico border. According to Levander, “[i]t is from the outermost periphery rather than the center of the US South—in a borderlands South—that the creation of an independent black society powerful and complex enough to defend African Americans against the racism that frustrates similar efforts in other parts of the South becomes imaginable” (64).

Unfortunately Levander needn't look farther than generic form of the novel itself to see exactly where *Imperio in Imperium* imagines an independent black society emerging. From Piedmont's early days of being bullied by his schoolmaster to the nation's failure to acknowledge all that his degree is meant to signify, *Imperio In Imperium* simultaneously critiques and enshrines higher education as the institution best suited to defend black Americans against Jim Crow subjugation, and, like the educated members that make up the Imperium itself, its location is meant to be everywhere, not just at the periphery of the nation's borders. Every black college in the United States produces the citizens that make up the Imperium, and without those colleges the Imperium could not enact the model of race leadership articulated in either Booker T. Washington or W.E.B. Du Bois. Understanding *Imperio In Imperium* as an early instantiation of the academic novel reveals how Griggs creates the independent nation to represent the promise made by both reconstruction and the genre itself—a space of utopian possibility where education is valued and its gifts are accessible to all who have earned them. Or, as the former president of Cadeville College Belton Piedmont pointedly says when welcoming the Harvard degree-holding Bernard Belgrave into the Imperium: “Come, your reward awaits you. You are worthy of it and I assure you it is worthy of you” (127).

Although it is certainly true that each of the readings I've just described contributes a crucial insight about the novels that are their subject, what they all ignore is the degree to which the academic novel has established a distinct generic identity whose categorical difference from other kinds of fiction is inextricable from the texts' meaning. As I will show, the academic novel is a genre that relies on a specific constellation of

narrative conventions that has increasingly subsumed the meaning of the novels that adopt them. These tropes will no doubt be familiar to anyone who has read even a few of these books: the school is a conservative institution that is alienating and hostile to outsiders; the protagonist is one such outsider whose difference can be recognized by those around them; the supporting cast is full of stock types, either manipulative, flippant, or incompetent; the protagonist must utilize considerable cunning to survive the trails of the institution; the characters' development or "education" never takes place within the classroom but always outside of it; finally, the plot hinges on one of two dynamics: the disruption of an autonomous world and its eventual return to order, or the protagonist's movement through this autonomous world toward personal enlightenment.

Given the ossification of its generic form, it is not surprising that criticism about academic fiction either (as in the examples above) ignores the genre conventions as unimportant to the texts' meaning or is instead concerned with how these conventions produce seemingly identical narratives across historical boundaries. Indeed, if we read academic fiction purely in terms of its generic structure, it is plausible to interpret two novels like Owen Johnson's *Stover at Yale* (1912) and Tom Perrotta's *Joe College* (2000) as, in crucial respects, an identical story told ninety years apart. Both books chronicle outsiders who come to Yale only to learn that the school is unwilling and unable to educate them. In both novels, the protagonists are alienated by a series of events that embody the bizarre minutia of academic life. Finally, these stories end, like hundreds of other academic novels before and since, with the disaffected outsiders embracing their marginalization and, in doing so, moving toward personal development. So despite the fact that the Yale University represented in *Joe College* appears in a radically different

moment in American history than the Yale University attended by Dink Stover, the fundamental story appears to maintain its generic and semantic commitments across time, producing the same stories over and over and over again.

One way to explain the ahistoricism of the genre would be suggest that neither the world nor the academy is all that different—that the social problems of discrimination, anti-intellectualism, and conformity confronting the characters in *Stover at Yale* in 1912 are in many ways the same problems confronting the characters in *Joe College* today. According to this view—a view that, despite certain obvious differences in the college population, has much to recommend it—the conservatism of the academic novel reproduces the conservatism of the academy itself. In her book *Faculty Towers*, Elaine Showalter notes that academic novels enact this very idea by “operat[ing] on a set of conventions, themes, tropes, and values,” the most powerful of which is “academic time” (3). Unlike traditional realist fiction which represents the individualized tempos and rhythms of ordinary life, Showalter describes academia proceeding through an idealized cycle not unlike the one described by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*, except in this case beginnings are associated with the Fall rather than the Spring. The cyclical nature of the academic calendar—from innocent freshman arriving on campus to experienced seniors graduating into the world; from naïve assistant professors who follow the spirit of academia’s unwritten laws to cynical deans who manipulate the letter of academia’s written laws—brings new people to the institution every year, yet the institution itself, its functional archetype, has undergone little change since Harvard College opened its gates in 1636. Like it was in the 17th century, the college is still a place where the country’s elite adhere to ancient customs they don’t fully understand, and

elaborate rituals preside over an inevitable cycle of rebirth, maturity, and exile. So even though critics widely agree that Don DeLillo's 1984 novel *White Noise* is a serious investigation into the relationship between death and consumer culture, its memorable introductory pages are consistent with its generic promise and narrative resolution: "every September for twenty-one years" Jack Gladney, professor of Hitler Studies at College-on-the-Hill, has watched cars travel down the expressway carrying disposable dorm room junk, yet what he sees on the parents' faces is nevertheless "a sense of renewal, of communal recognition... This assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do over the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tell the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation" (3-4). What all those mini fridges and hairdryers come to symbolize, then, is not the evacuation of meaning in a postmodern age, but an externalization of social maturity achieved through ritualized/institutionalized education. Thus when the novel ends with Gladney's six-year-old son Wilder crossing that very same expressway on a plastic tricycle only to survive miraculously unharmed, DeLillo gives his readers a glimpse into the boy's inevitable future—Wilder's own rite of passage into the world of higher education and his parents' corresponding sense of anxiety about their son's initiation into the institution, the cycle renewed.

Likewise, in *The College Novel in America* John Lyons notes that academia is particularly suited to the Aristotelian unities of action, time, and place: "For Aristotle the most effective dramatic action is one which involves a unity of plot, characters who are interesting (if not noble), and thought which is well-expressed. The academic world offers a certain insulation which gives the novelist the chance to enclose the action in

time and place. It also contains people for whom ideas as well as actions are important enough to precipitate crises. The teacher and the student should also be able to articulate their problems” (xiii). Within this insulated structure, the institution houses characters intelligent enough to understand the world but not practical enough to achieve self-awareness, and the plotlines are either comic or tragic depending on how the protagonists are inevitably brought low. So although “there are the Aristotelian reasons to think that an articulate hero enmeshed in a hierarchy of prestige could be the basis of great fiction,” Lyons ultimately concludes that “the novel of academic life has fostered no Fielding, Flaubert, or Tolstoy” (xv) because “the novel [form] is of the world and that the campus only offers thin and pallid fare” (xvii). In short, Lyons believes it is the strict adherence to the genre that inhibits the academic novel from embodying the traditional function of the novel as such—that is, of being malleable and reflexive in its representation of historical change.¹ “Just as literary conventions corrupt the literary portrait of academic types,” Lyons argues, “so do educational dogmas corrupt the intellectual content of many academic novels. The better novels often show that their authors understand the dogmas only to be free of them” (187).

In his belief that true artists must “be free” of the “conventions” and “dogmas” of academic fiction, Lyons reproduces perhaps the most familiar argument about genre fiction and its relationship to the literary field—that what makes worthwhile literature is not a book’s adherence to recognizable generic structures but rather its transcendence

¹ In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt observes “We have already considered one aspect of the importance which the novel allots the time dimension: its break with the earlier literary tradition of using timeless stories to mirror the unchanging moral verities. The novel’s plot is also distinguished from most previous fiction by its use of past experience as the cause of present action: a causal connection operating through time replaces the reliance of earlier narratives on disguises and coincidences, and this tends to give the novel a much more cohesive structure.” Of course, Watt has much more to say about the topic, which cannot be quoted at length. See pp 21-26.

over them. What is supposedly literary about novels like *Pnin*, *The Human Stain*, *Imperium In Imperio*, then, is how these books “transcend” their literary conventions to achieve other ends and not how they embody, enact, or employ those conventions as ends in themselves. What this has meant for the academic novel is that, insofar as scholarship on the genre exists, it is largely concerned with uncovering the ways in which writers use the “insulated structures” of academic time and place to craft stories in which an “articulate hero enmeshed in a hierarchy of prestige” might struggle against the unwavering imperatives of the institution, although the true meaning of that struggle is always understood to be significant insofar as it has nothing whatsoever to do with the function that those institutions are expected to perform.

But as Franco Moretti reminds us, “there is an unfortunate tendency in literary criticism to reduce “the concept of genre to a subaltern, marginal function, as is indicated most starkly in the formalist couple convention-defamiliarization, where genre appears as mere *background*, an opaque plane whose only use is to make the *difference* of the masterpiece more prominent. Just as the ‘event’ breaks and ridicules the laws of continuity, so the masterpiece is there to demonstrate the ‘triumph’ over the norm, the irreducibility of what is really great” (13). This widely-practiced interpretive mistake ignores the idea that “literary production takes place in obedience to a prevailing system of laws and that the task of criticism is precisely to show the extent of their coercive, regulating power” (12). It is, after all, “the task of the historian of culture...to deal with the mass conventions, the great ideological agreements by which each age is distinguished from the other” (14). Thus, if we take seriously Moretti’s insistence that we must understand how literature functions in accordance with dominant/emergent

ideological agreements presiding over a prevailing system of social contradictions, it becomes necessary for literary critics to understand the precise nature of the relationship between higher education and the novels that shape the horizon of expectations about what these institutions can and should be.

To understand how the academic novel came to be a major 20th century literary form, we must first acknowledge that it wasn't all that long ago that America's colleges and universities were marginal social institutions, and what happened to undergraduates and their professors meant almost nothing to the overwhelming majority of both readers and writers alike. When Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote the first American academic novel in 1828, the fictional Hartley College in *Fanshawe* was as remote to the average American as the Massachusetts Bay Colony was to the readers of *The Scarlet Letter*. According to Roger Geiger, "[c]ollege graduates accounted for no more than 1 percent of the male workforce before the Civil War. Even given the ambiguity of the notion of career in this era, they were concentrated in the clergy, education, government, medicine, and the law. Before the Civil War the percentage of college graduates among those entering all of these professions was nevertheless in decline" (3). Moreover, Peter Thelin reminds us that "[a]n undeniable fact of American life well into the late nineteenth century was that going to college was not necessary for 'getting ahead' economically, although a college degree did confer some prestige" (6-7). While it was true that "[e]stablished families took college education very seriously" because upper-class parents "wanted assurance that their sons were acquiring the values and skills requisite for responsible, effective participation as adults in public affairs and commerce," it was nevertheless the case that a college degree was a marker of class rather than a producer of class, an institution that

reproduced social hierarchies rather than an institution that eliminated them. What the early history of American higher education thus reveals about the academic novel is that, at least at first, the form really did function the way Eric Naimen describes it *Pnin*—as a way of ensuring the “characters’ fates will not be affected by the intrusion of forces extrinsic to the novel itself.” Indeed, higher education’s peripheral status in American life explains why, in the case of *Fanshawe*, the college campus was a convenient setting for romance about love, adventure, and loss. For the students who enrolled at Harley College, higher education had a negligible social function, and if the novel had been set within a remote New England village instead of on a remote New England campus, almost nothing about the story would be different because its central themes function inside colleges just as powerfully as they do outside of them.

The same, however, could not be said for academic novels published today. After higher education began to assert a transformative influence on American society, what it meant to have a college degree became a matter of interest to parents and employers, presidents and entrepreneurs alike. It wasn’t long before nationally circulating newspapers carried stories about the outcome of Harvard/Yale football games, and public intellectuals like Thorstein Veblen and John Dewey were writing books about why Americans who would never attended college themselves should take an interest in what was happening there. So by the middle of the 20th century, not only had the academic novel developed a codified generic structure, but the ambition to write novels about what these institutions mean to the social order took on a broader social significance as well.

The cultural investment in higher education can be tied to our belief in its status as the primary institution of social change in the 20th century. American higher education

has been defined by a steady—albeit incomplete—broadening of the curriculum, transitioning from exclusive training in the liberal arts like grammar and rhetoric toward training in practical arts like agriculture and engineering, as well as professional training in law, medicine, and education itself. Along with committing itself to increasing the number of academic subjects that could be learned, colleges have committed themselves to diversifying the kinds of human subjects that could be taught as well. Prohibitions against educating women and minorities gradually weakened, and the availability of financial aid and other entitlements like the G.I. Bill allowed people without wealth to finance their tuition bills. Once higher education was understood to be both useful for social advancement and available to anyone who wanted to pursue it, these institutions became enshrined as the great equalizers in the social imagination. The completion of a college degree came to symbolize the promise of American egalitarianism by creating an unprecedented opportunity to narrow the gap between the masses and the elite in terms of both culture and class.

Seen from this perspective, the most interesting thing about academic fiction is not the unchanging iterations of its generic form, but rather its ability mark the historical transformation of higher education from a marginal institution that served less than one percent of the American population before the Civil War to a central institution that serves as much as 60% of the American population today. In his article “The Rise of the Academic Novel,” Jeffrey J. Williams notes “the proliferation of the academic novel results . . . from an audience for whom higher education is natural and expected, and who takes the professor as a conventional figure. Also, it is an audience that still assumes the novel as a central medium of expression—in other words, an adult audience, probably of

those born in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, who still read books and might see their own fate in the situations that confront the beleaguered professors in academic novels.”

Central to this analysis is the claim that the proliferation of the academic novel corresponds to the expansion of American higher education such that there is a necessary identification between an upper-middle class audience of college-educated readers and the subjects of academic fiction.

The problem with these forms of analysis is that they are primarily concerned with the ways in which academic fiction traces the growth of US higher education, using a diverse set of protagonists to mark the inclusion of outsiders into what was once a very exclusive demographic club. More specifically, they interpret the ascension of these narrative codes as a sign that the world of higher education has become “normalized” without providing a corresponding analysis of the ideological stakes of this normalization—what Moretti called the regulating power of literature’s obedience to a prevailing system of semantic laws. Instead, I claim that we should follow Todorov by inquiring into the social contradictions that have necessitated the ascension of this newly ascendant narrative code, and consider why the academic novel has come to seem like a compelling mode of expression for ambitious writers to explore in the 20th century.

Indeed, the exponential rate of growth in college enrollments coupled with financial benefits of the degree not only made American higher education a ubiquitous American institution, but, crucially, it made enrollment into those colleges competitive as well. When less than one percent of the workforce went to college and the liberal arts curriculum was designed to train upper-class men for the leadership positions they were born to inhabit, the college diploma was little more than a participation trophy for the

rich. As Joseph Kett argues, “Throughout the period from 1780 to 1850 the baccalaureate degree remained more a certificate of attendance than a price for academic accomplishment” (70). If a student could prove basic competency and pay tuition then they matriculated, and if they bothered to attend their examinations they almost certainly graduated with a degree. But when the college curriculum was redesigned to give students from all walks of life a combination of both practical skills and general cultural literacy, a college diploma wasn’t simply an inheritance anymore. It became instead a powerful form of social organization—a universally interpretable sign among all classes—that students had proved worthy of their social position by competing for admission to these school and then, while they were there, submitting work to stringent evaluation by experts in the field.

So while diplomas to this day remain conspicuous markers of social class, since 1945 America has redescribed the institutions that produce them as meritocracies that select and transform college graduates from a broad group of deserving applicants rather than a narrow group of inheritors. The idea here is that educational attainment has ceased to be the pure expression of a birthright and has instead become a sign of achievement, signaling to rich and poor alike that social class in contemporary American society cannot just be inherited; it must now also be earned. From this perspective, the structures of exclusion that once defined higher education still exist, but instead of being grounded in what seems like the illegitimate class-based criteria of identity, character, and background, they persist under the legitimated (but equally class-based) criteria of SAT scores, personal essays, and unpaid internships. This dissertation thus argues that the symbolic work of the genre has been to stage narrative conflicts between the rich and the

deserving when in fact the postwar educational meritocracy has succeeded in making the two categories functionally indistinguishable. Put differently, we might say that in the old days, some of the elite went to college, but the degree wasn't crucial to either their social position or their beliefs about what it meant to have it; today not only do most of the elite have a college degree, but the fact that they earned it has become absolutely central to our culture's beliefs about why we have an elite at all.

In that sense, this dissertation helps to explain both the unchanging genre identity of the academic novel across radically different periods of higher education, as well as the proliferation of the genre through some of the 20th century's most celebrated authors. In contrast to critics who interpret the growth of the academic novel through its correlation to the rise of America's new "professional managerial class," I argue that what matters for literary history is the way academic fiction structures our beliefs about the social relations that create and sustain class. By suggesting that the historical narrative of mass higher education is not merely an empirical error but in fact a kind of academic fiction in itself, will make a number of important interventions into both past and contemporary debates about the relationship between higher education and American literature. With respect to the genre itself, my work departs from critics argue that the significance of the academic novel is interesting primarily for the ways in which it corresponds to demographic shifts in college attendance. Instead I argue that the crucial ideological function of the academic novel is not to register these demographic shifts, but rather to produce the ideal college experience as a ubiquitous meritocracy that defines the social position of those who attend college just as strongly as it does for those who don't. More broadly, I reverse the widely-held belief that the expansion of higher education has

produced social egalitarianism through either an inclusive literary canon or, as critics like Mark McGurl, Eric Bennett, and Loren Glass have recently argued with respect to creative writing programs, an inclusive literary class. In fact, my research shows that just the opposite is true—literary egalitarianism, at the level of both its production and distribution, has masked an inequality that higher education not only creates but simultaneously justifies.

If it's true that ideology is never more powerful than when it can imagine its own outside, the academic novel positions itself precisely in the imaginative space that challenges the academic meritocracy on its own terms. By imagining worlds in which students and professors spectacularly fail to embody higher education's meritocratic ideals, the academic novel enacts a powerful critique of the social order that, far from producing imaginative alternatives to the current regime, has functioned largely to reinforce it. Thus the narrative genre has become the primary site where the impulse to both critique and defend the educational meritocracy has been articulated—a space where the literary field enshrines the values of the meritocracy precisely to the degree that educational institutions fail to embody them. In other words, the academic novel is a narrative form that transforms a university's vision of itself into the drama of a lived experience—a way of both showing how woefully short colleges and universities come to making those ideals a reality, and, simultaneously, a way of suggesting how much better the world would be if they did.

This shift in the social function of higher education from a marginal institution associated with class reproduction to a dominant institution associated with class transformation explains why, for academic novels published during the 20th century—

ranging from Owen Johnson's *Stover at Yale* and J. Saunders Redding's *Stranger and Alone* to Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*—the commitment to the ideal of an educational meritocracy had profoundly altered the meaning of the academic novel's ready-made generic form. Indeed, one of the major claims dissertation makes is that the belief that higher education should function as a social meritocracy has subsumed the meaning of these narratives entirely. Because even though contemporary books like *The Secret History* and *The Art of Fielding* raise important questions about pursuing passion for its own sake—Greek culture for Richard Papen, baseball for Henry Skrimshander—such pursuits necessarily take on entirely new forms of value under the sign of a college diploma. In other words, if Skrimshander had stayed in South Dakota and played for his local recreational league, or if Papen had read the Greek classics in a book club operating out of his parents' basement, the passion would no doubt remain, but the social significance of affixing the pursuit to a marker of social class would vanish completely. For what would it mean to tell a story about students and professors inhabiting to college today—whether rich or poor, immigrant or native, bright or disinterested—if the question of what they made of their lives didn't hinge upon a belief that the meritocratic function of the university was fundamental to the prosperity that should awaits them after their education has ended?

Which is why, when Nabokov wrote *Pnin* in 1957, the question of what it means for the novel's protagonist to belong in an American institution of higher education is fundamentally related to the question of what it would mean for Pnin to deserve it. From the moment of his birth, Pnin was supplied with every resource necessary to attain a position at a respectable college: excellent tutors, involved parents, intimate exposure to

culture and ideas. But under the condition of the academic meritocracy, the whole point of his ineffectual bumbling is that none of his considerable advantages is enough to *guarantee* his place among the Waindell College faculty or the social class that his education should inevitably provide. It is in this sense that the academic novel reproduces the pervasive ideology of higher education today—a commitment to the idea that inequality must be defended rather than eliminated.

Chapter II: 'The One Place Where Money Makes No Difference':

The Campus Novel from *Stover at Yale* through *The Art of Fielding*

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Owen Johnson's campus novel *Stover at Yale* (1912) rehearses a familiar narrative about college life. The idealistic protagonist Dink Stover comes to school seeking "happy, care-free years" (13) where he can be "his own master at last, free to go and to come, free to venture and to experience, free to know that strange, guarded mystery – life –" (5). At Yale, the center of that life is football, a game that Stover has always loved but now begins to find so "complex, disturbing, incomprehensible" that "to win," he realizes, "he would have to change" (30). In fact, Yale's hyper-competitive atmosphere – not just with respect to football, but even more with respect to the social meaning it has for Stover and his classmates – transforms the game he once played for himself into serious work – a job that, instead of making him "his own master at last," makes him feel like a "slave" to Yale (246). Despite long days and tortuous practices, however, Stover decides to stick it out, conceding that he must leave the "simple democracy of boyhood" behind him if he hopes to succeed in this new environment (29). And in the end, Johnson's narrative insists that no matter how much Stover wants to enjoy the game of football, he must accept that "play, the fun of the thing itself, doesn't exist [at Yale]...we have made a business out of it all" (243).

Stover at Yale is remembered today, to the extent that it is remembered at all, as an early manifestation of the campus novel, minor both in ambition and execution. By contrast, the major writers of the early twentieth century didn't just refrain from writing about the college experience – they barely attended. Jack London and Theodore Dreiser dropped out of college, and perhaps this explains their ambivalence toward postsecondary education's relationship to the class of people that so often captured their attention. After all, the eponymous protagonist in London's *Martin Eden* (1909) was educated, like London himself, outside of school, while Eugene Witla, the protagonist in Dreiser's *The Genius* (1915), understands his time at the Chicago Art Institute as a minor part of his initiation into a much larger adult life. Similarly, Henry James spent even less time in college than did London (lasting a single year at Harvard Law School), while Edith Wharton never bothered attending college at all.¹ More recently, of course, the situation has changed. It's not just that a great many major writers who are otherwise uninterested in genre fiction (from Vladimir Nabokov and Mary McCarthy to Ishmael Reed and Jane Smiley) have found inspiration in academic fiction, but also that the minor genre within the minor genre – the campus sports novel – has been taken up by writers with distinctly unminor ambitions like Tom Wolfe and Chad Harbach. Which is to say that if writing about people like Dink Stover at Yale put you at the margins of American literature at the turn of the century, writing about people like Charlotte Simmons at Dupont puts you very near its center today. The main reason for this change is pretty straightforward, already implicit in the spotty attendance of writers in Dreiser's generation while all the other writers named above did – the number of Americans enrolling in some form of postsecondary education has exploded from around six percent of the college-aged

population at the turn of the century to around sixty percent today.² One might well agree with Jeffrey J. Williams (2012, 576-577) that no development in contemporary American life has been more significant than the huge increase in college attendance, which makes the new centrality of the academic novel seem more or less inevitable. And which makes it all the more striking that, as I want to begin by suggesting, even though the society from which the campus novel emerged has changed radically, the conventions through which the campus novel defines itself have not.

