

The American Campus Novel, 1985 – 2020: Neoliberalism, Higher Education  
and the Student Experience

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I declare that all the work included in this thesis is my own.

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## Abstract

This thesis situates the contemporary campus novel within an established literary tradition and analyses the genre's engagement with the contemporary American higher education sector, particularly the defining features which can be attributed to the marketization of higher education. Following Wendy Brown's definition of neoliberalism, these features are: the simultaneous exertion and erosion of institutional authority; individuals' embodiment of an entrepreneurial subject and social fragmentation which impedes democratic critique. These three defining features structure the analyses of campus novels presented in each chapter of this thesis. This framework enables consideration of the continued engagement of contemporary novels with the higher education sector, a concern which is further highlighted through the foci of each chapter. Prevalent literary genres, narrative devices, and the three diverse traditions of white, male elites, white women, and African American students are delineated in these chapters, further contextualising the contemporary novel within distinct literary traditions. These chapters discuss the engagement of contemporary novels with the role of the university in contemporary America through diverse literary techniques, as well as engaging with broader political and sociological frameworks which illuminate the experiences of white, male elites, women and African American students in the modern university. The conclusion of each of these chapters contextualises the contemporary campus novel within broader literary movements, further establishing the genre's significance in literary studies. One of the fundamental arguments of this thesis is that the campus novel is a significant resource through which to engage with current debates in the higher education sector. The conclusion situates themes from the novels within broader conversations surrounding the university institution, students, and their role in a democratic society.

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgments .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Rationale: Higher Education in Crisis .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>University Fiction: A Critical Genre.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The American Campus Novel: Defining a Genre .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>The American Neoliberal University.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Overview of Chapters .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Genre .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>S.: The Campus-Crime Novel and Institutional Critique .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b><i>The Magicians</i>: Campus-Fantasy and the Impossibility of Personal Development .....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b><i>The Secret History</i>: Campus Fiction, Greek Tragedy and Social Fragmentation.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Conclusion: Literary Genres in the Contemporary American Campus Novel .....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Narrative .....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b><i>If We Were Villains</i>: Academic Discourse as Institutional Critique .....</b>	<b>76</b>
<b><i>Black Chalk</i>: Narratives and Personal Development .....</b>	<b>89</b>
<b><i>The Rules of Attraction</i>: Fragmented University; Fragmented Society .....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Conclusion: Contemporary Campus Novels and Postmodern Literature .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>Chapter 3: The Contemporary Elite Campus Novel .....</b>	<b>115</b>
<b><i>The Marriage Plot</i>: Academic Specialization and Individual Isolation .....</b>	<b>118</b>
<b><i>The Art of Fielding</i>: Human Flourishing as Self-Alienation .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b><i>I am Charlotte Simmons</i>: The Elite University and Massified Society .....</b>	<b>146</b>
<b>Conclusion: Elitism in the Public School Novel and Contemporary Campus Novel .....</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>Chapter 4: The Contemporary Women’s Campus Novel .....</b>	<b>161</b>
<b><i>Tam Lin</i>: Blackstock College and Institutional Patriarchy .....</b>	<b>165</b>
<b><i>Legally Blonde</i>: University Education and the Female Entrepreneurial Subject.....</b>	<b>174</b>
<b><i>I’ll Take You There</i>: Social Fragmentation and the Destabilization of Female Identity.....</b>	<b>183</b>
<b>Conclusion: The Contemporary Campus Novel and Feminist Literature .....</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>Chapter 5: The Contemporary African American Campus Novel .....</b>	<b>195</b>
<b><i>Welcome to Braggsville</i>: The University and Institutional Racism.....</b>	<b>200</b>
<b><i>Big Girls Don’t Cry</i>: Education, Individualism, and Self-Definition .....</b>	<b>211</b>
<b><i>Between Brothers</i>: Education, Community Uplift, and Personal Development .....</b>	<b>222</b>
<b>Conclusion: African American Campus Novels and African American Literature .....</b>	<b>230</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>233</b>
<b>The Contemporary American Campus Novel and The Neoliberal Novel.....</b>	<b>233</b>
<b>The Contemporary American Campus Novel and the Neoliberal University.....</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>254</b>