Indeed, with respect in particular to athletics the campus novel has remained remarkably static over the past century, committed to the belief that “the business of sports” is an existential threat to the groves of academe. Sometimes, as in Wolfe’s *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), sports represent the corruption of higher education’s core academic mission; sometimes, as in Harbach’s *The Art of Fielding* (2011), sports represent higher education’s most enshrined values. But in both cases the opposition between business and education – first crystalized by *Stover at Yale* – remains the genre’s fundamental antagonism, an opposition that college athletics either intensifies, impedes, or resolves. And while it is obvious that history has changed what it means for college sports to operate like a business – Charlotte Simmons’s thinly disguised alma mater (Duke University) raised over \$78M this past year through its athletic department alone, while Stover’s Yale didn’t even have a recognizable athletics department at all – the relevant literary question is what it means for the academic novel to have begun to condemn the business of sports before it really was a business, and what it means for the academic novel to continue to do so today.³

We can begin to answer this question by asking what the business of sports meant to Johnson at the turn of the twentieth century, a question made relevant by the fact that, as we've already begun to note, it had nothing to do with the question of who was making money off Yale football. Not only were sports not an important source of revenue for the college, they weren't a source of revenue for the students either. Though he's one of the best players in the entire country, Dink Stover is not on an athletic scholarship and neither he nor his teammates is hoping to play professional football after graduation. Discovering that sports is a business, then, is a central part of Stover's education and hinges upon the fact that athletic competition at Yale isn't being waged either for the sake of improving character (which Stover had always believed) or for money (which Stover could never have believed).⁴ On the contrary, sports at Yale were a technology for producing a certain kind of "reputation" (74). Which is why the novel insists it is the "society game" (6) that truly defines the meaning of sports at Yale – a campus-wide competition to be chosen by the social clubs delineating the boundary between the school's "leaders" (95) and those who "don't count" (185). It's the competition for prestige that football is really all about. It has nothing to do with money.

Although that way of putting the point – that prestige has nothing to do with money – is, as the novel recognizes, not quite accurate, since the reason you can't buy your way into senior societies like Skull and Bones is not because the members don't care about money but because they already have it. Since everyone is rich "money alone won't land a man in" (27), so to win the *society* game Stover must agree to "play...as others are playing it" (29). And while it's a slight exaggeration to describe every student at Yale as rich, it's only a slight one. At the turn of the century only six percent of young

people graduated from high school and only four percent went to college (Burke 55). Part of the reason for such low attendance was that many schools required Latin and Greek – subjects covered in private preparatory schools but widely absent from (free) public education (Karabel 23). As for the tiny fraction of lower class students who were academically prepared for college, costs were often prohibitive. During the 1860s, the average price of higher education was sixty percent of a skilled tradesman’s income, and only two percent of American families could reasonably afford it (Burke 50, 56). But even when they suspended the language requirement and charged no tuition at all – as was the case for many land-grant institutions during the postbellum years – colleges had a difficult time recruiting and retaining lower class students due to opportunity costs. The occupational landscape meant that the aggregate income lost by a young man pursuing secondary and higher education was often greater than the potential gains afforded by his degree (240-241). Economically speaking, then, not only did the poor not go to college, but there would have been no financial benefits in their doing so.⁵

What these demographics reinforce is the idea that, despite an intensely competitive atmosphere within the institution, the students attending Yale were not struggling to earn economic advantages through higher education – on the contrary, having economic advantages was the very precondition of their attendance. What the business of sports in *Stover at Yale* is all about, then, is symbolic distinction made relevant only by the absence of economic distinction, making the performance of athletic competition an allegory of social competition among the rich – a symbolic struggle waged between class fractions rather than between the classes themselves. Within that institutional logic, Stover’s struggles on the football field function as a denied form of

social currency – one that resembles the earned advantages of a business and yet offers no real economic rewards. And this was particularly true within economically homogeneous institutions like Yale, “the one place where money makes no difference,” precisely because students must have money to enroll in the first place (10). Indeed from this standpoint *Stover at Yale* is primarily about the complete irrelevance of money to college sports and, perhaps more importantly, the irrelevance of business to the educational institutions that sanctioned them.

The question raised by the contemporary sports novel, however, is what to make of the business of sports (and of its condemnation) in an academic world where such symbolic distinction is not only anchored in real economic distinction but is utterly subsumed by it – a world in which postsecondary education is no longer limited to the six percent but rather open to the sixty percent. For while the notion that Yale had made a business out of college athletics functions as a compelling *metaphor* for Dink Stover at Yale, it would be implausible to suggest the same for colleges and universities in the age of mass higher education. In fact, perhaps the single most common observation about college over the past 40 years has been its transformation into an institution that exists to generate profits – whether for students, faculty, administrators, Wall Street, or the nation at large – which means that money has shifted from being the necessary precondition of a college degree to its widely understood (and greatly desired) economic outcome. And even though every major journalistic outlet in the past two years – *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *The Economist*, and *Time* magazine – has published an article asking if higher education is worth its cost, regardless of the answer (which,

significantly, is always “yes”) the underlying assumption is that the value of a college degree is invariably tied to its economic returns.

It should strike us as strange, then, that despite the dramatic shift in the meaning and function of higher education, for student-athletes in Wolfe’s *I Am Charlotte Simmons* college life bears an uncanny resemblance to the past. Just like Dink Stover at Yale, Dupont’s star lacrosse player Harrison Vorheese isn’t playing college sports to earn a living – he’s just playing around. Because the possibility of making a career out of lacrosse is practically zero, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* reproduces a world in which the connection between business and college sports is a moot point, not just for Vorheese, but for the vast majority of higher education’s 420,000 athletes who, like Dink Stover before them, have no interest in monetizing their athletic ability. Indeed, the NCAA is totally justified in its assertion – repeated *ad nauseam* in its popular ad campaign – that most college athletes who swim, serve, and shoot for their schools will be going “pro in something other than sports.” But if playing around is the primary mode of Vorheese and his jock buddies on the lacrosse team, the same could be said of the student body writ large. The rich, carefree students in *Stover at Yale* – who were fond of chanting “father and mother pay all the bills,/ And we have all the fun./ That’s the way we do in college life./ Hooray!” (232) – are described in the same manner as the characters that populate Dupont, whose fathers and mothers are the CEOs of corporations across the country. And this is why, even though Dupont’s campus was designed to be “an actual grove of academe through which scholars young and old might take contemplative strolls” (Wolfe 7), almost everyone in *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is really there to “party and ‘network’” – “paying dues so they can enjoy Club Dupont for four years” (255). When even marginal

students at Dupont get jobs that pay “ninety-five thousand to start” (416), it doesn’t matter what they study or how good they are at sports. Which means that if the money Stover brought with him to Yale made the business of college sports irrelevant at the turn of the century, the money Vorheese will earn from his degree makes the business of college sports irrelevant today.

I Am Charlotte Simmons describes an academic world that in many ways resembles Yale at the turn of the twentieth century – a world, that is, in which the connection between sports and business is made purely symbolic by the economic status that most of Dupont’s athletes have inherited before ever setting foot in a university.⁶ But in the era of mass higher education it is basketball, and not lacrosse, which comes closest to embodying the perceived social function of the modern university because it is through the athletic scholarship that historically marginalized groups routinely gain access to the best universities in the country. And unlike in 1912, where Yale football promised social distinction because the true distinctions among the student body (differences in social class) largely did not exist, in 2012 it is Dupont basketball that promises economically disadvantaged students like Jojo Johansson and Vernon Congers the very thing that has become almost essential to membership the upper classes – a college degree. More to the point, both the basketball team and the university are committed to understanding themselves as “business” institutions insofar as they produce economic class mobility for the sixty percent of Americans who are now given the opportunity to pursue some form of postsecondary education across the country. In this sense it is both Dupont’s commitment to helping Congers convert his athletic ability into a career, and, by extension, the total irrelevance of Stover doing the same at Yale that underlines the

discourse foundational to the business of college athletics today: that by transforming sports from something that merely resembled a business into something that actually functions as one, higher education has become a technology for developing and monetizing the innate talents of people across the socioeconomic spectrum.

But despite the economic mobility that a degree confers upon its recipients, for the professors in *I Am Charlotte Simmons* the effects of transforming Dupont into a business institution have proven to be disastrous for higher education's academic values. As a literary genre, the campus novel achieves its critical function by imagining the conditions of higher education's inevitable failure, demonstrating through lived experiences the various ways American society's primary institution of personal and social growth falls woefully short of achieving its mandate. *I Am Charlotte Simmons* represents the effect that business has on higher education the way that campus novels almost always have – by making the characters closest to the school's stated values the most alienated by its policies. The conflict at the heart of *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is one in which Dupont's "core academic mission" is threatened by a basketball program that operates as successful business in everything but name. The novel suggests that while a degree will almost certainly improve the economic prospects of Dupont's basketball players – perhaps no less than a NBA contract – the conditions under which the players attain that degree are totally at odds with the school's educational function. Because star athlete Jojo Johanssen seems unwilling to learn, he submits a paper written by his university-appointed tutor Adam Gelin, and so Johanssen's professor – who considers Johanssen's "contemptuous disregard for the core mission" of higher education a drain on the entire student body (518) – tries to "make an example" (635) of them in order to

reverse “the corruption of the scholarly ideal” and curb the “power of an athletic program that has gone out of control.” Wolfe thus literalizes the struggle to preserve academic values by nearly expelling the cheaters and purging Dupont of their influence. Here too we are meant to understand Johanssen not in terms of his own obvious failings, but the degree to which the athlete’s deficiencies corrupt his tutor – an earnest scholar coerced into cheating by an athletic department that pays his meager and wholly necessary wage. Which is to say that *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is a novel that seeks to show how schools with immense material and academic success, measured in endowment dollars and USA Today rankings, can always be undermined by powerful anti-intellectual forces – chief among them athletic spectacles that lead students away from contemplative strolls through the groves of academe toward football stadiums where “there were *two* odors...beer...and the great fluffy fumes of human piss” (299).

I Am Charlotte Simmons, then, is a novel in which the connection between business and college sports is condemned for being symbolic (as it is for Harrison Vorhesse on the lacrosse team) as much as it is for being real (as it is for Jojo Johanssen on the basketball team). And from that standpoint it’s difficult to see who Wolfe disapproves of more – the rich students whose economic backgrounds have prepared them for academic work they care nothing about, or the poor students whose economic backgrounds have underprepared them for academic work they desperately need but struggle to learn. As we will see, in *I Am Charlotte Simmons* this double-bind produces an unexpected insight, but for now it’s enough to say that, as far as the campus novel is concerned, it would seem that true education cannot take place within institutions subsumed by business interests. This is why for Rutgers English professor William

Dowling (2007) “the real stakes in the struggle against Div IA sports involv[e] the notion of the university as an enclave in a society where consumerist ideology – that ceaseless barrage of logos and brand names meant to empty out human consciousness until only consumer preferences remain – is the great antagonist of serious thought” (137).⁷

According to Dowling, instead of attending schools that have given in to the consumerist ideology of sports, high-achieving students choose schools committed to the true educational values of curiosity, inquiry, and engagement. And this “brain drain” doesn’t just apply to students, but faculty as well. Dowling’s book is a memoir, the true story of his own flight from the sports-obsessed University of New Mexico – where the quality of incoming students was so bad that “raising the ACT minimum merely to 20 would exclude nearly 65 percent of New Mexico’s high school graduates” (18) – to Rutgers, where “high-SAT kids in [his] classes were setting a pace that encouraged more average students to extend their reach” (33). When brilliant Ivy League Ph.D.s, lacking the enrollment numbers necessary to teach courses on literary modernism, are assigned to teach remedial freshman composition about “subject-verb agreement,” the message is clear: “We *can’t* go on like this” (15). It’s time to move on.

Like many like-minded critics of college athletics,⁸ Dowling favors combating the business of college sports with “de-emphasis” – the elimination of all institutional factors that produce differences between student-athletes and the student body writ large.⁹ Schools which have deemphasized college sports award no scholarships or other major advantages to their athletes, which means that the students who participate in basketball, football, rowing, and lacrosse at these schools are identical to the ones who study beside them in the libraries.¹⁰ From a certain perspective, de-emphasis would actualize Dink

Stover's dream of democracy among the student body by preserving what Owen Johnson, the NCAA, and even William Dowling himself loves about college sports – that good things happen when “competition [is] undertaken for the right reasons by people...who realiz[e] that athletics is nothing unless you do it for the love of the sport” (184) – while at the same time eliminating the economic and symbolic influence that privileges athletic performance at the expense of pure academic excellence. Put differently, the logic behind de-emphasis holds that the only way to achieve Stover's vision of a “democratic” institution where students are “free to know that strange, guarded mystery – life” is to liberate the university from both the economic influence of the athletic scholarship and the symbolic value of semi-professional athletes whose relationship to the schools they represent is little more than an unhappy marriage of convenience.

So if *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is a novel that imagines the university as an academic institution corrupted by business, perhaps the most refined (and successful) version of the de-emphasis fantasy is *The Art of Fielding*, the story of a university in which business has been totally written out.¹¹ A liberal arts college located in a secluded northern Wisconsin town, the fictional Westish is, with respect to sports at least, the conceptual opposite of Dupont – the kind of “school that had always taken pride in the mediocrity of its athletics” (426). As a member of the NCAA's Division III the Harpooners do not offer athletic scholarships, meaning the Westish College “Harpooners” are true members of the student body rather than hired guns who despise learning. In fact, athletes are so well integrated into Westish's academic life that one of its former quarterbacks (turned Harvard Ph.D.) is now the university's president and hyper-intellectuals like Owen Dunne still make the team – a player so uninterested in

baseball that he spends his time in the dugout reading *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* instead of paying attention to what's happening on the field (38). And while Dink Stover exchanges athletic performance for social distinction and Jojo Johanssen does the same for a Dupont degree, it's impossible for even the most talented members of the Harpooners to extract profits from their athleticism. Team captain Mike Schwartz drives a broken down car whose "windows [are] impossible to roll up" (144). More to the point, Schwartz seems incapable of transforming his athletic ability into any material advantages whatsoever; upon graduating Schwartz will owe "eighty thousand dollars in student loans" (136) on what appears to be a comparatively worthless history degree, and although he is the "captain of two teams" the law schools that uniformly reject him don't give "credit" for "extracurriculars" (173).

What the characters in *The Art of Fielding* do get credit for, however, is their performance on the field, and what ultimately makes that credit valuable is that it's imagined to be independent from economic instrumentality. Indeed, the whole point of Westish's baseball field is to produce an autonomous space that functions according to its own rules and procedures, far removed from business interests that might define or influence its operations. For the Harpooners, "Winners win. Losers get booted," (44) and though "*every day is a war*" for Schwartz and his teammates, the "constant struggle" (47) is not being waged for scholarships, SUVs, senior societies, law school applications, professional contracts, or jobs paying \$95,000 to start, but rather (as Dowling would argue) "for the right reasons" – reasons which are totally divorced from their "perversion" by business. In that sense, far from undermining the core mission of higher education, baseball in *The Art of Fielding* becomes a compelling vision of higher

education's ideal function – a way of transforming a mission statement into a meaningful lived experience for students and society. Once we understand the novel's ambition is to describe the conditions under which the Westish Harpooners could be a plausible metonym of the Westish College ideal, we can then see how the novel produces baseball as a version of the educational meritocracy that successfully functions only after capital (symbolic, economic, or otherwise) has been written out. And the novel does this by drawing a parallel between liberal education, sports, and art – all three of which are understood to be “apparently pointless affair[s], undertaken by people with a special aptitude, which sidestepped attempts to paraphrase its value yet somehow seemed to communicate something true or even crucial about The Human Condition” (256-257).

But as I have already begun to suggest with respect to the significance of lacrosse at Dupont, even in its most utopian versions the academic novel necessarily fails to get economic instrumentality out of college athletics. Within the framework of contemporary higher education, “commercialism” is neither the source nor the by-product of sports at all but rather a function of the colleges themselves. Before higher education promoted upward social mobility, colleges utilized sports to instill class solidarity among the children of the elite. Even though *Stover at Yale* represents sports as an allegory of social competition between “leaders” and “followers,” it's easy to see how, given the uniform class background of the participants, no real social antagonism was taking place. But as colleges and universities evolved to become institutions that *produced* economic differences rather than institutions that merely reflected them, so too did the meaning and function of college athletics. With apologies to Henry Adams, once the degree of Harvard was worth money in Chicago, the antagonism over who succeeded in college and how

they got there became more than symbolic. The significance of this shift, however, is not seen in literary figures like *I Am Charlotte Simmons*'s Jojo Johansson, whose payment by Dupont is emblematic of higher education's thirst for commercial profits, but rather in *The Art of Fielding*'s Mike Schwartz, who explicitly isn't paid at all. In one sense, it's certainly true that there's no profit to be found on the Westish baseball team. And yet for all of Mike Schwartz's personal struggles – raised by a single mother in Chicago's projects, addicted to drugs, burdened by debt – *The Art of Fielding* insists that his liberal Westish College education has equipped him with something that both Dowling and potential employers consider undeniably valuable *off* the field of athletic competition, above and beyond the virtues of strong personal character: “rhetorical and analytic and critical tools, tool for self-reflection, rich friends, references, respectability” (245). Which is just another way of saying that Schwartz “wasn't a kid from the projects anymore... What he had were *options*”.

The point of my analysis, then, is not to note that higher education has become big business – an observation so commonly made it's barely worth mentioning. Rather, the point would be to articulate the ways in which our culture's most compelling forms of resistance to the business of higher education are not resistance at all but rather the system's symbolic core – a set of discursive and institutional practices which have become ideologically necessary for the system's reproduction. Which is why perhaps our richest form of representing the inequities of higher education – academic fiction – is so often committed to discursively framing its resistance to one form of commercialism while, at the same time, being deeply committed to a politics which legitimates a

different form of commercialism altogether – a commercialism that is not hostile to, but rather totally consistent with, the dominant social and economic order.

In the case of *Stover at Yale*, the ideological agreement permeating the novel appears as a critique of Yale's transformation into a "business" on the grounds that it has turned an entire range of activities that have their own internalized values into the symbolic currency with which a social struggle is waged. After all, *Stover at Yale* is not merely a narrative response to discourse surrounding the function of higher education at the turn of the century; it is also an intervention into the popular literature of its time. According to Daniel A. Clarke (2010), beginning in the 1890s mass magazines promoted the virtues of higher education to the middle classes through fiction. Significantly, though, "the magazines did not reflect a changing reality in the image of college portrayed on their pages; they *actively created this ideal* out of a response to the sense of crisis perceived among their male readers" (18, emphasis mine). That is to say, the notion that universities could effectively manage the contradictions at the heart of progressive era business culture – rugged individuality, practicality, and self-made manhood on the one hand; cultural authority, creativity, and class formation on the other – is, at its core, a literary phenomenon intentionally constructed through widely circulated print media at the turn of the century. It was into this cultural field that *Stover at Yale* imagines its resistance, speaking back to popular fictions dramatizing the benefits of a college education to business-minded middle-class readers who were skeptical about the advantages of sending their sons to college.¹² But the narrative solution to Johnson's business problem is not, as one might imagine, to abolish either the institutions that produce Yale's currency market (senior societies) or the ones that extract its wages (the

football team); rather, Johnson's dream for Yale is to abolish its secrecy – to “retain the privilege any club has of excluding outsiders” but to do so by openly acknowledging social struggle so that membership in these clubs “stands as a reward of merit” for all to see (342, 343). What this acknowledgement prefigures, of course, is the rebirth of higher education in football's own image – the end of higher education based on a secretly held and largely *denied* form of social currency called cultural capital and the beginning of higher education based on a different form of currency all together, namely personal achievement.

In that sense, it's not hard to see how Johnson's meritocratic fantasy has become a version of the school system inhabited by the characters in *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. As a poor girl from rural North Carolina, Charlotte Simmons would lack both the economic and cultural capital (not to mention the correct gender) to attend the school system described in *Stover at Yale*. But because she is exceptionally bright, Dupont recruits Simmons on a full scholarship. In fact, because Dupont is overflowing with “smart kids” that have “hosed the SATs and the APs and the GPAs like it's their job” (255), it is in some sense exactly the kind of institution Johnson was imagining at the turn of the century – one where students are admitted for their achievements and not their background. The problem in this case is that Stover's dream for higher education is being undermined by recruited athletes, who from the novel's perspective not only don't deserve to be at Dupont, but whose preferential admission to the university represents an entire business culture hostile to the academic meritocracy embodied by Simmons. In this version, the novel's narrative resistance understands itself as a rejection of Dupont's transformation into a business on the grounds that both the shallow rich students and the

struggling poor ones interfere with the scholastic mission of the university. Yet here too the narrative solution is not to reimagine the university as an institution that works to abolish the unequal economic relations produced by business but rather to insist upon its unrealized potential to perfect them. By suggesting that Dupont deemphasize and return to its “core academic mission,” Wolfe produces the school as a place that rewards exceptional poor kids like Simmons for their intellectual excellence by placing them in the jobs that Dupont graduates are expected to have. But in doing so, the school must also necessarily exclude the vast majority of poor kids like Vernon Congers who lack either the support or the innate ability to be admitted into college in the first place. Put differently, in its resistance to the “business of sports” *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is a novel that imagines higher education as an imperfect technology for sorting a population of widely disparate natural talents into widely disparate economic positions rather than a technology interested in, or capable of, eliminating those positions altogether.

Despite these objections, it seems like every academic today believes that big-time college athletics at schools like Rutgers, Duke, and Dupont is a threat to the scholastic mission of higher education and ultimately harmful to the earnest students like Simmons and Gelin who are enrolled there. Furthermore, funding stadiums, offering scholarships to marginal athletes, and soliciting applications from sports fans make it difficult to foster an intellectual culture that attracts and retains talented faculty members like Dowling, who no doubt entertain offers from rival universities all the time. But what these critics fail to recognize is that insofar as Dowling’s move to Rutgers is seen as a victory for serious academic pursuits, it’s also symptomatic of the economic and political realities that facilitated his transfer – namely, an intense competition between colleges

and universities to attract top students and faculty. And that while competition between schools has the advantage of rewarding high-achieving students and faculty by uniting them within the same universities, it has also led to the consolidation of “educational capital” in fewer and fewer hands. To put this another way would be to note that the same procedures helping to bolster academic values by recruiting Dowling to Rutgers are, by extension, robbing the students at New Mexico of their most talented and effectual teachers.

What this means for larger discourses around higher education is that Dowling’s commitment to academic values is in fact totally consistent with the business values he seeks to resist. When “marginal” students at New Mexico – 50% of which qualify for Pell Grants – lose faculty of Dowling’s caliber, it is difficult to see how the *overall* academic mission of higher education can be achieved without a corresponding belief in the power of competitive markets to distribute human and educational capital where and when it most acutely valued.¹³ The “high-SAT kids” might be setting the pace for the merely average students at Rutgers, but it is precisely because of competitive admissions programs that there are comparatively large numbers of “high-SAT kids” at Rutgers to begin with. And insofar as college sports teams are imagined to be plausible metonyms of the schools they represent, what novels like *I Am Charlotte Simmons* and *The Art of Fielding* help us see is that athletic spectacles are neither the intrusion of external business values into the groves of academe nor the ideological tools universities use to conceal that intrusion; rather, big time college athletics are *our academic values laid bare* – the cultural reproduction of the competitive antagonism the fuels contemporary higher education.