## Introduction

The central argument of this thesis is that the university institutions, students, and society depicted in the contemporary American campus novel are definitively characterised by features attributable to the marketization of higher education. The contingent concerns of novels such as Bret Easton Ellis' *Rules of Attraction* (1987), Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) and T. Geronimo Johnson's *Welcome to Braggsville* (2015) serve two key functions: when placed within an extended literary tradition, they emphasise the extent to which the campus novel continues to be a fundamentally critical genre; in a broader social context, these novels provide a significant resource through which to engage with the challenges currently facing the higher education sector in America. This introduction takes these challenges as a starting point, as the current crisis in American higher education offers a particularly pertinent rationale for this project. Subsequently, three key contexts are outlined which justify the central claim of the thesis, providing this project's methodological approach and historical context. Firstly, an overview of scholarship of university-based fiction justifies the dual foci of literary aesthetics and social context which define the literary analysis deployed in this project. Secondly, an overview of the American campus novel reveals the sustained engagement of the form with higher education institutions and allows identification of key literary features which are prominent throughout the genre. Lastly, an overview of the contemporary higher education sector provides a framework through which to consider the campus novel's engagement with the institution. An overview of chapters concludes this introduction.

### **Rationale: Higher Education in Crisis**

Observing the increasing marketization of American society in 2006, Henry Giroux lamented that 'too little attention has been given to the condition of the American university and its

professors.’<sup>1</sup> Four years later, Martha Nussbaum echoed Giroux, highlighting ‘a crisis that goes largely unnoticed [...] a world-wide crisis in education.’<sup>2</sup> The subsequent plethora of scholarly works attending to the institution suggests that attention has been paid, however, what Zoe Bulaitis has identified as ‘[a]n urgent and defensive mentality [which] is reflected throughout literature concerning the contemporary academy’ does indeed suggest an institution in a state of emergency.<sup>3</sup>

A range of causes have been identified. The prominent corpus of scholarship which laments the marketization of the sector has been defined by Heather Steffen and Jeffrey J. Williams to comprise the field of ‘critical university studies’.<sup>4</sup> These scholars have decried the extent to which the decline of the university can be viewed alongside the decline of the nation state and conceptions of a national culture; student and adjunct instructors coming to embody the transition of individuals into consumers; the challenge to the humanistic priorities of liberal education.<sup>5</sup> These works argue that the marketization of the sector undermines the values for which universities previously stood. Still another reconsideration of higher education emerges from scholars who argue that the institutional values that these works would seek to uphold have always been illusory. As Henry Giroux has highlighted, critical pedagogues contextualise the university institution alongside other axes of power, revealing ‘how the mechanisms of domination and exclusion work to reproduce and legitimate the entrenched dynamics of class, race, gender, and sexual hierarchies in higher education’.<sup>6</sup>

Higher education is undisputedly facing a reckoning, and yet Bill Readings argues that this ‘crisis’ can be seen as an opportunity for a reconsideration of the institution:

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Giroux, ‘Academic Entrepreneurs: The Corporate Takeover of Higher Education’ in *America on the Edge: Henry Giroux on Politics, Culture, and Education* (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 89-100 (p. 89).

<sup>2</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Zoe Hope Bulaitis, *Value and the Humanities: The Neoliberal University and Our Victorian Inheritance* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey J. Williams, ‘Deconstructing Academe’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (19<sup>th</sup> February 2012). Online: < [https://www.chronicle.com/article/deconstructing-academe/?cid2=gen\\_login\\_refresh&cid=gen\\_sign\\_in](https://www.chronicle.com/article/deconstructing-academe/?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in) > [Accessed: 18<sup>th</sup> December 2020].

<sup>5</sup> For example: Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1996); Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2008); Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Giroux, ‘Racial Politics, Pedagogy, and the Crisis of Representation in Academic Multiculturalism’ in *The Giroux Reader* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 233-52 (p. 233).