When it comes to sports, the new campus novel tells the same story as the old campus novel – a story in which the corruption of sports emblemizes the corruption of the university as a whole (its takeover by business) while the ideal of sports uncorrupted by business represents the ideal of the university itself (the intrinsic values self-improvement). But the campus novel tells this story, as we began by noting, in a very different historical context. In the years in which *Stover at Yale* is set, the university has no economic function because its students are already wealthy, and the business that threatens corrupt it – the competition for symbolic prestige – isn't really a business at all. In the modern university, by contrast, where the students are the sixty percent instead of the six percent, the university not only is understood to have an economic function but finds its very justification in that function. Unlike Stover's Yale, the college degree doesn't simply reflect inherited class position; it produces and justifies it. So when commercialized sports are condemned today, the critique imagines an alternative, utopian academic world – as we see in both Dowling and Harbach – in which true merit is valued because the system works to recognize and reward it. In this respect, the basic narrative is the same but the new the social function of the university gives the story a different point.

However, as we've also seen, universities like Duke and Yale today – and even to a lesser extent Dowling's Rutgers – don't really serve the economic function the meritocracy attributes to them; their students are just as rich as were Stover and his classmates. So instead of telling the same story to make a different point, these novels are actually telling the same story and making the same point: the university is largely a site for the upper class to compete with itself in games that have essentially no economic meaning because their outcomes are more or less assured. And here Wolfe has a certain

advantage over Harbach and Dowling since that's the point he's actually trying to make: everyone at Dupont is rich and nobody cares about anything. Whereas Dowling and Harbach imagine that universities that aren't like the real New Mexico and are instead like the fictional Westish actually provide a kind of narrative blueprint for the meritocracy – in other words, if we could somehow abolish the athletic scholarship that the meaning of the college degree would be strengthened – *I Am Charlotte Simmons* provides a vision of American higher education which makes clear that the relevant competition has already been won at birth.

But of course *I Am Charlotte Simmons* has its own utopian fantasy, suggested in the romantic union of the poor scholarship intellectual and the poor scholarship athlete at the symbolic center of Dupont's campus – the basketball arena. By the end of the novel, both Charlotte and Jojo Johanssen are well on their way to leveraging their degrees into secure economic futures, but at least they'll have some interesting things to think about after they get there – Jojo with respect to “conceptual thinking” in Socrates, and Charlotte with respect to the first-personal plural in Flaubert. In our world, the economic value of contemplating the deeper mysteries of life is nearly zero, except when it's attached to a degree – something that, even under mass education, only thirty percent of college-aged Americans are actually able to achieve. By contrast, in a world in which money makes no difference, like the academic worlds inhabited by Stover, Charlotte, and their classmates, a humanities degree may take on entirely new forms of value, but that's only because their academic striving has no economic consequences.¹⁴

And in this sense, even *I Am Charlotte Simmons*'s much deeper cynicism about academic competition helps us understand something about both the formal

conservativism of the campus novel and its increasing centrality in American culture. It is increasingly central not mainly, as I began by suggesting, because more people are going to college today than at any point in history, but rather because college plays a much more crucial role in American society's understanding of how social class is formed and what it means. Outside of the literary field, it's not hard to see how obsessed contemporary Americans have become with narratives about the necessity of going to college and the rewards they will inevitably find there. From the education section in the *New York Times* to President Obama's claim that "every American [should] commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training," we believe that colleges embody (imperfect) equality of opportunity and serve as a gateway toward a more egalitarian society (Michael Shear, "Obama Defends Remarks Promoting College," *New York Times*, February 27, 2012.). The literary field has in many ways replicated this obsession. And while it's true that of the 200,000 or so original works of fiction published in the United States each year only a tiny fraction can be considered campus novels in the strict sense of the term,¹⁵ it's difficult to imagine another narrative genre which has attracted the attention of so many writers considered to be at the heart of twentieth century American fiction: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Joyce Carol Oates, John Barth, Don DeLillo, Philip Roth, Bret Easton Ellis, Donna Tartt, Michael Chabon, and Francine Prose, to name but a few.¹⁶

The pervasive contemporary belief that colleges and universities are the central institutions of social transformation explains why the boys in *Stover at Yale* didn't worry so much about whether they deserved their wealth while the boys and girls in every elite college today do; it's not just that they take pride in their academic achievements; it's that

without the educational meritocracy there would be nothing to imagine yourself being proud of. Which is to say that people like Charlotte Simmons's roommate Beverly – a graduate first of Groton and then Dupont; daughter all along of a Fortune 500 executive – understand themselves as deserving their prosperity, which in some sense they certainly do. And the point of the contemporary campus novel is either to show them how they're right or, by condemning the role money plays in colleges, to show everybody else how in a reformed system – if we could just make college open, fair, and meritocratic – they would be right. In other words, the attack on economic corruption today repeats the attack on economic corruption yesterday but for far higher ideological stakes, since today the vision of college that isn't corrupted matters not just to the pleasures of the upper class but to the legitimization of the upper class.¹⁷ We should interpret the proliferation of the American campus novel, then, as our culture's attempt to engage with a social problem that was of minor concern for Dink Stover but which has become ubiquitous in our own: that because the economic rewards of a bachelor's degree are rigidly pronounced, it's difficult to deny the extent to which American higher education produces social inequality as a structural outcome. But in representing the various ways colleges and universities fail to achieve their egalitarian missions, it's important to note how these narrative forms almost universally prescribe as treatment a different form of the disease: more inclusive admissions, more civil campuses, more financial aid, more teachers, better teachers, more college. In short, a thousand different ways of imagining a more-refined educational meritocracy in which everyone is sorted and no one left behind, even if they wanted it. Because today, perhaps more than ever before, it is necessary for the producers and consumers of literary fiction to believe that universal higher education makes our

unequal distribution of resources fair or, for those who have been historically excluded from the groves of academe, that a reformed higher education system would make a different version of the unequal distribution of resources fair, but this time for a different type of person.

¹ Carol Holly (1995, 96) writes about Henry James's decision to leave Harvard Law School before the end of his first year to pursue literature. Indeed, James's autobiographical fragment "The Turning Point of My Life" suggests that his experience in law school was a contributing factor in his decision.

² According to William Bowen et al. (2005, 14), "[e]nrollments in higher education among the traditional college-age (18- to 24-year-old) population remained below 5 percent until the early 1920s before rising to approximately 15 percent in 1949 at the height of veteran activity under the G.I. Bill. The fact that approximately 60 percent of current college-age youth are enrolled in some form of tertiary education testifies to the social and economic advantages of a college degree today. For much of our history (at least until the early 20th century), the perceived lack of utility in attending college—even among the financially able – suggests that the principle constraints on "college-going" were not always a lack of academic preparation or the absence of funds but rather doubts about higher education's relevance to social and economic mobility."

³ Data comes from the Office of Postsecondary Education's (2014) "Equity in Athletics" survey.

⁴ *Stover at Yale* articulates the ways in which sports were central to the institutional logic of an American higher education system committed to exploring that "strange, guarded mystery" of life through disinterested play. Echoing popular sentiments at the time, Teddy Roosevelt (1907) told a group of Harvard students that higher education's primary function was not the production of knowledge or profit but rather sound character: "Athletics are good; study is even better, and best of all is the development of the type of character for the lack of which, in an individual as in a nation, no amount of brilliancy of mind or of strength of body will atone" (1026). Regardless of one's innate ability, athletic competition was believed to

instill solidarity, leadership, discipline, and perhaps most importantly, the courage to persevere in the face of overwhelming odds. But even as Roosevelt encouraged college students to participate in sports, he emphasized the danger in abusing them. Sports were, at their core, a means of producing internalized virtues rather than a technology for producing economic profits:

I trust I need not add that in defending athletics, I would not for one moment be understood as excusing that perversion of athletics which would make it the end of life, instead of merely a means in life. It is first-class, healthful play, and is useful as such. But play is not business, and it is a very poor business indeed for a college man to learn nothing but sport...Play while you play and work while you work; and though play is a mighty good thing, remember that you had better never play at all than to get into a condition of mind where you regard play as the serious business of life.

Paradoxically, then, Stover's "struggle of ambitions with all the heartache that lay underneath" qualifies as "useful" precisely because it was not "the serious business of life." On the contrary, both Stover's struggle and his ambition were "free" insofar as they had nothing to do with business at all. *Stover at Yale* thus represents a historical moment in which the value of athletics was derived from what it offered its producers alone, and imagines a way in which Stover might benefit from those struggles by resisting their "perversion" as either a means to achieve economic returns or as an exercise solipsism.

⁵ If the value of sports was predicated on its refusal to generate profits, this was equally true of the institutions which housed and sanctioned them. It was not just sports, after all, but higher education itself that resisted the "perversion" of business. When Harvard history professor Henry Adams ([1918] 1999, 256) was told that "the degree of Harvard College is worth money...in Chicago" he was upset because, like sports, the liberal arts were understood to produce citizenship, curiosity, leadership, and temperament – characteristics unrelated (if not opposed) to any particular set of monetized skills: "Exactly as one kind of man sneers at college work because he does not think it bears any immediate fruit in money-getting," Roosevelt (1900, 55) said, "so another type of man sneers at college sports because he does not see their immediate effect for good in practical life". From Roosevelt's perspective, education had no more to do with "money-getting" than sports had to do with "practical life" – both institutions exist as tools of self-improvement that, if they were to be successful, could not be monetized.

⁶ According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1996), “college enrollment data by SES reveals that 39.7 percent of high SES 8th-graders attended NCAA Division I colleges compared to 14.7 percent for middle SES students and 5.2 percent for low SES students. Similar differences were seen by SES in reported participation in intercollegiate athletics with 1988 8th-grade students from higher SES groups more likely to report participation in intercollegiate athletics at NCAA Division I colleges than those from lower SES groups. For example, 5.0 percent of high SES cohort members reported participation as compared to 1.5 percent for middle SES and 0.5 percent for low SES 8th-grade students. High SES students were 10 times as likely to report participation in intercollegiate athletics as were low SES students.”

⁷ For Dowling (2007), the rise of college sports as a profit-generating spectacle indicates that universities have succumbed to what he calls “commercialization: the erosion and then finally the extinction of the university as the last remaining social space in which learning – that is, ideas and knowledge as a sphere of human consciousness valuable in itself, one providing an essential perspective on the wider world of practical concern – had been able to hold out against marketing and advertising forces” (86).

⁸ For similar critiques, see Sack (2008) *Counterfeit Amateurs: An Athlete's Journey through the Sixties to the Age of Academic Capitalism*; Sperber (2000) *Beer And Circus: How Big-time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education*; Yost (2010) *Varsity Green: A Behind The Scenes Look At Culture and Corruption In College Athletics*; and Zimbalist (1999) *Unpaid Professionals: Commercialism and Conflict In Big-time College Sports*.

⁹ In 1939, the University of Chicago famously discontinued its football program because it was considered a distraction by university president Robert Maynard Hutchins, who claimed that he did “not see the relationship of those highly industrialized affairs on Saturday afternoons to higher learning in America.” Fifty years later, the American Association of University Professors (1990) wrote that “[t]he time has come to recognize that intercollegiate athletics poses a major governance problem for American colleges and universities” because “academic programs are often threatened, but seldom benefited, by changes in the fortunes of the athletic program.” More recently, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (2007) adopted “a revised

statement to reinvigorate efforts on the part of governing boards to align intercollegiate athletics with the mission, vision, and values of higher education.” The “academic values” under consideration here are of course related to the academic merit of student athletes, who often receive preferential treatment in their admission decisions and who, once they arrive on campus, earn comparatively low grades.

¹⁰ Though deemphasized schools do not offer athletic scholarships, it’s not entirely true that these student-athletes are identical to the rest of the student body. College admissions officers construct merit according to a wide variety of criteria, including family history (legacy), diversity, and athletic ability. That said, William Bowen et al. (2003, 76) have shown that recruited athletes at highly selective universities have an admission advantage of more than 50 percentage points, meaning they are more than four times as likely of being admitted as comparable applicants not on a coach’s recruiting list.

¹¹ After a bidding war among six publishers, Harbach sold *The Art of Fielding* to Little, Brown for \$650,000 – one of the “highest prices for a man’s first novel on a topic appealing to a male audience” and not even the highest bid he was offered (Harbach took less money to work with Little, Brown’s publisher Michael Pietsch, the editor of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*). The novel was well-received, garnering positive reviews in most major publications. HBO bought the television rights before the novel was published (Philip Boroff, “Unemployed Harvard Man Auctions Baseball Novel for \$650,000.” *Bloomberg Business*. March 30, 2010).

¹² Owen Johnson (“Owen Johnson Attacks His Critics” *New York Times*, May 19, 1912) articulated his opposition to the “snobbery” of the society system in one of the leading mass magazines of his day – *Collier’s* – which begs the question as to why he would bother writing fiction at all. By his own accounts, *Stover at Yale* is not “a novel with a purpose” – a position that aligns Johnson’s understanding of sports and education with his understanding of literature: “I am staunch in my belief that the novel with a purpose is not the purest form of fiction. The best fiction is not inspired by a purpose, for the very reason that the literary man, the thinker who writes, should have the most dispassionate view of all, and his criticism of life is mainly valuable in so far as he is able to perceive the prejudiced points of view of the leaders of the social life of which he is writing and can readjust the values so as to present a truer criticism...If the opinion of such characters as Brockhurst, the insurgent, have been given wider currency than

the rest, I prefer to believe it is because they represent a sane criticism and point of view, and not because the book was designed as a pamphlet". So Johnson at least believed that what he was doing was using dispassionate literary imagination to perceive and represent a human prejudice better than any polemical essay ever could.

¹³ See Mortenson (2004) "Pell Grant Enrollment at State Flagship Universities, 1992-1993 and 2001-2002."

¹⁴ In many ways, higher education's subsumption under capital accumulation makes it difficult to envision how colleges might successfully intervene in the dominant order. Perhaps Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* ([1920] 1995, 252-253) gets closest by imagining the university not as an institution set apart from society through the "privilege of excluding outsiders," but rather as an institution that functions only when that privilege has no meaning. On the one hand, the aristocratic Amory Blaine believes that "every child....should have an equal start" – that, like Stover, the university should be committed to the equality of opportunity that defines a functioning meritocracy. But on the other hand, *This Side of Paradise*'s utopian gesture is that such distinctions should not be condemned for acting as symbolic currency. Rather, they should be celebrated *precisely because* they are alternatives to economic currency: "If you'd gone to college you'd have been struck by the fact that the men there would work twice as hard for any one of a hundred petty honors as those other men did who were earning their way through" and that "if there were ten men insured against either wealth or starvation, and offered a green ribbon for five hours' work a day and a blue ribbon for ten hours' work a day, nine out of ten of them would be trying for the blue ribbon. That competitive instinct only wants a badge". Here Blaine suggests that if the broader world were more like Princeton and Yale at the turn of the century– if and only if we lived in a place where money makes no difference because everyone was insured against poverty – will the symbolic currency that the university produces as a byproduct of its evaluative function be free of its brutalizing economic consequences.

¹⁵ The 200,000 figure is taken from Mark McGurl and Mark Algee-Hewitt's (2015) "Between Canon and Corpus: Six Perspectives on 20th-Century Novels" and represents an estimate of the number of novels published annually during the past decade. As one might expect, there has been steady growth over the past few decades.

¹⁶ John Kramer (2002) has published an extensive bibliography of campus fiction, *The American College Novel: An Annotated Bibliography*, that contains well over six hundred entries. Since its publication, such notable authors as Jeffrey Eugenides (*The Marriage Plot*, 2011), Zadie Smith (*On Beauty*, 2005), and Philip Roth (*Indignation*, 2008) have all published academic fiction.

¹⁷ According to Williams (579, 2012) “the proliferation of the academic novel results...from an audience for whom higher education is natural and expected, and who takes the professor as a conventional figure. Also, it is an audience that still assumes the novel as a central medium of expression – in other words, an adult audience, probably of those born in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, who still read books and might see their own fate in the situations that confront the beleaguered professors in academic novels.”

Chapter III: Injuries of Class: Mass Education and the American Campus Novel

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In Bret Easton Ellis's 1987 novel *The Rules of Attraction*, Richard Jared lights a cigarette over dinner at the Ritz-Carlton and announces that he has changed his name to "Dick" before telling his mother Mimi about the subjects he's studying at Sarah Lawrence College in New York: "Gangbanging 111. Freebasing tutorial... [and] Oral Sex Workshop" (150). And although Mimi is incensed at what she thinks three years at an elite college have done to her son—"Obviously," she says, "I can see we should never have sent you there" (152)—their dinner guest and longtime friend Paul Denton observes that Mimi's fears about educational influence are misplaced, not because Sarah Lawrence is a bad school, but because Richard "was always a rude jerk" (151).

One way of understanding *The Rules of Attraction* would be to interpret it as a novel of education—a *Bildungsroman* for contemporary America. As Franco Moretti notes in *The Way of the World*, the genre functions as a symbolic form that can "reduce and contain" (242) a set of social contradictions—chief among them the conflicting imperatives of self-determination and assimilation. The *Bildungsroman*'s "symbolic miracle" (vi) is thus its ability to make the discrepancy between internalized professed values and externalized operational ones "disappear" (72). Seen from this perspective, Dick Jared stages what first appears to be individual resistance to the dominant order of bourgeois social relations but is later revealed to be its most compelling unification: even as Dick complains about how much he "hate[s] college" (Ellis 170), he does so through the ubiquitous language of MTV—what Paul Denton recognizes as "Bonnie Tyler" clichés (172). The point, then, would not be to note that Dick has unknowingly been

socialized into voicing his resistance through the language of the dominant culture, but rather to see how Dick's cynicism would be, in the contemporary moment, the very mark of his successful socialization.

And yet to see *The Rules of Attraction* as *Bildungsroman* would be to understand its formal commitments as responding to particular historical and social conditions that, as Moretti correctly identifies, no longer exist. Moretti cites the growth of “impersonal institutions” (233)—business bureaucracy, the Church—for the genre's decline, but for my purposes the crucial change which renders the *Bildungsroman* an obsolete form was the vast expansion of (higher) education: a system that stresses “the objective side of socialization – functional integration of individuals *in* the social system” (230). But in this version of socialization, Moretti notes, the school “neglects the subjective side of the process: the legitimation *of* the social system inside the mind of individuals, which had been a great achievement of the *Bildungsroman*. What the school deals with are means, not ends; techniques, not values. A pupil must know his lesson, but he doesn't have to believe in its truth. Convincing the subject that what he must do is also symbolically right is, however, exactly what modern socialization is all about.” Moretti thus concludes that given a historical framework which saw the individual, once an autonomous entity, become an instantiation of the mass, the post-1914 political scenario “could hardly encourage a rebirth of the *Bildungsroman*: that mass movements may be constitutive of individual identity—and not just destructive of it—was to remain an unexplored possibility of Western narrative” (232).¹

But as a recent body of scholarship has shown, far from defying the narrative imagination, the “mass” has become a central part of it. And indeed it is precisely

because of educational institutions, and not in spite of them, that the *Bildungsroman* has become a necessary symbolic form in the latter half of the 20th century—a form, I argue, which has been reimagined as the American campus novel and repurposed to “reduce and contain” the social contradictions inherent in the postwar educational meritocracy.

Campus novels such as *The Rules of Attraction* have much to say about the significance of the growth in higher education and have received increased critical attention in recent years for their ability to represent what Jeffrey J. Williams calls the “centrality of higher education in American life” (577). By this I don’t mean that campus novels provide useful data about the history of American higher education – in fact, they do just the opposite. That is, if we read both the American campus novel and its most influential criticism alongside that history, what we see is a constellation of texts that are committed both to redescribing the postwar university as an institution that can combat social inequality and to making invisible a social inequality that the university not only doesn’t combat but instead helps to legitimate. In fact, one of the greatest achievements of a text like Mark McGurl’s brilliant *The Program Era* has been, like the novels that are its subject, to reinforce a certain vision of the university as a technology for increasing opportunity, democracy, and egalitarianism, when, as I suggest below, for most Americans the reality is quite different. Indeed, the symbolic work of the American campus novel has been to imagine a system that stages social conflicts between the deserving and the entitled when in fact the two categories have become functionally indistinguishable.

Ellis’s *Rules of Attraction* gets closer to representing the structures underlining this reality than does much of the corresponding criticism, suggesting (as in the dinner

table conversation above) both a certain skepticism about the democratizing mission of higher education and some alternate interpretations of its actual function. For Dick the college campus is nothing more than a playground. And despite the fact that it's a very expensive playground—tuition at Sarah Lawrence was \$17,440 in 1987—Dick can skip class and behave like a “rude jerk” because he can afford it.² After all, the banks in Dick's family have been there “about a century and a half” (148), and if he graduates thinking that semiotics is “the study of laundry” (172) it won't make any difference to his economic prospects whatsoever, since the same banks paying his sizable tuition will one day secure his future. Of course, even if Dick did have to apply for jobs, not knowing the definition of semiotics wouldn't hurt him any more than knowing the definition would help him, since almost no one believes that a comprehensive understanding of semiotics qualifies an applicant for any job whatsoever. In that sense the connection between the educational process and its outcomes is made meaningless by Dick's wealth, and what he chooses to study at his scholastic bacchanal matters as much (or as little) as the value of his diploma.

To be sure, Dick is wrong to think of colleges like Sarah Lawrence as hedonistic playgrounds. In fact, just the opposite is true—by 1987 elite schools were academically selective, and they're even more competitive today.³ But Dick's fantasy nevertheless reproduces the history of the higher education system in significant ways. Prior to the 1940s many elite private universities had well-earned reputations as “country clubs” merely posing as academic institutions. At the turn of the century academic standards among the “Big Three” (Harvard, Yale, and Princeton), already in steep decline since the 1880s, were in crisis due to class-based admission practices aimed at recruiting

“gentleman” applicants from a small pool of elite prep schools (*Chosen* 21-22). An indifference toward academic performance, coupled with the central importance of “eating” and social clubs among the student body, created a frivolous atmosphere similar to the one described by Dick Jared in 1987. In fact, at the turn of the century “[s]o anti-intellectual was the undergraduate culture at Yale that classes vied with one another for the honor of being the least studious. In 1904, the yearbook boasted of having ‘more gentlemen and fewer scholars than any other class in the memory of man’” (20). Indeed, Princeton’s reputation as “the finest country club in America” was not only well understood to be a mark of upper class distinction, but it was also the school’s strongest tool in recruiting applicants looking for an “exclusive” collegiate experience that had nothing to do with academic ability whatsoever (59). And even when, in 1922, the school’s leading students made a strong push to broaden admission criteria, it wasn’t for the purposes of increasing access to marginalized groups such as Catholics and Jews (to say nothing of African Americans and the poor) both of which made up less than 5% of the freshman class in 1900 combined (23); on the contrary, the *Daily Princetonian* published an editorial claiming their school should “develop, not mere scholars, but *leaders*—men sound of body, mind, and spirit” (127) in order *to further marginalize* academic performance in admissions criteria because Catholics and Jews were proving capable of out-performing their WASP counterparts on the required entrance examinations (128-136).

Just as they were in 1927, elite universities are among richest and the most exclusive institutions in America, but what Dick fails to recognize is that in 1987 their exclusivity no longer derives from class privilege but rather intense academic

competition. Over the past sixty years higher education's enormous growth has fundamentally altered both its social function and its meaning within the cultural imagination.⁴ With the aid of massive government investment in such programs such as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (the "G.I. Bill"),⁵ the National Defense Education Act of 1958, and the Higher Education Act of 1965, the United States has remade its occupational and intellectual landscape, bringing millions of people through the higher education system and placing them within the new postwar economy.⁶ Rapid expansion following the war meant that it was structurally impossible to accept cohorts of men like Dick Jared—sons of wealthy bankers more interested in learning about substances than semiotics. As a result, opening the gates has empowered universities to recruit students outside the narrow confines of the elite, producing a student body eager to earn the economic advantages that postwar higher education has historically provided.

And it is this conflict between the deserving and the merely rich which is at the heart of Mimi Jared's insistence that she "should never have sent" Dick to Sarah Lawrence—an institution whose contemporary status among the elite masks the political and economic realities of the postwar meritocracy. Dick's behavior is emblematic of higher education's legacy, not its present, and while it's true that elite colleges have almost always housed and trained the nation's leaders, today's schools have been called upon to select and transform those leaders from a broad range of deserving applicants instead of a narrow group of inheritors. It was only after elite schools began actively recruiting students based on merit rather than money that graduating from those schools was no longer a mark of class privilege but rather a sign of achievement. And while it has never been true that a semiotics diploma from an elite school could guarantee a student

the kind of job that secures their wealth, it just might put them inside a classroom with someone who can.⁷ More to the point, and contrary Dick's fantasy, a semiotics degree from a postwar university indicates that the student who has secured it, regardless of their racial, gender, or socioeconomic background, can succeed in an environment overflowing with intelligent, highly motivated people—an environment very similar to the makeup of today's upper managerial class. Mimi is therefore entirely justified in her anxiety over Dick's academic performance because the successful completion of the college curriculum has become a prerequisite to membership in the upper classes—an opportunity that by 1987 was open to anyone.⁸ And the meritocratic procedures that determine a successful college career—from SAT preparation to the application process to core curriculum requirements—means class status in American society is no longer something that can be simply inherited; it must now be earned.⁹

Insofar as universities are no longer synonymous with the legitimization of class reproduction but, more importantly, class mobility, it is not Bret Easton Ellis but rather his Bennington classmate Donna Tartt who best articulates how campus novels function to represent the social contradictions at the heart of the postwar meritocracy. Tartt's 1992 *The Secret History*, published five years after *The Rules of Attraction*, takes place within the same elite school system but examines how a poor but talented student might utilize education for economic and social progress. After a stint at his local community college, Tartt's protagonist Richard Papen finds himself “by a trick of fate” (11) accepted to the “[p]rogressive” and “[h]ighly selective” Hampden College.¹⁰ The problem is that although he is a talented translator of Greek, Papen—whose “father ran a gas station” and whose mother “answer[ed] phones in the office of one of the big chip factories outside

San Jose” (7)—cannot actually afford to attend Hampden and undergo the social transformation that elite schools are expected to perform. Nevertheless, in an implicit case of “need-blind” admission practices (and further evidence of Hampden’s progressive attitude), “sympathetic professors wrote letters” and “exceptions of various sorts were made” (12) on Papen’s behalf so that he could attend a private college in Vermont and finally break “the despair [his] surroundings inspired” (10).

At Hampden, Papen quickly learns that he “does not have anything in common” with his classmates, the vast majority of whom are wealthy (9). While he relies on a menial work-study position as part of his financial aid package, the student body enjoys parties, expensive cars, and fancy dinners. More substantial than feelings of inadequacy, however, is Papen’s poverty, which not only places his life in jeopardy during the winter vacation, but also becomes a major barrier to his academic success. He discovers the school’s only Greek teacher Julian Morrow “conducts the selection [of his students] on a personal rather than academic basis” (14) and that no one had “heard of his accepting a pupil who [like Papen] is on such considerable financial aid” (32). Still, through a combination of buying a new outfit, lying about his class background, and impressing his fellow students with his knowledge of Greek, Papen successfully enters Morrow’s cohort and begins his journey as a nascent member of the Hampden elite.

Richard Papen’s social transformation in *The Secret History*—from a community college in California to the elite school system in New England—thus reflects a dominant cultural narrative that understands education as the essential technology for producing American egalitarianism through meritocratic class mobility. Notable writers such as Mary McCarthy (*The Groves of Academe*), Vladimir Nabokov (*Pnin / Pale Fire*), John

Barth (*Giles Goat-Boy*), Don DeLillo (*End Zone / White Noise*), Philip Roth (*The Human Stain*), Tom Wolfe (*I Am Charlotte Simmons*), Zadie Smith (*On Beauty*), and Jeffery Eugenides (*The Marriage Plot*) and others have all used postwar higher education as a fundamental backdrop for understanding the difficulties that race, gender, and class pose in upward social mobility, and the various ways the university has aided, impeded, or ignored those ambitions.¹¹ In fact, one of the genre's defining plot structures has been higher education's resistance to incorporating marginalized populations and the corresponding success or failure of outcast students in adapting to the white, upper-class world that academia has historically served. Thus, beginning with his need-blind admission and financial aid, through his social isolation, and concluding with his difficult integration into Morrow's cohort, Papen's struggles in *The Secret History* are typical of the postwar campus novel and reproduce the widely held view that contemporary colleges and universities maintain traces of "The Big Three" in their considerable resistance to the many outsiders that have come to populate their halls. Equally significant, however, is the corresponding belief that despite these numerous barriers, Papen's experience at Hampden ultimately reflects the educational system's inclusiveness since, in Papen's own words, Morrow "can't be all that elitist if he accepted me" (32).

Furthermore, if the emergence of a democratic "mass" educational system has significantly influenced the way novelists like Ellis, Tartt, and others think about class narratives, it has also influenced the way contemporary literary criticism thinks about their novels.¹² Asserting that "the rise of mass higher education in the postwar period might well claim an objective priority...if we are to understand postwar American

literature in genuinely historical materialist terms” (283-284), perhaps the most significant book about the history of the American novel published during the past five years has been Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era*. Writing for *The New Yorker*, Harvard University professor and former creative writing student Louis Menand praises McGurl for his ability to side-step arguments about whether creative writing programs produce good or bad literature, instead noting the debate itself is at the heart of both the imaginative process and the postwar educational system—anti-institutional students working toward social (and by extension, aesthetic) institutionalization: “the outside contained on the inside” (2). Menand notes that seeing the creative writing program as a mark of the inclusive, expansive higher educational system allows McGurl “to make a larger point, which is that university creative-writing programs don’t isolate writers from the world. On the contrary, university creative-writing courses situate writers in the world that most of their readers inhabit—the world of mass higher education and the white-collar workplace” (3). Likewise, in a review for *Twentieth Century Literature*, Tom Cerasulo writes that as “Mark McGurl’s terrific new book demonstrates, it was the forces of democracy and public access—not of isolation, solipsism, or elitism—that led to the formation of creative writing programs and have since colored the American fiction that has flowered there” (1).

As evidence of the Program’s increasingly dominant role in literary production, McGurl points to the increase in graduate writing departments, from a mere handful in the 1940s to over 300 programs in 2004, and argues that the expansion of higher education is intimately linked to both the proliferation of creative writing programs and the logic of their narratives (24-25). As mass education began “fundamentally alter[ing]

the demographics of higher education”, the educational opportunities produced by creative writing programs would lead to new, egalitarian aesthetic opportunities for marginalized students—a kind of “flattening of the steep slopes of Parnassus” (282). In terms of literary production, this means that the same enrollment policies that brought talented students like Raymond Carver and Sandra Cisneros into the higher education system also created fiction that marked the significance of this social transformation—stories that chronicle the success of “outsiders” like Richard Papen at Hampden, and, by the same logic, produce Mimi Jared’s anxiety over her son’s academic performance as a recognizable social fear of an entrenched elite.

It should be said, however, that McGurl’s insistence that creative writing programs have led to “the ‘democratization’ of authorship” (306) has not been without its detractors. In her well-publicized review in the *London Review of Books*, writer Elif Batuman contests the assertion that creative writing programs, in attaching themselves to mass educational institutions, have created systemic excellence: “I should state up front that I am not a fan of programme fiction. Basically, I feel about it as towards new fiction from a developing nation with no literary tradition: I recognise that it has anthropological interest, and is compelling to those whose experience it describes, but I probably wouldn’t read it for fun.” Batuman challenges McGurl’s claim that creative writing instruction could possibly democratize the literary field on the grounds that “writing, especially nicely turned prose, demands a certain surplus of money and leisure” and that “[p]retending that literary production is a non-elite activity is both pointless and disingenuous”. At the heart of Batuman’s objection is the belief that “The World Pluribus of Letters has replaced a primary standard of ‘universal literary value’ with a primary

standard of persecutedness, euphemised as ‘difference’.” It’s not as if Batuman thinks that mass higher education is bad in itself—she just doesn’t think that creative writing programs, in transforming the identities of their participants into the substance of their fiction, could (nor should) succeed in democratizing a field of aesthetic values simply by changing the demographics of its producers.

So while both McGurl and Batuman believe that the influx of previously-disenfranchised students into creative writing programs presents a challenge to received literary values, they disagree about its effects. Indeed, not only is Batuman’s refusal part of a long and popularly employed discourse that has looked skeptically at the “arrival of the masses in the halls of academe” (*Program* 293), but her underlying suspicion is a central component of McGurl’s analysis. For example, because Carver was raised in considerable poverty and was the father of two young children by the age of 20, it’s safe to say his enrollment at Chico State in 1958 was, demographically speaking, of “anthropological interest” even if he lacked the “surplus of money and leisure” necessary to create stories of “universal literary value.” Carver’s “decayed” teeth and “worn clothing” marked him as a stranger in the “self-perpetuating upper-middle-class dynamic” of competitive and prestigious writing programs such as Iowa, just as his minimalist fiction about the working poor was at odds with the dominant trends in literature (qtd in Sklenicka 90-91). John Barth saw Carver’s minimalism as emblematic of “a national decline in reading and writing skills, not only among the young (including even young apprentice writers, as a group), but among their teachers, many of whom are themselves the product of an ever-less-demanding educational system” (qtd in McGurl 293). Barth was not alone in his dissatisfaction of Carver’s work; sometime in the 1980s

“Kmart Realism” became a popular way of associating this form of fiction with low-end retail.

McGurl thus interprets “Kmart realism” as “a barely disguised” but widely practiced form of “symbolic class warfare” (297), and the term allows him to understand Carver’s fiction as an attempt to work through this condescension in the form of a shame/pride dialectic: “[l]ower middle-class modernism, as an offspring and elevation of mass educational practices, figures upward mobility as an continuing existential *process*, a *program*, a *working* of the shame/pride dialectic in the form of... fiction” (301). When poor students enter the academy, the tension between their “class identity (who you feel yourself to be)” and their “class positionality (where you currently stand)” (301) is made possible by the fact that higher education allows class positionality to be readily “changeable” while class identity lags behind and is changeable “only gradually, and perhaps always incompletely” (304). The disconnect between those psychological and social categories is perhaps what explains Carver’s return to the Iowa Writer’s Workshop in 1973 to teach in a school that had not recognized his literary talent—according to his biographer, Carver “hungered to be accepted where he once felt rejected” (Sklenicka 250). More important than his personal motives, the disconnect between class identity and class positionality made possible by mass education has transformed what was once anthropologically interesting into the very core of “literary value” and explains how Carver could obtain the publishing credentials necessary to teach at such a prestigious institution.

And insofar as Carver, in his fiction, is writing about the class to which he feels himself to belong while occupying another class altogether, he may plausibly be

understood to suffer the injuries of class in the form of insults and experience injury through the barely-disguised class-condescension that epithets like “Kmart realism” are designed to be. But if the injuries of class are predominantly affective and are expressed through class condescension, those insults are made possible because Carver’s class position renders insults the only expressible mode of injury. To put this another way would be to note that the academy’s “symbolic class warfare” must *necessarily* take place at the level of discourse since the mere fact that poor creative writing students find themselves in creative writing classrooms—and, significantly, in the universities that house and fund them—means that they have already taken the crucial first step in overcoming the actual injury of class difference, namely exclusion from the higher educational system altogether.

Or at least they would have if the narrative of mass higher education were true. But as educational historians have widely recognized, in the past 40 years there have been almost no poor students in the university to experience the psychological blows that are so central to McGurl’s analysis, and (given what we know about the kinds of things that poor students study) especially few in the creative writing classroom. Although there is evidence suggesting that poor students fare no worse than their rich counterparts once they enter the pool of credible applicants, it is nevertheless true that socioeconomic status is the single most significant factor in producing credible college applicants in the first place (*Equity* 100). In his book *Tearing Down the Gates*, Peter Sachs has shown that class disparity creates substantial achievement gaps throughout the education system. Beginning in primary school, students are sorted into “academic” (college prep) and “vocational” tracks largely along class lines. One study found that in 1992 fully 63% of

students in the highest socioeconomic group were enrolled in the academic track compared to 28% from the lowest socioeconomic group (113). Thus it comes as no surprise that there is a sharply pronounced disparity between rich and poor students in college preparedness—only 45% of seniors from the lowest social class even submit a single college application, compared to 79% from the highest group (114). Likewise, in his book *Crossing the Finish Line* William Bowen has noted that the “failure of educational attainment to continue to increase steadily is the result of problems at all stages of education, starting with pre-school and then moving through primary and secondary levels of education and on into college” (3). Bowen finds overwhelming evidence to support the claim that inherited economic disadvantages manifest themselves in high school graduation rates and college acceptances to this day. According to his research, students in the bottom-income quartile have high school graduation rates that are 23 percentage points lower than their top-income counterparts (23). In all, he found that students who come from the highest family income and parental education distribution categories are nearly *five times* more likely to graduate with a bachelor’s degree than the students from the bottom of these distributions.

Despite these trends, many Americans continue to believe that the difference between rich and poor student achievement, their widely divergent acceptance rates to college, and the threat this poses to class mobility, can still be addressed by America’s large network of two-year community colleges which are “open enrollment” and therefore accessible to anyone regardless of college preparedness. These institutions are understood to provide potential educational opportunities to those willing to capitalize upon them. But as Steven Brint and Jerome Karabel have argued, while substantially

cheaper than their four-year counterparts, community colleges are hardly the engines of economic prosperity they understand themselves to be. Brint and Karabel conclude that while “in the absence of community colleges, many highly motivated individuals...would never have entered, much less graduated from, an institution of higher education,” it is nevertheless true that “the two year institution has accentuated rather than reduced existing patterns of social inequality” by diverting (mostly poor) students away from four-year institutions (227). In fact, Curtis Reynolds has estimated that since the 1980s beginning at a two-year college actually decreases a student’s likelihood of graduating with a bachelor’s degree by nearly 30% (qtd in *Crossing* 134). Among the least enfranchised groups, only 12% of minority and low-income students who enroll in these colleges ever transfer to four-year universities, and only 7% manage to graduate once they’re there (“Opportunity Adrift” 5). As for low-income students that overcome these obstacles and enroll in four-year universities—the vast expansion of the educational system has not improved their chances of success. Since 1970 educational opportunities for the least-advantaged students have stagnated. The chances of earning a bachelor’s degree by age 24 have only improved for those who come from families in the upper half of the nation’s income distribution (Sachs 118). For those students coming from the poorest quartile, *the chances of graduating from college have scarcely risen above 6%*, even as the chances for the children of the upper-middle quartile have almost doubled, from 14.9% in 1970 to 26.8% in 2002.

At this point we can only speculate on the raw figures, but given the fact that 6% of students from the lowest income distributions even manage to graduate with their bachelor’s degree, and that students coming from low socioeconomic households are

between 10 and 22% less likely to major in the humanities than their rich classmates, it's plausible to assume that the actual number of students who, like Raymond Carver, overcame their class backgrounds to enroll in MFA programs is very small.¹³ The social function performed by McGurl's reading of Carver is therefore to imagine the university as the site of a class conflict that, empirically speaking, doesn't actually exist—at least not within the university itself. And it's the same with the widely-documented clash between Batuman's skepticism and McGurl's egalitarianism, or any debate about the effect of mass higher education on contemporary aesthetic values. When one takes a closer look at how the last forty years have altered American history, Kmart realism becomes symbolic not just in the sense that it marks the presence of the lower classes within the system of higher education, but, more powerfully, in the sense that it replaces them—it gives you the proliferation of lower class culture without any meaningful increase in lower class enrollment. And insofar as Kmart realism has become the “house style” of the Program, it suggests one useful function that creative writing classrooms might serve for the universities that house, promote, and fund them: providing a way of understanding themselves as increasingly open when in fact they have become increasingly closed.

Back at Camden College, Ellis presents a very different fantasy of class conflict than the one imagined by Mimi Jared, Donna Tartt, John Barth, and Mark McGurl. For while each of these figures is concerned with the degree to which universities are affecting the lives of students from within the school system, *The Rules of Attraction* expresses a palpable indifference to educational influence all together. And it's not because Ellis, unlike so many of his peers, is insensitive to the conflicts that arise when

disenfranchised students attend elite liberal arts colleges like Camden, but rather because there were no disenfranchised students attending them to begin with. On the contrary, what we might think of as class-condescension takes place not between rich and poor undergraduates within the university but between Camden's students and the town's local residents. In one such episode, Norris asks the "shy, acne-scarred cashier" at the drug store if she knows who wrote *Notes from the Underground* and, when she shrugs and points them toward the best-selling paperbacks, "sneers a little too meanly" and remarks that "[t]ownies are so ignorant" (215). But more significant than class-condescension are the ways in which novel imagines how "class warfare" extends beyond symbolism when waged between members of different classes. A confrontation over Sean Bateman's \$600 debt to local drug dealer Rupert Guest erupts into real antagonism before Bateman escapes the machete-wielding townies by retreating through a guarded gate on campus (269-272). In this sense, the university is not an institution which has tried and failed to open itself to the poor, but which in fact exists to exclude them. And so Bateman, the wealthy son of a New York businessman who can afford to pay the debt, nevertheless expropriates a local "businessman" of the town's underclass, marking the true injury of class for Rupert Guest and the millions like him—the inability to overcome his class position and pass through the gates a university.

The Rules of Attraction—a campus novel that denies the transformative power of education—is thus significant because it is at odds with the dominant cultural narratives surrounding the social uses of universities in neoliberal America. Even as Mimi Jared expresses the anxieties of a broad swath of upper-class parents who worry about how significantly universities have corrupted or cultivated their children, *The Rules of*

Attraction starkly denies education's influence, insisting that Camden's primary social function is to *prevent* social transformations from occurring all together. Which is why Ellis, a graduate of Bennington College, situates his campus novel at a small, elite, liberal arts school isolated from a surrounding impoverished community.¹⁴ Separated by gates and guards, the whole point of Camden College is to insist upon the fundamental difference, along class lines, between the kind of people that drive MGs and the kind of people that think "Fassbinder is a beer from France" (241). As the novel continually insists, the differences between the two classes amount to more than simple differences in merit: nearly all of Camden's students are incompetent or unambitious—"Was I learning anything?" Sean asks himself, even as he fails his classes (217)—and so their differences in wealth cannot be understood as differences of personal achievement. If the rich and lazy children of wealthy investment bankers are culturally and financially separated from the surrounding community, the novel suggests that Camden neither created nor resolved these differences. Thus, rather than representing an inclusive, egalitarian social program, higher education in *The Rules of Attraction* ossifies the class stratification between the children of the elite and the people who move their furniture, suggesting the inability of education to address society's economic inequalities.

Understood within the context of postwar educational history, *The Rules of Attraction* begins to look more like the truth of the higher education system than the upper-class fantasy Ellis understood it to be when he first published the book in 1987. For while it may seem easy at first to dismiss the connection between, on the one hand, a novel about ultra-wealthy liberal arts students attending a school predicated on exclusion and, on the other hand, the massive state-sponsored system of public higher education, it

turns out that both institutions perform the same function in the increasingly stratified social and economic hierarchies of post-1970s America. And while it's true that in 1987 tuition alone at Bennington College was \$17,990 (about 59% of the median family total income of \$30,850)¹⁵ and that, in contrast, tuition at the University of Michigan was a mere \$1,342 (about 7.5% of the median income), the comparatively inexpensive tuition belies the widening gap between rich and poor students who are actually enrolling in good public schools. Despite lower costs than private colleges, the best public universities have, since the 1970s, steadily accepted fewer and fewer poor students, increasing the educational gap between haves and have-nots. State “flagship” universities—the large public schools that represent the core of American higher education through their pledge to serve all segments of the population—now compete for prestige with the best private colleges by improving their freshman GPAs and SAT scores, leading to increasingly narrow acceptance margins for larger pools of applicants. To use one such example, the average GPA in three “public ivy” flagship universities (UCLA, North Carolina, and Virginia) saw the percentage of entering students with A or A+ grades rise from 55% to 90% between 1974 and 2006 (*Crossing* 16). As a result of increased competition, and because there is a strong correlation between high school achievement and socioeconomic status, the percentage of students from economically disadvantaged households entering the best state universities—as a whole—has steadily declined. And in perhaps the most alarming case of growing inequality in public education, the University of Michigan cut the number of students eligible for Pell Grants by a staggering 48% between 1992 and 2001 despite suing for the right to “open” the university by utilizing affirmative action in its admissions criteria (Sachs 162-163). What

these statistics show is that, in the face of political and cultural rhetoric claiming otherwise, exclusive liberal arts schools like Camden College and flagship universities like the University of Michigan have become increasingly similar in their exclusive admissions practices and have contributed to greater levels of social stratification.

When educational reformers like William Bennett and Michelle Rhee combat low performance with increased standards, children with the best access to resources (time, technology, family support) will win the game of personal achievement, and since poor children have always done academically worse compared to their rich counterparts, it comes as no surprise that the best schools service a very small minority of the population. But today the significance of this gap is best seen not in the homogeneous private schools like Bennington, Sarah Lawrence, and Princeton, which have historically been reserved for elites, but in the public schools where the ideology of mass educational opportunity is perhaps still strongest. Even as there is outrage at skyrocketing tuition and the underrepresentation of minorities, we cannot forget that “increasing access” to higher education primarily affects those students who are already prepared to attend. We can thus see that *The Rules of Attraction* understands Camden College, with its gates and walls, not as a historical outlier of the hierarchical system destroyed by “mass education,” *but as that system’s avant-garde*—a figurative extension of an unequal system of benefits sorted along class lines. American universities have not grown from academic country clubs like “The Big Three” into institutions that eliminate poverty through class mobility; instead, they are largely ineffective in confronting poverty because, as a certain critique of American educational history has shown, every year fewer and fewer poor students graduate from them.

And while it's fair to say that support for underprivileged students varies widely among flagship universities—at the University of New Mexico, for example, almost 50% of undergraduates are eligible for Pell Grants, and schools like UCLA, Berkeley, and Washington have enrollment rates over 20%—classifying these schools as exceptions would, in the end, only serve to prove the rule (Mortenson). Furthermore, even if higher education was both perfectly accessible and perfectly free—the utopian horizon for some in the digital humanities—it would still fail to address the fundamental problem of social inequality. There are many ways to produce “higher education for all,” both in fiction (McGurl) and in fact (community colleges, MOOCs, Khan Academy, etc.); but we cannot forget that “educational capital” is in many ways a poor substitute for actual capital, which is why encoding it as if it was capital has been such a successful ideological apparatus of neoliberalism and why, in an period where both educational attainment and economic inequality are at simultaneous highs, critiques which insist upon the difference between them have become so necessary. Indeed, as John Guillory has noted us about the unequal distribution of cultural capital, “[g]iven the only partially successful social agenda of educational democratization in the last three decades, we may conclude that it is much easier to make the canon representative than the university” (7). And while the difference between symbolic inclusion and material enrollment has always been profound, because universities today are not only lauded for producing diverse syllabi, but diverse writers as well, creative writing programs have only deepened the ideological conflation between integration and real social equality. However, the difference between an egalitarian position and the fantasy imagined by McGurl is not, as Guillory might argue, “the proposition that *everyone* has a right of access to cultural works, to the means

of both their production and their consumption” (54)—preserving the “right of access” through meritocratic procedures has been a defining (and successful) feature of postwar higher education, as McGurl correctly identifies. Rather, the real question should be why access to cultural capital through the higher educational system should be imagined as a necessary (or even strategic) precondition of social equality at all.

As I have shown, the concept of “mass education” as an egalitarian system of social equality is greatly misleading. While it is true that enrollment numbers have substantially grown since 1945, the number of poor students benefiting from them has, at best, stagnated. Students from the highest socioeconomic groups are accepted to college in higher numbers, perform better during their enrollment, and graduate at a much higher rate. Poor students, on the other hand, are increasingly denied access to the state’s top educational institutions while being diverted into a community college system that actually decreases their chances of earning a bachelor’s degree. Furthermore, even as women and minority students have increased their presence in higher education proportional to their population statistics, the percentage of low-income students succeeding in college remains low. Thus, while it is true that educational attainment is directly correlated to higher lifetime earnings for individuals, the degree to which education as a social program has narrowed the inequality gap between the richest and poorest has proven ineffective in aggregate. That is to say, since around 1980 massive investments in higher education, particularly in the form of “merit aid,” have largely benefited students who never really needed them, and have actually contributed to greater degrees of social inequality for those in the lower classes, not less.

And whether like McGurl you believe that the system is modestly working despite its obvious flaws, or whether you believe that restructuring is essential to achieve better outcomes, at its core the problem with higher education is not that it is ineffective in dealing with social inequality, but that it never can. As John Marsh has argued, education does not significantly (or even marginally) affect the job market that graduates will step into—a market whose greatest growth in the coming decade is projected to come from the lowest end of the service sector (70). And because education is a supply-side approach to job creation (it improves the quality of the worker, not the quality of job he or she may eventually occupy), insofar as there are essential low-paying service jobs in the United States, Americans will continue to fill those jobs and remain in poverty. So even if the drug store cashier happened to have graduated from Camden and had known who wrote *Notes from the Underground*, the knowledge would not have enhanced her \$3.55 an hour wage.¹⁶ Thus, without large-scale changes in wage structures and the promise of job security, an entire class of people will always be occupying the lowest rungs of the social ladder, and this has nothing to do with their ability to navigate the maze of higher education or write a novel. Marsh is therefore entirely right when he asks: “The real question is whether the guidance we offer one young person (get a college degree) is guidance we could offer a whole class of people—say, the poor or low-income or unemployed. In other words, an education may enable the rise of any one poor or low-income person. But will it enable the rise of all or even most of them? An individual can learn his or her way out of poverty and inequality. Can the nation?” (67).

Despite objections such as these, education remains firmly entrenched in the contemporary imagination as the nation’s best path out of poverty. Narratives such as

McGurl's and Tarrt's belie the fact that "mass education" is an ideological fiction whose purpose is to preserve an ideal of equal opportunity during a period of increasingly unequal outcomes. If society can be made to believe that its economic status is the result of deserved distinctions rather than inherited (dis)advantages, then it can subsequently justify social inequality on the grounds of individual merit. During the past sixty years or so, the higher education system has been one of America's most effective technologies for sustaining the ideology of equal opportunities, and has done this by orchestrating a myth of systemic inclusion—the incorporation of populations, behaviors, and academic disciplines that give the illusion of equality when, in terms of class stratification, the exact opposite is taking place. And within the logic of systemic inclusion, one of the university's most successful developments has been the creative writing program, whose "institutionalization of anti-institutionality" remains a powerful tool in mystifying the social impact that mass education has had on American society through the production and promotion of new voices in literature.

So while it may be fair to say that, in some respects, post-war American literature is a product of more inclusive creative writing classrooms, if one examines the material site of the material site of literary production—the university system as a whole—it's easy to see that the one area where the Program's influence is not indicative of a corresponding change in social egalitarianism is the area of poverty. Seen from this perspective, the historical narrative of mass education McGurl presents in *The Program Era* should itself be interpreted as a kind of campus fiction; instead of the marginalized student overcoming disadvantage through integration in the educational system, McGurl chronicles the difficult journey of the unheard voice entering the literary canon. That both

of these stories, at their core, confuse integration *as such* with social equality is a telling example of how deeply our commitment to educational egalitarianism is engrained, and misunderstood, in one of the discipline's most insightful critics.

And although McGurl misinterprets mass education as a form of egalitarianism, he nevertheless identifies a central issue of creative writing that is actually at the heart of the larger American educational system: “[t]his is an ambiguity at the heart of creative writing: does it allow you to be who you are? or escape who you are?... If the risk of the first is the haunting discovery that the *person I really am* is the product of an American institution, the risk of the second is the discovery that the *person I am not* is the same—the product of an American institution” (370-371). But while it may be fair to understand both Americans and American literature as products of the educational system in one form or another, we should emphasize that this is equally true for the 6% of low-income students who graduate from college as it is for the 94% of them who don’t. That is to say, the program era doesn’t simply allow initiates such as Raymond Carver and Richard Papen to become who they are, in life or in art; it also excludes the significant majority of people who were never given the opportunity to succeed, making them what they are as well. The American educational system’s ability to define everyone, even if it is through exclusion, is well established. But unlike the multi-culturalists, the postmodern avant-gardists, and even the Kmart realists who try desperately to define themselves against (but always within) the system, the reality is that the *true* injuries of class are not at all hidden, and are most deeply felt by the 94% of low-income students that never graduate from college in the first place.

As for the fantasy of Camden College, *The Rules of Attraction* clearly understands the moment in economic and educational history where the ossification of social classes via the higher education system began to intensify. But while Ellis's version of the university system is much more plausible than both Tartt's and McGurl's, it would be a mistake to conclude that the vision of unequal access he provides stands as a critique of social inequality *per se*. For while it's true that unequal access excludes low-income students (to their disadvantage), producing equal access is not a solution to social inequality insofar as it is used to justify unequal outcomes. Assuming Camden opened its gates, and the Rupert Guests of America took classes alongside the Sean Batemans, the university would continue to produce socially unequal outcomes: some college graduates like Sean's brother Patrick Bateman would work on Wall Street, and some who were not as smart, lucky, or connected would become bicycle repair technicians. Indeed, even if truly equal access could be achieved, it would only function to convince us that the unequal class positions we occupy after we graduate are the ones that we deserve. In that sense, the contemporary university not only marks the distinctions between the minimum-wage "townies" that have never heard of *Notes from the Underground* and the elite Camden students who have, it also justifies the "deserved" distinctions between graduates on the highest and lowest ends of the socioeconomic spectrum—the parents like Mimi Jared paying \$58,310¹⁷ a year out of pocket to send "Dick" to schools like Sarah Lawrence and Bennington, and the highly educated professors making \$62,050 who work there.¹⁸

Or in perhaps a better comparison we might turn to our own profession to see how the injuries of class are carried out from within the university system itself. One way of

doing that would be to note that the median salary of those within the gates and groves of academe—tenure track professors—is about 42% above the national median of \$26,364.¹⁹ And although more must be done to diversify the ranks of the professoriate, the comparatively high pay rehearses a certain version of the mass education narrative. These salaries, however, nevertheless mask the growing divide between faculty and administrative compensation over the past forty years—two groups who share near identical levels of education. Speaking about this issue, former George Washington University president Stephen J. Trachtenberg has insisted “it was a terrible mistake on the part of the [American Association of University Professors] and other faculty groups to deride the compensation of university presidents, because it’s not an issue of what you pay presidents. It’s an issue of what you pay people in the academy. If the presidents are paid well, it follows, or it should follow, that the professor will be celebrated and honored and also fairly compensated. Paying your president reasonably is a good investment on the part of the faculty” (qtd in Thornton). In arguing that high presidential salaries ultimately benefit everyone in the academy, Trachtenberg erodes the occupational and financial distinctions between employees and management. But as Benjamin Ginsberg notes, since 1975 the compensation for higher education administrators hasn’t just risen—it’s exploded. In fact, in 2007 the average salary of a university president at a doctoral institution was \$325,000, placing them just outside the top one percent of all American earners (24). And while the official stance of the AAUP has been to say that “the point of salary analyses is not to pit one group in the academy against another,” it nevertheless concludes that increased presidential salaries do not correlate to increased

institutional performance or faculty pay. On the contrary, professor salaries, expressed in real terms, have only increased 5.7% since 1970.²⁰

Of course, another way to understand the injuries of class would be to note that unlike university presidents and deans, many “part-time,” non-tenure-track faculty make a median salary of \$16,200 a year while their full-time tenure-track counterparts make \$62,200 a year despite the fact that, in many cases, they teach the same classes, possess the same credentials, and are celebrated and honored by students, faculty, and administrators alike (Berry 55).²¹ And most of them, if they work in English departments at least, can say with confidence that Dostoyevsky wrote *Notes from the Underground*, for whatever that’s worth.

¹ In the preface to the new edition he notes that the *Bildungsroman* is a form best suited to European modernity and reflects that his original “mistake” was “never fully explaining why [the European Bildungsroman] was so deeply entwined with one social class, one region of the world, one sex” (x). To correct this error, Moretti suggests that “[w]ide cultural formation, professional mobility, fully social freedom – for a long time, the west European middle-class man held a virtual monopoly on these, which made him a sort of structural *sine qua non* of the genre. Without him, and without the social privileges he enjoyed, the *Bildungsroman* was difficult to write, because it was difficult to imagine” (ix-x). Moreover, within the historical context of European modernity, “social mobility, which is such an essential trait of the *Bildungsroman*, literally vanishes in the presence” of the lower classes; these figures, it would seem, are excluded from the genre because they “defy narrative imagination” (x).

² See The Associated Press. “Colleges’ Tuition Outruns Inflation.” *The New York Times*, sec. Education: Print. 1987.

³ In April 2013, members of the Ivy League released their admissions data. Harvard’s acceptance rate of 5.9% is not only the lowest of the bunch, but the lowest recorded total in the school’s long history. See Ellis, Blake.

⁴ The movement of higher education from the periphery to the center of American life can best be seen by tracking student enrollments. In 1939-1940, total student enrollment at all higher educational institutions was just under 1.5 million, but by 1949-1950 that number had ballooned to about 2.7 million—an increase of nearly 80% (Frydl 261). Today about 60% of the total college age population have enrolled at some level of the higher education system, up from just 5% in 1920 (*Equity* 14). To facilitate these enrollments, the US now spends about \$22,234 per student, or 2.7% of its total GDP, on higher education (*Equity* 67).

⁵ Considered by many to be the final leg of the New Deal, the Federal government poured enormous resources into distributing education benefits to all its veterans. In the peak years following WWII, the United States spent approximately \$8 billion dollars a year to care for its veterans, an investment that constituted a quarter of all federal expenditures in 1950. The GI Bill's education title actually exceeded the money spent on reconstructing Europe through the Marshall Plan (Frydl 3).

⁶ For more information on postwar higher educational growth, see Roger Geiger's *Research and Relevant Knowledge: American Research Universities Since World War II*.

⁷ In their article "Pathways to Top Corporate Management," Michael Useem and Jerome Karabel show the growing correlation between prestigious universities and top corporate managerial positions.

⁸ It is not just wealth, after all, but educational attainment that has become central to our understanding of social class in contemporary America. Whereas 55 percent—more than half—of corporate managers in the 1930s had never attended college, that number had plummeted to fewer than 15 percent by the mid-1980s. ("Pathways" 184).

⁹ For more on the impact of admission practices in the emergence of the American meritocracy, see Nicholas Lemann's *The Big Test*.

¹⁰ The fictional Camden and Hampden colleges are analogues to the real-world Bennington College where Bret Easton Ellis and Donna Tartt studied creative writing together in the early 1980s. See "The Art of Fiction No. 216."

¹¹ Of course, the titles listed here are just a tiny fraction of the number of campus novels published during the last 60 years. John Kramer's *The American College Novel: An Annotated Bibliography* contains well over 600 entries.

¹² The opposition to bureaucracy and conformity was not unique to Program writers – in fact, a broad range of postwar thinkers and intellectuals shared a similarly ambivalent relationship to the educational institutions most responsible for their existence. Stephen Schryer notes how many postwar thinkers were committed to the fantasy of

“a public-minded but anti-managerial cultural elite dedicated to national education but indifferent or hostile to pragmatic reform” -- thinkers that did not “formulate ideas about a better society” but rather brought “this society into being through their very existence” (11). But despite its good intentions, this commitment to professional occupational autonomy has often devolved “into an entrepreneurial conception of professional agency that facilitated the ongoing privatization of the university and other public-sector workplaces” (178). Idealizing professional work as nonconformist and, by extension, anticapitalist “allows humanistic intellectuals to imagine that their work serves a political constituency outside of the academy” when in fact “its primary function is to defend the absolute integrity of autonomous professional work” severed from any critical or egalitarian social functions (166). Likewise, Sean McCann and Michael Szalay note that in a “newer version of professionalism, which gained in prominence from the mid-sixties onward, the professional is the master of valuable knowledge and ability, but owes no special debt to the public good and needs no non-market, ideological defense” (454). This, in turn, leads “many academic humanists [to] see the political universe entirely in symbolic terms, imagining...that to change the cultural apparatus could be to change that world—that to provide, as [C. Wright] Mills put it, ‘alternative definitions of reality’ could itself be the most radically political of acts” (460).

If the new managerial class is hostile to interventions into its occupational autonomy, it’s easy to see why conjuring “alternative definitions of reality” might seem like an appropriate substitute for material change, especially if these alternative definitions do not require relinquishing control over their fields of restricted production – it serves their own material interests. And yet, it is nevertheless a mistake to think that redistributing this “valuable knowledge” in the form of education stands as a challenge to symbolic political thinking; on the contrary, universal education is the very definition of a symbolically political act. Within the neoliberal ideology of “human capital,” the true “alternative definition of reality” perpetuated by today’s educational class is one where knowledge and property are functionally indistinguishable. And while it’s true that the accumulation of knowledge in the form of a degree is often a prerequisite to the acquisition of property, as growing number of college graduates have seen in recent years, ensuring access to the former does not guarantee access to the later.

¹³ For more information on enrollment statistics for students in the lowest socioeconomic categories, see Ma, Yingyi, “Family Socioeconomic Status, Parental Involvement, and College Major Choices—Gender, Race/Ethnic,

and Nativity Patterns” (2009); Goyette, Kimberly A. and Ann L Mullen, “Who Studies the Arts and Sciences? Social Background and the Choice and Consequence of Undergraduate Field of Study” (2006).

¹⁴ In 1987, Bennington’s \$17,990 tuition was the highest in the country. See The Associated Press, “Colleges’ Tuition Outruns Inflation” (1987).

¹⁵ See Welniak, EJ, and MS Littman, “Money Income and Poverty Status in the United States: 1987” (1988).

¹⁶ See US Department of Labor. “Changes in Basic Minimum Wages in Non-Farm Employment Under State Law: Selected Years 1968 to 2012” (2011).

¹⁷ See Bennington College, “Bennington: Tuition, Fees, and Costs” (2011).

¹⁸ This figure is based on the Labor Department’s estimates for postsecondary teacher median pay. See United States. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Occupational Outlook Handbook” (2010).

¹⁹ Figure based on the 2010 median salary estimates by the Social Security Administration.
<http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/COLA/central.html>

²⁰ Figures based on data from 2012 and were calculated from the AAUP’s annual survey. See “Here’s the News: The Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 2012-13.”

²¹ Figures based on the median salaries for public sector employees in the state of Illinois, although it’s fair to say they parallel the national median.

Chapter IV: “The Acquisition of the Accepted Symbols of Advancement”:

The Quest for Freedom and Literacy

Here upon this stage the black rite of Horatio Alger was performed to God's own acting script, with millionaires come down to portray themselves; not merely acting out the myth of their goodness, and wealth and success and power and benevolence and authority in cardboard masks, but themselves, these virtues concretely! Not the wafer and the wine, but the flesh and the blood, vibrant and alive
Invisible Man (111)

Stranger and Alone's plot is nearly identical to those found in every other academic novel—the story of an outsider named Shelton Howden whose estrangement from New Hope College becomes the very basis of his education. Upon arriving on campus as a poor orphan and “work [study] student” (6), Howden “felt lonely and alone” because he “wanted to belong” to a world that did not want him in it (5). Since “most of the parents who sent their children [to New Hope College] were professional folk of comfortable income, and some were really wealthy” (17), Howden believed “[l]iving in [his basement dorm] room, rising at this forbidding pre-dawn hour, working on the farm, eating in the dining hall at the table nearest the kitchen gave him nothing in common with” (20) his classmates. Indeed, Howden's poverty “blocked his association with all those others—those who stayed abed until the first bell rang at six forty-five, who had decent clothes to wear, money to spend, and parents to go home to” (21). Howden would graduate from New Hope College and become a superintendent of primary schools, a

prosperous man who never quite felt as though he belonged to the social class that his education had made possible.

But there are two things that about New Hope College that register *Stranger and Alone*'s significance among the other academic novels discussed thusfar. The first is that New Hope College was “need blind” in its admission criteria--“the state of one’s purse was not an overbearing consideration for admission” because “every student had to participate ‘in the democracy of work’” (17-18). What the “democracy of work” means for the novel is that the college undoes the inherited advantages of Howden’s classmates, giving him an equal opportunity to succeed in both the world of higher education and the world that awaits him when he leaves. Thus, when Howden ascends to take his place among the state’s judges and college presidents—no longer “blocked [in] his association” with the elite—everyone can interpret Howden’s diploma as a sign he has earned his newfound social position, even if at times he doesn’t seem to believe it himself.

The second thing that makes *Stranger and Alone* significant is that New Hope College is located in Louisiana and, when Shelton Howden attended it in 1923, he and all his fellow students were black.

If the academic novel is a narrative genre that imagines the university as an institution that constructs and validates earned inequality on the basis of equal opportunity, *Stranger and Alone* accomplishes this task far better than many of its peers. Unlike the hallowed halls of the Ivy League, New Hope College¹ has comparatively few barriers to entry. Rich and poor, male and female students learn alongside one another with minimal constraints, meaning whatever rewards the graduates of New Hope earn after they leave can be understood as a byproduct of their own striving. At the same time,

however, those rewards must come within a society defined through racial subordination, meaning that regardless of how well New Hope College justifies inequality *within* black social life, it must also necessarily fail to do the same within the broader social world. Taken together, these two conditions show that question raised by *Stranger and Alone* (1950) is how to represent the justified inequality of the emergent academic meritocracy within the unjustified inequality of state-sponsored racism that was Jim Crow America.

In that sense, *Stranger and Alone* appears to reproduce a historical dynamic that resonates on college campuses to this day. By now the historical links between education and slavery are well-known—almost all of America’s early colleges were funded by wealth extracted from the colonial slave trade, while South Carolina’s “Negro Act of 1740” established a widely-adopted precedent for prohibiting black literacy.² Indeed, institutions of higher education actively created the racial science which sanctioned white supremacy, and they circulated this ideology to the nation’s leaders through a prescribed curriculum. Thomas Jefferson’s belief that an educated citizenry was necessary to sustain democratic self-rule may have prompted him to found the University of Virginia, but such beliefs were not historically incompatible with slavery—far from it. Under white supremacy, the stability of the republic depended as much upon the liberal education of free white men as it did upon the enforced ignorance of its racialized underclass (1).³

After emancipation, however, the educational systems once built upon a particular form of racial domination became systems that held the promise of eliminating racial domination. Reconstruction opened up the possibility of redistributive justice through a wide range of investments, not the least of which was formalized education. The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (colloquially known as the “Freedman’s

Bureau”) established hundreds of primary schools throughout the South for the purposes of social welfare, and, in the process, created a substantive demand for college-educated teachers among the black population. Even after the retreat of reconstruction and the rise of segregation, the lesser-known (second) Morrill Act of 1890 required states that did not admit black students into their land-grant institutions to create separate (and unequal) black colleges—some of which exist today as Historically Black Colleges and Universities—that would educate the kind of students Sheldon Howden teaches when he becomes a professor at Arcadia State. Thus the promise of reconstruction to engineer a certain degree of social equality awarded free blacks the opportunity to learn, even as white supremacy through segregation meant that higher education could never accomplish its egalitarian ideals.

Within this context, it goes without saying that the overt racism produced and proliferated by American higher education explains why there are no African American campus novels before emancipation and why comparatively few of them exist today. Yet the story of education by other means has a foundational relationship to the African American literary tradition as such. The prohibition against formalized schooling created the condition for what Robert Stepto has described as African American culture’s “primary pregeneric myth ... the quest for freedom and literacy” (xv). According to Stepto, stories like Frederic Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* (1901) show African American literature establishing itself as an autonomous tradition through its commitment to representing literacy acquisition, not simply as part of the narrative action, but also through the tropes of authorial control and/or resistance.

Before emancipation, slaves hid their literacy from their masters, believing that the ability to read and write gave them access to the human dignity denied under the law—a form of cultural equality that would, in a limited but nevertheless important way, subvert the legal one. After emancipation, former slaves and their descendants were allowed to read and attend school, but the burgeoning promise of freedom and literacy would nevertheless be hindered by the endurance of white supremacy under Jim Crow. Thus we find the quest for freedom and literacy as a pervasive theme throughout every period in African American literature, manifesting itself in stories where it is at the center of the narrative action like it is in Douglass, Washington, and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* just as strongly as it is in stories like *Native Son* where the quest is conspicuously absent. Indeed, the social significance of Bigger Thomas's bibliophobia is made both visible and relevant when contrasted to the literacy of Max and the other white attorneys.⁴

We can begin to understand how the same historical condition of state-sponsored racism that created African American literature also stood in productive tension with the generic imperatives of academic fiction, particularly through the way college education is imagined to overcome the class divisions between rich and poor students while simultaneously failing to overcome the social divisions between black and white races. But in order to make the incommensurability between racial and class uplift visible, *Stranger and Alone* must first enact a clever form of concealment, performing Howden's personal evasion of "the race question" by setting the majority of the novel on racially homogeneous campuses.⁵ Indeed, it is precisely the separateness from white society that makes the consequences of black education both visible and central to the narrative's generic logic. Before entering New Hope College, a poor black orphan like Howden

knew that “he had been on the outside looking in on white people who had position and authority” (9), though he didn’t really understand what it meant to “be somebody” (11) until the defining line of racial difference was no longer the central organizing principle of his life. From the moment he set foot on New Hope’s segregated campus, however, and saw firsthand the children of the black upper-classes “dressed in [a] sack coat and plus-four knickers” (3) using words like “Bushwa” in casual conversation, the presumption that Howden’s blackness made him just—or only— “as good as any of [his classmates]” (6) unravels as the meaning of “outsider” shifts from racial to class difference. That is to say, higher education gives Howden the ability to identify a nuanced social hierarchy *within* the black community, above and beyond the one imposed *upon it* by the color line—a hierarchy whose ranks Howden felt compelled to climb no matter the cost.⁶ Like most academic novels, then, *Stranger and Alone* is centrally concerned with the “social world” of class formation, but it is a world that that could only be brought into focus once the burden of “living a dual existence” as black person under Jim Crow had been temporarily displaced by the all-black institution and its corresponding social forms (169). For although Howden “had not gone to house parties when he was in college and there and then met the men who were now prosperous physicians, dentists, federal employees, and insurance managers”, without higher education he could never begin to apprehend the subtle but all-too-real differences that exist among them—a “world on a level of habits and attitudes and adjustments subtly different from the one in which, but for [his education], he would still be a poke.” It was only after he earned the necessary educational credentials—once higher education, in spite of itself, performed its mandate of (limited) upward mobility—that Howden could

finally attend the dinner parties of the black bourgeoisie and “think of the men whom he would see...as intelligent, successful, even charming, and he could think of them and himself as deserving the haven their women made for them.”

What this means is that unlike the narratives Stepto describes, *Stranger and Alone* articulates its quest for literacy and freedom through a very deliberate generic form—a story that has its impetus in the broader African American literary tradition, yet one that adopts the conventions of academic fiction to achieve its critical function. *Stranger and Alone* accomplishes its generic imperative by delineating the limits of various educational institutions throughout Louisiana—from the primary schools Howden oversees through the colleges he attends and serves. The novel thus reveals a world in which hierarchies are produced through a particular set of institutional structures rather than inherited racial difference—the illegitimate form of oppression the university is imagined to displace. Which is why, from the novel’s perspective, the relevant social difference between the poor orphan Howden, who works in order to save money for medical school as a railcar waiter, and the “improvident, shiftless, ignorant, and, at times, an amusing lot who gambled and drank up their money” (88) who work at the same job their entire careers has nothing to do with race, nor is it the fact that the waiters are racially conscious while the protagonist is not; rather, what facilitates Howden’s movement through the social order is that he went to school, transforming the narrative of racial uplift through higher education into one of individual achievement and rewards.

At the same time, the white men that do occasionally appear in *Stranger and Alone* function to remind us that whiteness will always grant them access to a separate sphere of rights and privileges that Howden’s education never can—a truth made more

powerful by the fact that it applies to Howden's alcoholic and ignorant boss, Steward Maroney, just as strongly as it does to New Hope College's respected racial sociologist, Dr. Posey. Significantly, it is nothing that these white men believe or accomplish that makes them "better" than Howden, who is himself an attempted rapist and traitor to his race.⁷ Rather, it is their whiteness that marks their superiority—an entitlement that, unlike the economic rewards Howden and his classmates work toward at New Hope College, can never be undone by the meritocratic evaluation of higher education, even in its most idealized forms. Likewise, because the success and failure of black college graduates under Jim Crow was necessarily subsumed within a society predicated on white supremacy, the unequal outcomes that the academic novel describes would always be tainted by racial difference and could thus never be fully legitimated under the competing ideology of the emerging educational meritocracy. Thus a central part of the African American campus novel's literary work is to call into question the structures that legitimate racial inequality and, in the process, undo the socially constructed boundaries that prohibit schools from performing their prescribed social work. *Stranger and Alone* accomplishes its imperative the way that Stepto has already anticipated—by utilizing the tropes of authorial control to challenge the racist discourse produced and transmitted through institutions of higher education. Redding incorporates the discourse of scientific racism—Dr. Posey makes Howden read Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* in its "fourth revised edition" (45)—to produce New Hope College as racist institution that operates under "[t]he practically universal assumption [that] the Negro cannot be made equal" (47).⁸ In a manner typical of the academic novel, New Hope College exists in contradistinction to its ideal, and Howden struggles to reconcile his reason for

attending school (social advancement) with the discourse that actually defines it (social conservatism): “[i]t never occurred to him that the books he was reading and the lectures he had heard might be the scholarship of prejudice, the rationalizations of fallible men whose conclusions were questionable. Against the testimony of these scholars he had only subjective experience to offer” (48). Indeed, the closest Howden gets to resisting the ideology of racial science comes in brief a moment of doubt over how racism must necessarily evacuate the meaning of his diploma: “Education, the acquisition of the accepted symbols of advancement, Howden reflected gropingly, the adoption of certain patterns of living, or certain attitudes, habits, and inclinations—did these mean nothing? Or were they, as Madison Grant declared, merely imitating accretions?” (47).

Of course, to read *Stranger and Alone* correctly is to understand the “testimony” of “subjective experience” as constitutive of both the African American literary tradition and the novel itself. Thus, when Redding juxtaposes the discourse of scientific racism alongside Howden’s self-doubt, the contrast doesn’t simply reproduce the historical truth of white supremacy’s influence over black higher education.⁹ Far from it. Instead, *Stranger and Alone* subsumes the “practically universal” discourse of scientific racism within the novel to subvert it using all of literature’s critical tools, not the least of which are characters whose subjective consciousness exist in conflict with their prescribed historical circumstances. Once made into literature, it is “the scholarship of prejudice” rather than “the habits of living” that becomes the “imitating accretion” of higher education—an accretion against which Howden’s own experience stands in dialectical tension. When Howden reads that “Negroness was a fundamental condition of being which—and here he turned it into a question—nothing could overcome?” (47) what

transforms a “fundamental condition” of knowledge into a “question” open to interpretation is its mediation through a consciousness capable of being for-itself—a transformation that is meant to implicate both Howden and the reader, even if neither takes up the call. In fact, it is Howden’s refusal to internalize his own questions about racial science that gives *Stranger and Alone* its critical bite. As the novel makes clear, the success or failure of Howden to become self-conscious through education is somewhat beside the point—even if his curriculum hadn’t been based on racist doctrine, no amount of learning could raise him high enough to escape segregation. Which is why *Stranger and Alone* is a novel that shows us how if black higher education was to achieve its idealized function—if, in other words, Howden’s diploma was to be a sign that he has earned his equality—it had to signify within a social system that had yet to be born.

The degree to which that system exists today is a matter of continuing debate.¹⁰ As students of color across the country have testified, even though universities are no longer segregated, they are by no means equal and have yet to achieve their legal mandate to serve both black and white students equally. While the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision marked the end of both *de jure* segregation and its institutional counterpart, scientific racism, it did not signal the end of *de facto* segregation in American education at any level. Indeed, many Northern primary schools are more segregated today than they were in the past, and protracted legal battles over the systematic underfunding of HBCUs and other minority serving institutions have extended well into the 21st century, achieving varying degrees of success.¹¹ We need not look farther than the 2015 student demonstrations at over 51 colleges and universities to see the extent of the unrest. Although it’s true that black students are proportionally

represented on college campuses—African Americans are about 13% of the American population and about 15% of college students—there remains a persistent gap between enrollment and graduation rates among African American students, suggesting that colleges have been far more successful at recruiting black students onto campuses than they have been at serving them while they're there.¹² The frustration that black students felt as marginalized students was compounded by their frustration over the invisibility of African Americans on the faculty and syllabi. According to Leah Libresco, the most common student demands include increased representation among the faculty, diversity training, and required classes for students focusing on racial issues.¹³

What we can say, however, is that the end of segregation transformed higher educational institutions from schools oriented toward the management of a permanent underclass of biologically inferior blacks into schools (imperfectly) oriented toward giving everyone the opportunity to succeed, and for the black population in particular this means reversing the legacy of racism enacted through the state-imposed ignorance and wage theft that had deprived African Americans of their wealth and civil rights.¹⁴ In terms of literature, this also means that once the of “scholarship of prejudice” was discredited, “the acquisition of the accepted symbols of advancement” would no longer “mean nothing” to either educated people like *Stranger and Alone*’s Dr. Posey or American society writ large. The end of segregation thus signals the beginning of the African American campus novel as a narrative form free to work along the same logics as its generic peers—opposing the very real inequality of educational opportunities to produce the ideological fantasy of equal educational outcomes. The contemporary African American campus novel is thus often committed to representing institutional

resistance against black students and culture grounded in, and reflexive to, the history of slavery insofar as such barriers prevent colleges and universities from undoing the very inequalities they once helped to create. Put differently, we might say that if the African American campus novel of Jim Crow represented the illegitimacy of white supremacy in higher education by subverting the discourse of scientific racism, the African American campus novel of today represents the illegitimacy of white supremacy in higher education by subverting the discourse of cultural essentialism and pathology.

We can begin to understand the significance of the shift from representing white supremacy as essentialist biology to representing it as essentialist culture through contrasting the “social world” of *Stranger and Alone* with the one envisioned by Ishmael Reed’s 1993 novel *Japanese by Spring*,¹⁵ whose principle character, the former Black Panther party member Benjamin “Chappie” Puttbutt, faces rampant discrimination at Jack London College where he works as tenure-track professor. Ironically, the novel’s opening chapters find Puttbutt mounting a defense of Robert Bass Jr. who is “president of the Amerikaner Student Society and the American Chapter of the Order of the Boer Nation, a nationwide organization of right-wing students” (5). Although Bass has just assaulted a black student with a baseball bat, Puttbutt tells a local reporter that “[t]he black students bring this on themselves” through “their disaffiliation from the common culture” and that [b]lack students, and indeed black faculty, should stop their confrontational tactics” because “black separatism is tempting such reactions from the white students” (7). Reed frames the confrontation as one in which black students’ desire to represent their unique identity is met by violent backlash from white supremacists, but of course such confrontations are only possible within institutions where black and white

students struggle over the meaning of what is “common” about culture to begin with. That is to say, for *Stranger and Alone* “black separatism” in the form of Jim Crow was the very condition higher education could not overcome, and as a result the relevant “culture” he learned (or failed to learn) at college was one based on social class and took place at the “level of habits and attitudes and adjustments subtly different” from the those Howden brought with him from the orphanage. But in a world in which “[t]he practically universal assumption” was not that black students “cannot be made equal” through higher education but rather that higher education is the primary means through which they can be made equal, what “black separatism” means is maintaining a commitment to black culture within dominantly white, and often hostile, institutions.

What this also means is that the “habits and attitudes and adjustments” learned by Puttbutt in *Japanese by Spring* have almost nothing to do with his social class and everything to do with his integration into academic culture. Like *Stranger and Alone*’s New Hope College, Jack London College defines success according to rules established by white supremacy, and, like Sheldon Howden, Puttbutt is a bald-faced opportunist who betrays his race to achieve personal success within the institution:

Puttbutt was a member of the growing anti-affirmative action industry. A black pathology merchant. Throw together a three-hundred-page book with graphs and articles about illegitimacy, welfare dependency, single-family households, drugs and violence; paint the inner cities as the circles of hell in the American paradise—the suburban and rural areas which were, in the media’s imagination, wonderlands with sets by Disney—and you could write your way to the top of the best-sellers list. Get on C-SPAN. It was the biggest literary hustle going and Puttbutt decided that he was going to get his. He had written a dozen or so articles about affirmative action. About how your white colleagues don’t respect you. About how you feel stigmatized. About how you feel

inferior. You know, the usual. All of these speeches, op-eds and lectures, he felt, would get him where he wanted to be. Would get him tenure. (10)

Although his colleagues in the Department of African-American Studies view him as “an Uncle Ben,” Puttbutt’s ambition is to align himself with the more powerful faculty in English and Women’s Studies, going as far as to write that “black men originated the slave trade and how, during the slavery period, they treated their women worse than the slave master treated the slaves” (58). *Japanese by Spring* is littered with language from conservatives—described as “Moynihan analysis” (213)—but if such screeds alone weren’t enough to land him tenure, Puttbutt’s professed hatred of black culture places him in the good graces of President Stool, who thinks Puttbutt’s best-selling *Blacks, America’s Misfortune* is a “masterpiece” (43).

It is important to note, however, that Puttbutt disparages black culture not because he passionately disapproves of it, but because doing so allows him to advance in a profession that ignores his otherwise serious academic contributions. Puttbutt’s true scholarly interest is studying the 1920s poet Nathan Brown—a writer who is unfashionable amongst the English department’s resident Miltonians and French theorists, but who nevertheless “had become a popular poet in Europe, a household name in Rome, London and Paris” (14). Indeed, Puttbutt is more productive and a better scholar of literature than his colleagues, most of whom “haven’t published in years” (43) and use academic conferences to “meet women other than [their wives]” (96). The point of Puttbutt’s parallel intellectual work is made clear when, instead of recognizing Puttbutt’s noteworthy academic achievements, Jack London College denies his tenure request on political grounds, giving the position to a superstar “radical feminist lesbian ecologist activist” (11) named April Jokujoku “who had one article to her name.

Something to do with Clitoridectomy Imagery in the Works of Black Male Novelists”

(57). Thus when Puttbutt is simultaneously denied tenure while also being invited back to teach as “a thirty-thousand-dollar-a-year lecturer” (83), the tragic contradictions that originally defined the Jim Crow academic novel appear again as farce. In other words, for black Americans “the accepted symbols of advancement” that “mean[t] nothing” under segregation still mean nothing today, but the reason why those symbols fail to signify has nothing to do with Puttbutt’s biological inferiority and everything to do with how academia devalues his achievements. Because Puttbutt has no real opportunity to earn tenure and advance—after all, the reason why President Stool wants him around is the same reason why his colleagues want him exiled—here too we have a narrative structure in which a black academic is destined for failure, but instead of failure being understood as a byproduct of his collectively-defined legal subordination, it’s understood as a byproduct of his individual political beliefs about black culture.

Of course, the irony that forms the basis of *Japanese by Spring*’s institutional critique emerges from the fact that Puttbutt doesn’t purport to have any political beliefs about culture at all. He was never really committed to “taking sides” between Jack London’s ideological factions because his real “policy is one of enlightened self-interest” (131). Like Sheldon Howden before him, Puttbutt wants nothing more than to own a nice house and have respectable job and exercise the freedom to pursue his literary curiosities—options foreclosed to him because the college does not allow him to avoid the pathology question one way or another. In 1923, Shelton Howden’s failure to confront race emerges from an uncomfortable dissonance between the dignity he felt at the margins of his consciousness and the legal inferiority he learned was objectively

verified by science, but in 1993 Puttbutt's avoidance of the race question emerges from the absurdity of making essentialist (and hierarchical) claims based on culture. So instead of using narrative techniques that represent a black historical consciousness at odds with itself, Reed employs postmodern pastiche to render both the institutional foundation for black pathology discourse and the academic backlash that follows from that history to be absurd. The testimony of personal experience that once formed the essential "truth" of earlier African American campus novels is thus itself undermined by a whole series of postmodern narrative uncertainties—unreliable narrators, nonlinear plot structures, authorial intervention, layers of complex information that cannot be internally verified, etc. That Puttbutt's superior scholarship on Nathan Brown is based on a figure that, in our world, doesn't actually exist is just one way *Japanese by Spring* undermines both the truth of Puttbutt's experience and the institutions responsible for legitimating truth altogether. To use a better example, late in the story we learn about an intellectual Think Tank that conducts research on "Afrocentricity" (188) is funded by a man who belongs to "[t]he secret government...the government within a government" (185) and who amuses his guests by showing visitors "JFK's brain" as proof "the people he paid" to assassinate the former president had "gotten rid of this communist and lover of Negroes" (187). The conservative Think Tank is full of ridiculous archetypes – "token liberals" and "token blacks" (188) espousing claims no more or less ridiculous than those of Jack London College's white professors who think "blacks are inferior because they can't blush" and the black professors "claiming white people are icepeople," the two together "represent[ing] the highest level of intellect that a racist society is capable of producing" (156). In its non-hierarchical blend of fact and fiction, then, what *Japanese by Spring*

reveals to be pathological is not black culture itself, but rather academia's contradictory procedures for both disparaging and valorizing black culture—to include black culture under the critical purview of academia in order to manufacture a conflict in which picking sides is nonsense because the terms of victory meaningless and the outcomes don't matter.

But it is not within academia alone that higher education has failed in its mandate to reverse the legacy of racism; too often, the accepted symbols of advancement mean nothing outside of college as well. Hence the interest in Percival Everett's 2001 novel *Erasure*--one of the very few academic novels in which universities are imagined to be realms of freedom from necessity, in this case providing shelter against the demands of market society. The novel's protagonist, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, is a member of the bourgeoisie whose grandfather, father, sister, and brother are all medical doctors, but who graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard with a degree in English instead. Ellison grew up literate and free in "a bungalow near Annapolis," (4) enjoys fishing, woodworking, and art, and his academic life has allowed Ellison to explore his interests and create exactly the kind of art that he (and many others) considers valuable. Shortly after the novel begins, Ellison has been promoted to professor of English at UCLA, presumably on the basis of his "[w]idely unread experimental stories and novels" which are "[c]onsidered dense and often inaccessible" (225). In fact, his latest book is a "retelling of *The Satyricon*" (164) in which "Aristophanes and Euripides kill a younger, more talented dramatist, then contemplate the death of metaphysics" (42). And although he has "been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona, and Georgia" (1) he simply "doesn't believe in race" (2). It's not as though Ellison doesn't recognize that his

“dark brown skin, curly hair” and the fact that “some of [his] ancestors were slaves” means “there are other people who will shoot,” “hang,” “cheat,” and “stop” him because of it (1-2). Rather, the truth of his experience tells him that he “did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south,” “is no good at basketball,” and “cannot dance” (1). In terms of his writing, anyone “interested in African American Studies would have little interested in [his] books and would be confused by their presence in the section” because “the only thing ostensibly African American was [his] jacket photograph” (28). So even though, according to Ellison, “the society in which I live tells me I am black”—which means, of course, he cannot help but be “living a *black* life,”—he doesn’t believe this amounts to anything that can be understood as the collective shared experience known as race.

The book market, however, does. Although the novel he’s currently shopping “shows a brilliant intellect” and is both “challenging” and “masterfully written,” no one will buy it because “[i]t’s too difficult for the market”. Publishing books, his agent reminds him, “is a business” (43), and “the market won’t support this kind of thing” (61). What the market will support—what readers buy, and what prize committees adore; in short, what the world demands from him—are “the true, gritty stories of black life” (2). So when his mother is stricken with Alzheimer’s disease and requires extra money to cover her expenses, Ellison is forced to abandon his artistic pursuits and externalize his intellectual labor for the desires of consumers. Disgusted and inspired by Juanita Mae Jenkins’s best-selling *We’s Lives In Da Ghetto* (an obvious reference to Ramona Lofton’s *Push*), Ellison writes a semi-serious novella full of black dialect called *My Pafology* (an obvious reference to Richard Wright’s *Native Son*) under the penname Staggy R. Leigh.

Ellison thinks the book is “not a work of art, but...a functional device, its appearance a thing to behold, but more a thing to mark, a warning perhaps” (209) and that if people “can’t see it’s a parody, fuck them” (132). Nobody can, of course, and after Ellison publishes the manuscript with Random House, Kenya (“Oprah”) Dunston selects it for her book club, helping it reach “number one the *New York Times* bestseller list” (259). He then sells the movie rights for “three million dollars” (209) and wins the “most prestigious book award in the nation.” The story of black pathology is no more “the story of [Ellison’s] people vividly portrayed” than “Abbot and Costello” are the representative figures of whiteness (261), but it is so engrained in the public consciousness that a parody Ellison did not live, does not recognize, and does not believe in becomes “the truest novel” his fellow writers and critics “have ever read.” Ellison summarizes his dilemma quite succinctly when he says:

The fear of course is that in denying or refusing complicity in the marginalization of “black” writers, I ended up in the very distant and very “other” side of a line that is imaginary at best. I didn’t write as an act of testimony or social indignation (though all writing in some way is just that) and I did not write out of a so-called family tradition of oral storytelling. I never tried to set anybody free, never tried to paint the next real and true picture of the life of *my* people, never had any people whose picture I knew well enough to paint. Perhaps if I had written in the time immediately following Reconstruction, I would have written to elevate the station of my fellow oppressed. But the irony was beautiful. I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression. So, I would not be economically oppressed because of writing a book that fell in line with the very books I deemed racist. And I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be (212).

Because Ellison is not writing “in the time immediately following Reconstruction,” his retelling of *The Satyricon* is not an attempt to “elevate the station of my fellow oppressed” – is not, to paraphrase W.E.B. Du Bois, to show the world he moves arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas across the color line. And though Ellison is not exactly oppressed in same sense as his racist caricature Van Go, he can plausibly be called a victim of racism by virtue of how thoroughly racial pathology influences the popular imagination, and how that influence manifests itself through market demands that have become necessary to follow outside of academia’s restricted field.

The difference between racism understood as biological/legal inferiority and racism understood as historical/cultural inferiority is a difference grounded in necessity. Under Jim Crow, education was helpless to overcome the biological inferiority of black Americans because it was what Sheldon Howden knew as the “fundamental condition of being.” By contrast, contemporary higher education is imagined to overcome the supposed cultural inferiority of black Americans through any number of procedures, both inside and outside academia itself. One way of doing that is by rejecting the institutions that manufacture the narrative of cultural pathology, as Ishmael Reed does in *Japanese by Spring*. Another way is to imagine universities as a technology for overcoming it. As *Erasure* makes clear, three generations of professional education and a comfortable income can overcome enough of history’s racial injustice that today a black writer can plausibly say he “never had any people” at all.

As Kenneth Warren notes, the defining feature of African American literature was its orientation toward Jim Crow, but once the legal prohibitions that sanctioned racial inferiority had disappeared, how culture defines racial identity becomes instead a

question of how black writers utilize cultural memory—"the way we were once upon a time, which still informs the way we are now" (96). Likewise, we have seen that what it meant for the African American campus novel to avoid "the race question" under Jim Crow meant denying the collective project of racial uplift into which black writers were implicated, but what that question means for authors of African American campus fiction today has been to avoid the question of whether a collective project based on racial essentialism is possible at all. Indeed, as *Erasure* makes clear, in the absence of Jim Crow and the power of its legal sanction, it is no longer true that a single educated African American can stand as a metonymic argument against the racist doctrine that blacks are biologically inferior, nor is it the case that the black bourgeoisie imagine themselves to be part of the same group of interrelated upper-class families that form a group of "race leaders" (that's the force of Ellison saying "he never had any people"). Instead, the question that informs contemporary African American literature—and the African American campus novel specifically—is this one: "In the absence of a broad movement for social justice, just how do the personal victories and defeats of those with petit bourgeois aspirations matter in the broadest possible sense?" (131). And Warren's answer explains why the African American campus novel has seemed like such a fruitful place to explore the questions that have informed African American literature from its very beginning: "the idea that sustains the possibility of an African American literature is a belief that the welfare of the race as a whole depends on the success of black writers and those who are depicted in their texts." (139)

And in that sense, Zadie Smith's 2005 *On Beauty* embodies both the generic imperatives of the American campus novel and the literary-historical imperatives of

contemporary black fiction. In many ways, *On Beauty* is a conventional campus novel about a mid-career art historian named Howard Belsey who is plagued by his personal and professional failings. In keeping with the dominant critical impulse of academic fiction, ten years of service has not been enough to make Howard feel as though he belongs at Wellington University, but of course very few people do: not the brilliant but conservative Monty Kipps who aspires to take the “‘liberal’ out of Liberal Arts” (148); not the distinguished poet Claire Malcolm who wonders “[h]ow she ever ended up here, in one of these institutions...where one must make an argument...for wanting to write about a chestnut tree” (219); not the Haitian service workers that are both central to the university’s operations and marginalized by its labor practices; and not the gifted writer Carl Thomas who cannot officially enroll in Wellington’s classes despite being the ideal Wellington student.² But even as it adheres to the campus novel narrative tropes, *On Beauty* is also a retelling of E.M. Forster’s classic 1910 novel *Howards End* utilizing black characters, transforming a conventional story about an elite New England college campus into a conspicuously intertextual, transhistorical, transnational, and multiracial narrative about race, history, and the literary field.

Indeed, the Hyppolite painting “Maîtresse Erzulie” is emblematic of *On Beauty*’s understanding of culture, capital, and the relationship of each to the history of race relations in America. “Like all the Catholic saints rolled into one being” (175) the voodoo goddess depicted in “Maîtresse Erzulie” does “a lot of symbolizing.” In contrast to the canonical figure Rembrandt, Hyppolite composes in a “primitive, childlike style” with “no perspective, no depth” (175)—a flatness that suggests his autonomy from the history

² It’s also worth noting that Zadie Smith interjects herself into *On Beauty*, noting that she, too, doesn’t belong in Wellington or the Harvard University that it stands for.

of western art and marks his painting as a distinctly black aesthetic practice. But the question of what black aesthetics means today is made relevant by the wildly divergent responses to “Maîtresse Erzulie” by the black women who look at her. For someone like Kiki Belsey (and, to a greater extent, her son Levi Belsey), the painting offers an opportunity to reconnect with a Caribbean history that has been lost when she married Howard and moved from Florida to the white upper-class neighborhood of Wellington. From the perspective of an upper class British woman like Carlene Kipps, the painting is “company” and the “greater part of [her] joy,”—a symbol of “love, beauty, purity.” At the same time, the Haitian house cleaner, Clotilde, “won’t look at [Erzulie], can’t even be in the same room as her” because the image is frightening (175). The point here is not that Clotilde interprets the symbol differently—as representative figure of “jealousy, vengeance, and discord”—but rather that she doesn’t interpret “Maîtresse Erzulie” at all. For her, the voodoo goddess at the center of the painting is instead a quasi-religious artifact—a belief Carlene dismisses as mere “superstition.” Far from being a unifying expression of black identity, then, “Maîtresse Erzulie” reveals the historically produced differences between British women who own Haitian art and Haitian woman who make “four dollars an hour” (429) cleaning the spaces under which it hangs.

But despite its symbolic contradictions, the one place where “Maîtresse Erzulie” seems totally reconciled is in its status as an art commodity. Whether one believes the painting is part of an autonomous black aesthetic or whether it has become part of the western art canon, whether the beholders see Erzulie as a representative symbol of beauty or as an instantiation of the divine, nobody denies the painting “is worth a great deal” (175). This is why the pressing question raised during the novel’s climax is not so much

how a person's history changes what a work of art means, but rather what it means for a person to own a work of art given its history. The fact that Carlene Kipps "bought it herself" (428) means that, as private property, she can do anything she wants with "Maîtresse Erzulie," including hiding it in her office to torture the help or giving it away to a person she barely knows. Then again, a slightly more charitable way to understand the Kipps's relationship to "Maîtresse Erzulie" is one of responsible stewardship, a position exemplified when Monty Kipps hangs the painting in the halls of Wellington's Black Studies Department so that people who care about reconnecting with their history through the mediated form of diasporic art—people like the 'Soyinka Professor of African Literature' Erskine Jegede and the young street poet Carl Thomas—can access their culture whenever they so desire. Seen from this perspective, it doesn't matter what the painting means or who owns it as long as people can learn about, and be reconnected with, their history whenever they look at it.

The problem with this position is, as the novel makes abundantly clear, that restoring to people like Carl and Clotilde a history that belongs to them means comparatively little when history is the only thing that does belong to them. Even though Carl believes that primary reason students pay Wellington's tuition is they "get to talk to other people about that shit. That's all you're paying for...It's nothing more than that" (137), the novel itself recognizes that access culture is not exactly what their money is buying. One of *On Beauty*'s major sub-plots centers on Monty Kipps's invocation of Wellington's bureaucracy to prevent Carl from auditing classes as a special student—something Kipps sees as "a blatant corruption...whereby students who are NOT enrolled at [Wellington] are yet taught in classes here, by professors who, at their own

‘discretion’...allow these ‘students’ into their classes, choosing them over actual students better qualified than they – NOT because these young people meet the academic standards of Wellington, no, but because they are considered *needy cases*” (329). But once readers see that Carl is not simply being offered an education because of his need—described as “Keats with a knapsack” (230), Carl is perhaps *more* talented than the “better qualified students”—the novel’s true critique of higher education becomes less about the interpersonal politics blocking Carl from entering Wellington as a special student and more about the social politics blocking Carl from entering Wellington as a regular one. Significantly, the meaningful difference between these two ways of understanding contemporary higher education is the force of the diploma as a marker of social class. So while Carl can sit in the same classrooms and read the same books and learn from the same teachers as Zora Belsey, without the Wellington degree he’ll have a tough time turning his knowledge about African-American poetry into something that will save him from a life of poverty. From the novel’s perspective, then, it’s not enough for Carl to get a Wellington education by simply being near black culture, or even by producing it; he has to own it, too.

On Beauty’s distinction between culture and class thus reveals something about race in contemporary American society that J. Saunders Redding, from his position in history under Jim Crow, could not imagine about the political possibilities of black empowerment through higher education. Under a regime of state-sanctioned segregation, higher education seemed like the precondition of black equality. Slave labor might have built the first American colleges, but after emancipation these institutions would become the primary site racial uplift. Despite their serious disagreements, both Booker T.

Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois believed schools could produce the people white supremacy said didn't exist--useful tradesman in the case of Washington, the Talented Tenth of race leaders in the case of Du Bois. On a literary level, the African-American campus novel was subsumed within the paradigm of this resistance, becoming either instrumental or indexical to the idea of black equality. Novels like J. Saunders Redding's *Stranger and Alone* functioned as protest novels against black inferiority, explaining the injustice to a sympathetic audience, or like Du Bois's *Mansart Builds A School* they became evidence that black authors were capable of more than white society believed possible.

But at *On Beauty* makes clear in the opening pages, "this isn't 1910" (5) – part of the historical difference between American society under Jim Crow and American society today is that in 2005 Carl Thomas's transformation into next Keats doesn't stand as a sign of the race improving itself. It's just him getting ahead. And what that means for people like Clotilde is that they get left behind

¹ New Hope College is no doubt based on Southern University in Baton Rouge.

² For more on the history of slavery to the founding of early American higher education, see *Ebony and Ivy*.

³ See James D. Anderson, *The Education of Black Folks in the South*.

⁴ Written in 1950, *Stranger and Alone* appears 14 years before the Civil Rights Act and four years before the Supreme Court ended *de jure* segregation, but only two years before the publication of another novel that takes up similar themes, namely Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. There is of course much to say about *Invisible Man*'s relationship to higher education, African American literature, and the way the novel masterfully places each in conversation with the other, and if *Invisible Man* had ended shortly after Chapter

6 with Dr. Bledsoe's expulsion of the narrator from the novel's version of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, it would no doubt be one of the finest academic novels ever written. As it stands, Ellison's narrator embarks on a journey from segregated Southern schools to the race riots of Harlem, the distance between the two a deliberate statement about the limits of education to define the individual's relationship to society.

Even so, *Invisible Man* does produce a sophisticated account of race and social class, albeit in multiple different contexts. In the beginning of the novel *Invisible Man*'s narrator is in (literal) competition with other black children for a scholarship to the "state college for Negroes" whose stated purpose is to help the most worthy child "develop" and "shape the destiny of [his] people" (32), but whose true function is to "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (33); as the benefactors who award the scholarship remind him, "[w]e mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times" (31). Like *Stranger and Alone*, *Invisible Man* clearly shows that segregated higher education was at odds with itself—a self-contradictory institution whose professional and intellectual ambitions "to do right" existed in tension within the subordinated "place" it created by and through Jim Crow. Which is perhaps why what the narrator gets from his institution isn't the presumed credential for racial uplift, but rather a job reference that instructs potential employers to "hope him to death, and keep him running" (194).

⁵ Redding could have easily set *Stranger and Alone* outside the strict confines of Jim Crow where the interactions between white and black citizens were less stringent and the meaning of distinct social worlds did not carry the force of legal sanction. After all, readers get a taste of this kind of separateness when Howden briefly attends the "democratic" [Columbia] University in New York, only to return to the south so that he might teach at Arcadia State—a very common career path for the black intelligentsia and one that Redding himself followed (106). The fact that the vast majority of the book takes place within segregated schools indicates that Redding was primarily (although not totally) concerned with the social worlds produced by institutions that were homogenously black.

⁶ Sutton Grigg's 1899 *Imperium in Imperio: A Study of the Negro Race Problem* likewise takes up the issue of the hierarchy of black social life, literalizing the black college as the inverted foundation of an independent empire within an empire.

⁷ Sheldon Howden has no shortage of negative characteristics, but it is important to distinguish among them.

Throughout the novel Howden violates various codes of interpersonal ethics, ostracizing himself from his college roommate, his co-workers, and to a lesser extent his wife. Yet Howden's status as an orphan reproduces a certain narrative of black pathology that saw freedman as lacking the organizational and institutional structures necessary to govern themselves effectively. That the novel begins on the first day of school without giving readers much information about Howden's past suggests a parallel between Howden's personal history and the history of the people he represents, embodying the Jim Crow moment as one that is both a beginning in-itself and a continuation of a long quest for freedom. Seen from this perspective, Howden's feelings of isolation, his dearth of significant relationships, and his corresponding selfishness are all symptomatic of post-emancipation racial consciousness in need of the institutional support through which meaningful relationships and racial solidarity can be achieved. The fact that New Hope College's racist curriculum fails to educate Howden about the need for broad solidarity is no doubt one of his personal character flaws (stemming from his stubbornness), but it is also insightful observation about the meaning of the term "race traitor" within the context of an institutional structure predicated on the stratification of the black community.

⁸ Important to note the disparity between when the novel is set (1923) and when it is published (1950). By the time Redding writes the novel, comparatively few people believed in Madison Grant. According to Carol Taylor "The mid-1920s marked the high point of racism's scientific respectability. By the early 1930s, scientific pronouncements on race were under fire from members of the scientific community." (454)

⁹ "his goal in writing was not (or not merely) to demonstrate that white society discriminated against educated blacks but rather to show that discriminatory practices and discourses in fact made black education itself possible" (Brown 138)

¹⁰ The same year that Redding published *Stranger and Alone*, the U.S. Supreme Court echoed the novel's meaning by interpreting segregation's fundamental inequality through higher education. Because the original 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision "assumed the possibility of attainment of a theoretical equality within the framework of racial segregation, rather than on a full hearing and evidence which would have established the inevitability of

discrimination under a system of segregation”, challengers saw quite clearly how the evidence of lived experience would negate segregation’s theoretical foundations (Kluger 556). In its 1950 *Sweatt v. Painter* opinion, in which a black student named Heman Marion Sweatt sued over the right to be admitted to the University of Texas’s Law School, the court saw the “number of the faculty, variety of courses and opportunity for specialization, size of the student body, scope of the library, availability of law review and similar activities” at the University of Texas to be “superior” to those found in Texas’s segregated law school. Additionally, they found at the University of Texas “a far greater degree those qualities which are incapable of objective measurement” such as “reputation of the faculty, experience of the administration, position and influence of the alumni, standing in the community, traditions and prestige.” Based on the evidence, the court concluded the theoretical premise of segregated equality “overlooks realities,” ruling that it could not “find substantial equality in the educational opportunities offered white and Negro law students by the State” of Texas. Moreover, when the court overturned nation-wide segregation in its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision in 1954, part of its justification for dismantling the “separate but equal” doctrine relied on a 1950 UNESCO report entitled *The Race Question* that demonstrated the international scientific community rejected the idea of racial superiority altogether. Because there was no proven biological difference between races that would justify differences in accommodations, and because segregation was shown to produce racially-marked differences in resource distribution that could not be construed as anything but unequal, the justice system concluded that segregation was little more than attempt to deny African Americans their constitutionally protected rights for equal protection under the law.

¹¹ See Bobby L Lovett’s *America’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities*.

¹² According to the NCES, as of 2012 only 36.4% of the college-aged black population is enrolled in college, compared to 42.1% of the white population.

¹³ “Here Are The Demands From Students Protesting Racism At 51 Colleges”

<http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/here-are-the-demands-from-students-protesting-racism-at-51-colleges/>

¹⁴ Like the old Horatio Alger stories, the argument was never that marginalized populations are given an equal opportunity to succeed in American society; the legacy of racism ensures that this could never be true. Rather, the argument is that marginalized populations could succeed despite those inherited inequalities—inequalities undone by the democracy of work.

¹⁵ In the intermediate, the campus novel “proper” gets going full-steam, but the black campus novel doesn’t until it gets going until Ishmael Reed and the Culture Wars.

Chapter V: What Do You Want To Be When You Give Up?:

Memoir, #QuitLit, and the Forms of Academic Nonfiction

“You’re cut out for failure, and you know it.”—John

Williams, Stoner

The three novels that make up David Lodge’s campus trilogy—*Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984), and *Nice Work* (1988)—all begin in the same way and, in fact, in a way that thousands of other novels also begin: “This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental” (Publisher’s note). But the standard disclaimer¹ isn’t quite enough for Lodge who, in an author’s note preceding the narrative’s first pages, goes on to repeat and qualify it: “Although some of the locations and public events portrayed in this novel bear a certain resemblance to actual locations and events, the characters, considered either as individuals or as members of institutions, are entirely imaginary.” Furthermore, when the campus trilogy was reprinted as a single volume in 2011, Lodge felt the need to come back to the question, noting in a new introduction that *Changing Places* had indeed been based on his time at Berkeley, and that he had “promised [himself] that when [he] got home [he] would use all this experience to write a novel—a comic one, as campus novels tend to be, exploring the gap between the high ideals of academic institutions and the human flaws and follies of their members” (Introduction).

One way to read this progression is as a move from an “entirely coincidental” relation between the “work of fiction” and its “imaginary” characters to a deliberate relation between Lodge’s “real experiences” and the persons to whom they correspond—

a shift that registers something crucial about the academic novel and the world it both produces and describes. As Elaine Showalter says, part of the academic novel's longstanding appeal has been "the insider's gossipy pleasure in recognizing portraits, usually unflattering, of colleagues and friends" (4). For Showalter, academic novels are an open invitation to analyze, debate, and (as she says) "gossip" about the secrets they expose—in fact, speculating about the degree to which these fictions correspond to the world are part of their intended critical function. But by the time Lodge was ready to acknowledge the correspondence between the imagined Morris Zapp and the real-world Stanley Fish, it was, for the very reason Showalter suggests, more or less irrelevant. That is, by 2011 every English professor who was moderately interested in the topic already knew that Zapp was based on Fish, and the pleasure they might derive from seeing the secret exposed had vanished because there was nothing left for the fictions to conceal.² Which is to say that the presumed niche interest of the academic novel was no longer determined by the question of resemblance to persons living or dead—was *Changing Places*'s Sy Gootblatt based on Stephen Greenblatt? Was *Pictures from an Institution*'s Gertrude Johnson based on Mary McCarthy? Was *Death in a Tenured Position*'s Janet Mandelbaum based on Helen Vendler?—but by something else entirely.

As Lodge himself implies in his new introduction, the dominant interest in the academic novel is more properly understood through its ambition to expose "the gap between the high ideals of academic institutions and the human flaws and follies of their members." The idea here is that you don't have to be an insider to be interested in the meaning and function of higher education and that—at least by the 2011 re-issue of *Changing Places*, if not by the 1975 original publication—enough people cared about

the “gaps” between educational “ideals” and “follies” that the gaps between Zapp and Fish had ceased to matter. Increased government support through the G.I. Bill, the National Defense Education Act, and the Higher Education Act, in conjunction with higher earnings for college graduates, meant that more people in the 1970s were implicated in the relationship between higher education and the social order than at any previous point in history, and by 2011 that concern was larger than ever. Elsewhere in this project I have outlined the transformation of American colleges and universities from a relatively minor group of institutions that served about 6% of the population at the turn of the 20th century to a central mass of institutions that serve about 60% of the population today—a demographic shift that explains the interest in these educational “gaps” and correlates to a rapid proliferation of narratives about college life. As Jeffrey Williams shows in his article “The Rise of the Academic Novel,” between 1950 and 2000 American authors published roughly 410 novels about academic life at a gradually increasing rate, which roughly corresponds to rising student enrollments over that same timespan (568).

Williams explains the rise of academic fiction—texts ranging from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House* (1925) to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pnin* (1957) and John Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966)—through its correlation to the rise of America’s new “professional managerial class,” but from my standpoint that correlation makes sense only if it’s situated within a larger critical framework. I argue that it’s not exactly the rise of the educated class that matters for literary history so much as it is the way these fictions structure the educated class’s beliefs about the social formations that create and sustain it. Indeed, beginning in the early 20th century, there have been two not entirely compatible developments that the

academic novel, through its formal conceits, has helped to mediate and expose. On one hand, the ongoing democratization of higher education embodies the hope that Americans can (l)earn their way into a just social and economic order. On the other hand, the growing commitment to the equality of opportunity has justified the growing inequality of outcomes, revealing that those hopes for educational egalitarianism have gone largely unfulfilled. In fact, my research shows that despite the ten-fold increase in college enrollment since the turn of the century, American educational institutions largely serve the same populations as they did in the past, and largely for the same reasons. The essential difference is that what was once understood as inherited privilege is now understood as justly earned reward, and, I argue, it is this tension between the similarity of the class status of the academic population and the difference in that population's understanding of itself that makes the academic novel such a compelling form of representation in postwar American literature.

My concern in this final chapter, however, is not exactly with the academic novel, but with a related form that has in many ways overshadowed it: the academic memoir. These narratives share many of the same genre conventions of their fictional counterparts, but as my reading of *Changing Places* suggests, instead of disguising the resemblances between real persons and imaginary characters, they loudly proclaim their correspondence and are indeed predicated upon it.³ What accounts for the shift? In an earlier chapter I noted that academic fiction is concerned with representing the social forces restricting undergraduate enrollment during periods of supposed democratization, but for authors writing about their experiences in the 1960s—Jane Tompkins's *A Life in School* (1996), Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Colored People* (1994), Marianna Torgovnick's

Crossing Ocean Parkway (1997), etc.—attending college appeared easy and natural.⁴ Indeed, for Tompkins it was “a foregone conclusion that [she] would go to college; the only question was where” (66). Gates said going to Potomac State “was inevitable: you went there after Piedmont High, as sure as the night follows the day” (192). Torgovnick “quite naturally chose to stay in school through college and into graduate school” (42). Early beneficiaries of mass higher education, each of these authors understood themselves as following a familiar plot through college. What distinguishes these narratives from previous incarnations, then, is not so much that colleges excluded them, but that the profession did. Despite support from the 1958 National Defense Education Act, wherein the advanced studying and teaching of American literature became an essential (and well-funded) component of promoting national culture, there remained within the academy an intensely narrow view of what “national culture” actually was. So even as the percentage of the student population majoring in English was highest in modern history, and tenure-track faculty made up about 78% of the professoriate, the investment in higher education meant there were plenty of white male tenured faculty teaching a literary canon that did not reflect the history and experiences of the newly diversified study body.⁵

In fact, the disconnect between misogynistic literature and the influx of women on campus is at the heart of Tompkins’s book *Sensational Designs*, wherein she notes that it wasn’t just English departments that were built upon the exclusion of women, but the professional practices defining the canon itself. According to Tompkins, the reason why Nathaniel Hawthorne is revered today has less to do with the objective aesthetic merit of his work than it does with a professional reading audience trained—as she was at Yale—

to value contemporary values like complexity and moral ambiguity, and this explains why a writer such as Harriet Beecher Stowe could have such a stellar reputation in one historical context but such a miserable reputation in a different one. The publication of *Sensational Designs* made Tompkins a very successful academic, but what eventually made her a star was flaunting her disdain for the codes of conduct of the dominant (and, in her eyes, misogynistic) academic discourse. Tompkins has said that the motivation to write *Sensational Designs* was in part a reaction against her education, while her turn to autobiography and memoir was an attempt to circumvent the institutional biases and hierarchies of an academic credentialing system that ignored and even undermined the value of personal writing and feminized bodies of knowledge.⁶

But before *Sensational Designs* earned Tompkins a full professorship at Duke, she began her career off the tenure track at Temple University as a contingent laborer and “person of no account” (*School* 96). In her memoir *A Life in School*, Tompkins attributes her precarity to a fundamental misunderstanding of academic life, believing that “professional advancement was the same as getting good grades in school: you did your best, and people would notice and give you a gold star”; it never occurred to her that “anything other than merit would contribute to [her] advancement” (96). For a long time Tompkins was mystified by her stagnant career: “I knew that professionally speaking I had the right credentials and that people who counted had thought well of me....So at Temple I sometimes felt like a princess in disguise, waiting until someone discovered who I really was. When no one did, I began to suspect that something had gone terribly wrong, but I was at a loss to know what it might be. I had, to put it mildly, no political sense” (96).

It didn't take long for Tompkins to figure out what had gone so terribly wrong. She had the pedigree and the publications to be a successful colleague at Temple, but what she didn't have was the penis.⁷ Tompkins's department chair said that putting her on the tenure track meant that two male assistant professors—"men with families" for whom "[c]ertain commitments had been made"—would almost certainly be passed over for tenure because, comparatively speaking, they lacked her "superior qualifications" (97-98). Tompkins had a predictable reaction:

I went around repeating the story—about my credentials, the young men, how the chairman had said it wouldn't be fair—hoping to get some light on the situation. Finally the husband of a friend, a businessman, said the words that made everything clear: "Do they want their five dollars or do they want the tie?" The gritty commercial metaphor opened my eyes. In purely professional terms the department's decisions didn't make sense. Since my qualifications were better, yet they still preferred the young men, they weren't getting full value, unless something else had entered their calculations. (97)

Had Temple been interested in getting the "full value" out of its investment in its employees, Tompkins is correct in thinking that it "didn't make sense" not to hire her permanently. Of course, the "something else" entering the department chair's calculations—whether he was aware of it or not—was misogyny, and the premium he paid for that discrimination was inferior faculty.⁸ Which is just to say that instead of Woodrow Wilson fellows capable of writing books like *Sensational Designs*, what the Temple English department was getting instead, like many other English departments around the country, were "men with families" and their penises and their ties.

Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Tompkins was undervalued because of her femininity, and like *Sensational Designs*, *A Life in School* examines how merit is shaped by its historical and institutional contexts. But unlike *Sensational Designs*—a book that

intervenes in a scholarly debate over aesthetic value—*A Life in School* intervenes in a debate over the value of scholarship as such. According to Tompkins, higher education teaches students “to succeed in its own terms,” and insofar as success means “obeying rules,” the gendered practices governing academic life do immense harm to the people who live and work within it (xvii). Of course, attempting to change higher education by making such an argument in the professional literature would only reinforce the problem, since “to adhere to the conventions [of academic argumentation] is to uphold a male standard of rationality that militates against women being recognized as culturally legitimate sources of knowledge” (“Shadow” 170-171). By contrast, “[t]he criticism [Tompkins] would like to write would always take off from personal experience, would always be in some way a chronicle of [her] hours and days, would speak in a voice which can talk about everything” (173). Indeed, the 1980s marked a period in which the question of which texts counted as literary became just as important as the question of which texts counted as scholarship, not just to Tompkins, but to a number of prominent academics such as Cathy Davidson, who pioneered the dissolution of public/private writing in literary studies by insisting that her memoir, *36 Views of Mt. Fuji* (1993), would count toward her tenure and promotion (Begley 54). Which is why *A Life in School* is not merely a memoir that reveals how institutional power works—in this case, that academic “woman does not advance by merit alone” (98)—but also a text that works against institutional power itself. After all, “obeying rules” enabled Tompkins to achieve success on academia’s terms; changing those rules enabled Tompkins to transform her status as a female “outsider” (98) into the core of what merits success in academia at all—insight, innovation, and the courage to explore ideas that others have overlooked.

The academic memoir can thus be understood as both a critique of, and cure for, the educational meritocracy's glaring imperfections: the true testimony of resistance against entrenched professional practices transformed into the currency through which those practices are perfected.

But in the past few years a new kind of life writing about higher education has emerged, a form that both reproduces and reverses the outsider critiques which defined the academic memoir of Tompkins's generation. Published mostly through personal blogs and digital news columns, "Quit Lit" is a genre that, like the academic memoir, examines higher education's many failings and attempts to work against institutional power by mobilizing the identities of its authors. Quit Lit likewise shares Tompkins's skepticism about the academy's commitment to rationality and its ability to comment upon itself, and it takes seriously her belief that criticism about higher education should begin with personal experience. However, whereas the academic memoir produces a narrative critique in which historical outsiders succeed in higher education despite considerable professional resistance from the universities that produced them, Quit Lit tells the opposite story: these narratives often describe "gold star" students like Tompkins—they've earned the right credentials and the people who count think well of them—who have failed to achieve the social and economic security that higher education is imagined to provide.⁹ So instead of repeating what Tompkins did at Temple and using their "superior qualifications" to "lobb[y] members of the appointments committee to vote [them] onto the tenure track" (98), the authors of Quit Lit opt instead to leave academia behind.

Perhaps the best-known example of Quit Lit is Rebecca Schuman's 2013 *Slate* article "Thesis Hatement" in which she warns potential academics that "ruin is predestined and completely unrelated to how 'right' you do things" because, even though "you are probably spectacular," the academic job market is such that "you will never get [a] stable, non-penurious position at a decent university." Schuman's understanding of academic life is similar to that of Tompkins during her political awakening in the 1970s: that universities are not the meritocratic institutions they imagine themselves to be. Schuman's diagnosis—that favoritism toward "inside candidate[s]" and even random chance plays a significant, if not dominant, role in the academic labor market—has become the conventional wisdom, but while it positions itself as a critique of the academic meritocracy, in reality her cautionary tale signals the culmination of higher education's meritocratic ambitions. Unlike Temple in the 1970s when what mattered most was whether you wore a tie, it's no longer the case that deserving candidates are being passed over for undeserving ones; in the current academic labor market everyone has "a book contract, peer-reviewed publications, and stellar teaching evaluations" because there are no more undeserving candidates, not even the men with families. Thus the narrative of the qualified struggling to replace the unqualified no longer has any purchase. Whereas the academic memoirist confronted a world in which the problem was making sure that the best people got the good jobs, the authors of Quit Lit confront a world in which the problem is that the good jobs are disappearing.

Which is why, if the academic memoir understood itself as both a representation of the educational meritocracy and its evidence, Quit Lit understands itself as the academic meritocracy's negation: the testimony of a highly credentialed academic

multitude whose anonymity marks the system's brutality. The emergence of Quit Lit thus registers a shift in our thinking about American higher education because it moves away from glamorizing the academic "star system" of the 1980s and 1990s and centers our attention on the growing mass of contingent academic laborers that define colleges and universities today. Stories like those of Margaret Mary Vojtko, an 80-year old career adjunct at Duquesne University whose life-long penury kept her working to pay for her own cancer treatments, are all too common and, if visibility counts for anything, not common enough. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (quoting the Department of Agriculture), "the percentage of graduate-degree holders who receive food stamps or some other aid doubled between 2007 and 2010," and that "about 360,000 were receiving some kind of public assistance." From this perspective, Quit Lit produces a vision of the "corporate university" that has become remarkably successful at educating students—indeed, how can graduate education consider itself anything but successful when it produces so many smart people—but remarkably poor at employing those students with the jobs they almost certainly deserve.

Quit Lit taps into the growing sense of frustration among a class for whom education, once a path to a stable academic career—as it was for Tompkins, Gates, and Torgovnick—has become a dead end. In that sense, replacing the critique of the academy's commitment to choosing the best people for the best jobs with an attack on the political economy in which, because there are no more good jobs it doesn't matter who the best people are, Quit Lit represents a deeper analysis of the academic meritocracy than did the academic memoir. Showing us a world in which merit is omnipresent and hence irrelevant, it also suggests a profound kinship between skilled and unskilled

labor—between the people who teach writing for under \$21,600 year and the people who serve hamburgers for just a little less.¹⁰

But the world of low-wage work is not the world Quit Lit's authors want to live in, and the eponymous ending of the Quit Lit genre serves as a conspicuous reminder that they don't have to—that merit can still be rewarded in America, even if it isn't in the English Department. To use just one example, in "My 'I Quit' Letter" Melissa Dalglish writes that "[m]y desperate desire to stay in academe turned into fury at the system that had taught me that my self-worth lay in conforming to its standards, that those PhDs who didn't become academics were second-class citizens, lesser, unworthy." Dalglish's "identity was so tied up with being an academic that contemplating not being one was something like contemplating [her] own death." Luckily, Dalglish experienced a political awakening of her own: "There was a whole world of things that I could do—things that I'd want to do, things that I'd love to do—that weren't being an academic. They were jobs that would let me have everything I fundamentally wanted—intellectual stimulation, colleagues I liked, financial security, job stability, the ability to have a family on my own timetable, the choice of where I lived—on my own terms." So instead of feeling like a failure for making a wage that's closer to an entry level data clerk than a tenure track assistant professor, Dalglish now works as a Research Training Centre Coordinator in the Research Institute at the Hospital for Sick Children. A worthy profession, no doubt, and one that makes her much more happy and much less poor.

Hence instead of critiquing the divide between a growing number of poorly-paid contingent workers and an increasingly narrow group of permanent ones, Dalglish's narrative reveals its allegiance to an economic system that creates the division and, in

doing so, reinforces its values. Indeed, in this case the attack on the inequities within the academic job market largely functions to valorize higher education's role in producing and legitimating the social inequity outside of it. Because even when a graduate degree doesn't secure you a job within academia, it nevertheless trains you for any number of well-paying jobs: the very thing that Quit Lit authors "fundamentally wanted" out of their investment in higher education to begin with. So if the bad news of Quit Lit is that the percentage of graduate-degree holders receiving food stamps has doubled, providing a plausible account of why academics leave the higher education labor force, Quit Lit's good news is that there's plenty of money to earn after they leave. After all, of the 44 million people that received food stamps or some other form of public aid in 2010, merely .8% of them—360,000 out of 44,000,000—held higher degrees (Patton). Furthermore, of the 22 million people with master's degrees or higher, only 1.6% of them are on public assistance. So not only are 98.4% of people with higher degrees above the threshold for public assistance—each of them is estimated to earn over 1.2 million dollars more over the course of their lifetimes than those with a B.A., and 2.2 million more than those with a high school diploma.

The rapid ascendance of Quit Lit reveals how, in broad but very real sense, higher education still awards economic opportunity, which is why one of Quit Lit's major goals has been to show contingent academic laborers across the country that they haven't "failed" as academics so much as they've mistaken an investment in human capital with an identification as a temporarily embarrassed associate professor. But instead of reproducing a larger narrative that "blames the victim," attributing unemployment to some form of personal inadequacy, Quit Lit highlights, in Lodge's terms, "the gap

between the high ideals of academic institutions and the human flaws and follies of their members” by identifying a structural problem between what higher education says it wants and who it’s willing to employ. In the 1970s, the high ideals of the educational meritocracy were being undermined by the human flaws and follies of a misogynistic profession; for Tompkins, overcoming those flaws meant experiencing a political awakening that required her to understand that “woman does not advance [in the profession] by merit alone” and to challenge an entrenched discourse that constructed merit along patriarchal lines. But for Schuman, Dalglish, and any number of Quit Lit authors writing during the last decade, the economic rewards associated with the academic meritocracy are being undermined by a labor market so saturated with qualified applicants that making distinctions between them is the equivalent of flipping a coin, which, of course, is no distinction at all. Here too we have an imperfect meritocracy—one predicated on merit’s overabundance rather than its scarcity—but the form of Quit Lit’s political awakening does not require sustained engagement within the institution. Instead, the engagement imagines itself as withdrawal.¹¹

Insofar as academic nonfiction reveals the hidden truth in the groves of academe, we can see that Quit Lit is really about abandoning the unprofitable corporate university to work in profitable corporations, or leaving an irrational academic job market to stake one’s claim in a rational one. Moreover, insofar as they are concerned with exposing institutions for overlooking their most deserving employees, both the academic memoir and Quit Lit are genres that don’t critique the corporate university for being corporate so much as they critique the corporate university for not being corporate enough: for not recognizing the “full value” of the human capital that it produces but fails to support. If

the difference between having everything you fundamentally want out of your job and having to apply for government assistance is a mistaken sense of your value—what Jane Tompkins described as having “no political sense”—it’s true that learning to appreciate what you’re worth solves a very real type of problem: a problem that academic nonfiction has been interrogating for at least the past twenty years. When Tompkins was laboring off the tenure track in the early 1970s, Temple’s English department failed to recognize her full value because of overt misogyny, and her solution to the pressing political issue of her day was combating the institutional barriers denying that value by writing about her feelings, to great personal and professional success. But the reason why Quit Lit authors can’t get permanent academic jobs today is not primarily because gender discrimination has increased but because labor exploitation has. In 1969, three years after Jane Tompkins graduated from Yale with her Ph.D., only 13% of all doctoral degrees across the country were awarded to women.¹² Today about 54% of Ph.D.s are awarded to women—a monumental turnaround. In 1996 when Jane Tompkins’s memoir made its intervention, women made up about 33% of the full-time faculty. Today, they are roughly 42% of the full-time faculty—a number that obviously lags too far behind the enrollment statistics, but one that nevertheless represents a movement toward gender equity across the profession (the missing 10% presumably reserved for those to whom “certain commitments” are still being made).

So while a certain degree of discrimination, including discrimination by prestige, remains stubbornly entrenched in academic departments around the country, it’s almost certainly true that higher education is more inclusive and meritocratic now than at any other point in history. What is also true is that Quit Lit’s critique of the educational

meritocracy produces an unexpected insight, not through the now-familiar insistence on “naming names,” but by demonstrating how those names have in some sense become irrelevant. It is for this reason that Schuman’s “Thesis Hatement” is a better critique of the politics of higher education than perhaps she understands, and certainly better than her detractors believe it to be. For “Thesis Hatement” shifts the narrative focus away from the personal triumphs and tragedies of the unemployed since the reason why they will never get a stable academic position has less to do with the job market’s (mis)recognition of a candidate’s merits than it does with impossibility of accommodating so many deserving candidates at all. Whereas Dalglish’s account focuses on how merit is undervalued within academia compared to the private sector, Schuman’s account suggests the complete irrelevance of merit since, as she says, when only 25% of the academic labor force works on the tenure track, “ruin is predestined” no matter your race, sex, creed, or object of study. Here, the causal account of how and why academics did or did not get their jobs—and, significantly, who did or did not get them—pivots toward a suggestion of how labor functions in relation to capital, independent of the names of the people who hold those jobs, fictional or otherwise.

As my reading of *Changing Places* shows, the academic novel’s interest in concealing names reproduces the larger aesthetic interest of the novel as such. In a Lukácsian sense, for the novel to successfully represent reality, what it needs is a type of person: a character that resembles Stanley Fish rather than an identity that corresponds to him. Here the commitment to typology—to narrative abstraction—is the precondition of producing the historical subject whose personality, in all its individual complexity, is shown to be implicated within social, institutional, and ideological structures beyond

his/her immediate understanding. Indeed, it is the gap between resemblance and correspondence that makes abstraction possible, and ultimately makes legible the gap between society and self, or what Lodge referred to as “high ideals of academic institutions and the human flaws and follies of their members.” Seen from this perspective, it is *Changing Places*’s commitment to abstraction that makes Lodge’s experiences with Stanley Fish cease to be thinly veiled *roman à clef* gossip and enables it to become something more: serious literature. And Lodge was able to realize those ambitions because the historical condition of the campus trilogy’s production—the vast expansion of American higher education—has meant that enough people are now implicated in what college represents as a social institution that individual claims about particular schools or professors have come to seem beside the point.

However, as my reading of *A Life in School* also shows, the recent interest in personal writing poses a certain challenge to both the novel’s commitment to abstraction and the institutions that have enshrined abstraction as the horizon of politics and art. Instead of utilizing the gap between resemblance and correspondence as the basis to critique the world, academic nonfiction attempts to *close* the gap between literary figures and real people by making the particulars of individual experience essential to understanding the world these texts describe. From this perspective, the names matter to literature because the particularity of the injury overturns the public/private binary and gives the story its political force.

But the rise of Quit Lit demonstrates that it’s not exactly the indexical relationship between character and nonfictional text that reveals the political economy of the academic world; it is instead the network of relations, between all the authors of

academic nonfiction, that defines the structure of the labor market constitutive of that world. Since the 1980s, academic superstars like Jane Tompkins have written more memoirs about overcoming long odds than anyone has the time or constitution to read, describing and wresting control over the academic meritocracy in the same masterstroke. Conversely, *Quit Lit* testifies to the failure of that system to reproduce itself, both symbolically in the form of the success story and materially in the form of tenure track jobs. But the conditions of *Quit Lit*'s production—the newly credentialed academic multitude—make not just the names of the authors, but the political commitment to naming names, irrelevant. Indeed, what the ever-growing number of *Quit Lit* narratives allow us to see, in aggregate if not in their particularity, is that the injustice of higher education does not derive from any individual violation of academia's meritocratic procedures; the structure itself is the injustice, embodied not in the identities of the people it harms, but in the social relations that constitute the labor market.

¹ The standard disclaimer—that the text is fictional; that it has no pretensions to objective correspondence—dates back to at least the 18th century when novelists and playwrights used it to insulate themselves against reprisals by government and church officials. Perhaps the most famous example of such backlash occurred in 1934 when Russian Princess Irina Alexandrovna sued Metro-Goldwin Mayer over *Rasputin and the Empress*—a film that (untruthfully) depicted Rasputin seducing “Princess Natasha.” The royal family successfully argued in the English Court of Appeal that the real-life Princess Irina was the “referent” of the fictional “Princess Natasha” and as a result of the film she had been publicly defamed (Davis 269).

² Lodge writes: “For Morris Zapp I drew on a great many Jewish academics I had encountered on my two visits to the United States, and one in particular, a friend [Fish] who fortunately revels in the portrait and in

fact rather exaggerates the resemblance to himself.” Lodge is perhaps the only person who believes the resemblance is exaggerated. (Intro)

³ According to Diane Freedman, academic nonfiction (sometimes called “autocritography” “new belletrism” or, more derisively, “nouveau solipsism”) has been so successful because “personal testimonies still have political-action, aesthetic, and epistemic value” (8). One of the aims of the academic memoir movement is not just to represent how institutional power works, as academic fiction does, but to work against that power by interjecting one’s own voice into, and against, a dominant form of disembodied inquiry. Far from being self-indulgent expressions of pure personality, however, academic nonfiction in general, and the academic memoir in particular, takes seriously the lessons of contemporary critical theory. Candace Lang says that the intellectual climate informing these memoirs “shot the notion of objectivity full of holes, and along with it, that of pure subjectivity: it taught us that everything is indeed ‘experience,’ but that experience is always mediated, in a circle that passes through the personal, but always on the way from and to the ‘unpersonal,’ or other” (50). Nancy Miller echoes that view, noting “the ambiguous back and forth between lives and stories, between facts and history, has been crucial to the creation of feminism and central (for better or for worse) to the evolution of confessional culture” (Miller xiv).

⁴ The academic memoir is not confined to English professors. In her book *Academic Lives*, Cynthia Franklin notes that faculty from many academic disciplines have in recent years adopted the memoir. Although my analysis here focuses on people working in modern languages, the political economy shaping the labor market and its ideology can in many ways apply to other areas of the academy.

⁵ According to the NCES’s “Degrees and Other Formal Awards Conferred” surveys, in 1970 there were about 64,000 English majors comprising 13% of all students. Today, the enrollment numbers have dropped to about 53,000—an unfortunate, if not catastrophic, 18% decline—but that number represents only about 3% of the student body.

As Jack H. Schuster and Martin J. Finkelstein note in their book *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers*, the growth of higher education between 1940 and 1970 represented an enormous

increase—from about 147,000 to 474,000—but it “amounted more or less to an exercise in cloning—that is, pouring more white males into the liberal arts” (40). In the years after 1969, faculty growth has in some senses “more of an exercise in academic biodiversity” even as it has also been an exercise in contingency.

⁶ Tompkins is unambiguous about the point: “The public-private dichotomy, which is to say the public-private *hierarchy*, is a founding condition of female oppression” (169). She goes on to say that “[m]oving from one thing to another without embarrassment. It is a tenet of feminist rhetoric that the personal is political, but who in the academy acts on this where language is concerned? We all speak the father tongue, which is impersonal, while decrying the fathers’ ideas” (174).

⁷ If there was ever any doubt, one need only visit Jonathan Goodwin’s excellent digital humanities project “Jobs of the MLA” wherein he shows how unabashedly misogynistic English departments were in the 1970s. Some of them explicitly stated they “preferred” men, while others asked discriminatory questions such as “whether you are married and, if married, how many children.”

⁸ Chicago-school economist and Nobel Prize winner Gary Becker had articulated a similar insight in his landmark work *The Economics of Discrimination* in 1957, namely that “when discrimination occurs, [economic actors] must, in fact, either pay or forfeit income for this privilege” (14).

⁹ There’s another kind of quit lit—those of the tenured faculty.

¹⁰ According to the American Association of University Professors, the median rate of pay per course for adjunct labor is \$2,700, meaning a full course load of four classes a semester yields a yearly salary of \$21,600—only \$6,000 above a minimum wage job.

¹¹ When the problem of the academic labor market presumes low wages are a byproduct of an “oversupply” of workers, it makes sense why leaving the labor market can seem like a political act: it reduces the supply of labor and thus raises its price for those who remain. But the actual problem with the academic labor market is that there simply

isn't an oversupply of labor—almost every year, English departments teach more students than the year before, and the demand for such services is at an all-time high. The pervasiveness of the overproduction myth is unbelievable except through an appeal to the ideology of supply-side economic theory. Of course, Marc Bousquet has already written powerfully on this subject, and his analysis is worth quoting at length:

We are not “overproducing Ph.D.s”; we are underproducing jobs. There is plenty of work in higher education for everyone who wants to do it. The problem is that this enormous quantity of work no longer comes in the bundle of tenure, dignity, scholarship, and a living wage that we call “a job.” The concrete aura of the claim that degree holders are “overproduced” conceals the necessary understanding that, in fact, there is a huge shortage of degree holders. If degree holders were doing the teaching, there would be far too few of them. Graduate employees understand that labor markets are socially structured: with a single stroke (by, say, restoring the 1972 proportion of tenurable to nontenurable faculty in a major state, such as New York or California), all of the “surplus” degree holders in many disciplines could immediately employed. (40-41)

¹² Figures taken from the National Center for Education Statistics' *Digest of Educational Statistics* “Degrees conferred by degree-granting institutions, by level of degree and sex of student: Selected years, 1869-70 through 2018-19.”

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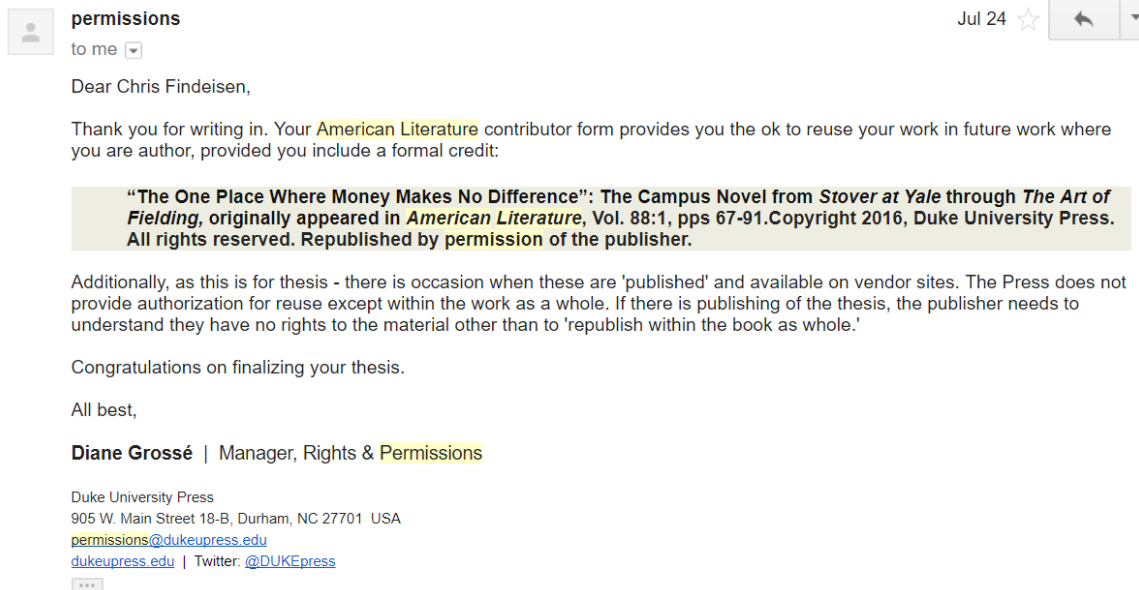
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APPENDIX

“‘The One Place Where Money Makes No Difference’: The Campus Novel from *Stover at Yale* through *The Art of Fielding*” originally appeared in *American Literature*, Vol. 88:1, pps 67-91. Copyright 2016, Duke University Press. All rights reserved. Republished by permission of the publisher.



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