I argue that we should recognize that the loss of the University's cultural function opens up a space in which it is possible to think the notion of community otherwise, without recourse to notions of unity, consensus, and communication. At this point, the University becomes no longer a model of the ideal society but rather a place where the impossibility of such models can be thought – practically thought, rather than thought under ideal conditions.<sup>7</sup>

Readings suggests that the current crisis in higher education offers an opportunity to begin the search for a space beyond the established narratives which have been so influential, yet ultimately limit the function of university institutions. This project argues that campus novels published during the contemporary period offer a valuable resource through which to engage in the reconceptualization for which Readings argues.

### **University Fiction: A Critical Genre**

By engaging with university institutions in fictional discourse, university-based fiction performs a dualistic function. As part of the humanities, fiction performs the three functions by which Rens Bod defines the discipline. Alongside a 'memory function', the humanities perform an 'educational function' and a 'critical function'.<sup>8</sup> Bod highlights the humanities' role in both constructing public opinion and perceptions, as well as critiquing those very attitudes. Bod suggests a harmonious relationship between these functions; however, in the context of the work of Michel Foucault, the interconnection of institutionalised education and literature is a conflict between the exertion of power, and a resistant impulse. For Foucault, '[a]ny system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry.'<sup>9</sup> 'Literature', however, 'is the contestation of philology (of which it is nevertheless the twin figure): it leads language back from grammar to the naked power of speech, and there it encounters the untamed, imperious being of words.'<sup>10</sup> In this context, literature which

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<sup>7</sup> Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse' in Robert Young (ed.) *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1981), pp. 48 – 78 (p. 64).

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An archaeology of the human sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 327.

features university institutions is a site of contestation, wherein the institution's very authority is both reinforced and challenged.<sup>11</sup>

For Jeffrey J. Williams, this dual function makes university fiction a crucial resource. In 'Teach the University', Williams outlines a suggested syllabus for the study of American higher education, including the history of the institution, philosophies of the university, and sociological documents. The university, Williams claims, is 'a nexus of discourse', a significant strand of which is 'university fiction':

University fiction acts out some of the ideas of the university. It also foregrounds some of the public expectation of the university that falls under the radar of the scholarly tradition and its official line of ideas; we need to consider these unofficial ideas alongside those issued from a largely professorial tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Similar to Foucault and Bod, Williams identifies a dualism at the heart of university fiction – the form engages with dominant 'ideas of the university' while also offering a perspective which Williams argues is overlooked in 'official' discussions of the institution. This contradiction is evident throughout scholarship of fiction concerning higher education, throughout which the form's social influence is highlighted, as well as its potentially disruptive function.

The influential role played by university fiction has been noted throughout scholarship of the form. Commentary on university fiction's role in creating a public impression of the university institution is particularly prevalent. In her overview of British university fiction, Janice Rossen argues that university texts 'are important because they are widely believed by their readers to constitute an accurate representation of academic life'.<sup>13</sup> In his study of the genre, Ian Carter deploys particularly Foucauldian terms, noting that readers must 'understand that we face a discourse, a machine that controls what we see by generating rules for including some things and excluding others.'<sup>14</sup> Both of these texts discuss

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<sup>11</sup> See Leonard Lawler, 'Contestation' in Leonard Lawler and John Nale (ed.) *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 80 for discussion of this term in Foucault's work.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey J. Williams, 'Teach the University', *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition and Culture*, 8:1 (2007), pp. 25-42 (p. 30; p. 35).

<sup>13</sup> Janice Rossen, *The University in Modern Fiction. When Power is Academic* (St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ian Carter, *Ancient Cultures of Conceit. British University Fiction in the Post-War Years* (Routledge, 1990), p. 5.

the role of British university fiction in reinforcing the social authority of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and this hegemonic function is particularly mirrored in American fiction which depicts students' experiences at Ivy League institutions.<sup>15</sup> Gunila Lindgren and Sherrie A. Inness have highlighted the influence of college novels which featured female protagonists, texts which served a vital function in reassuring their publics that higher education for women would not lead to a destabilization of gender roles.<sup>16</sup>

The genre's influence is not limited to its institutions nor student experiences. Elaine Showalter's *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* features the confession that 'novels taught [Showalter] how a proper professor should speak, behave, dress, think, write, love, succeed, or fail', a didactic function which has been echoed by William J. Tierney.<sup>17</sup> *Faculty Towers* highlights the way in which the genre has consistently engaged with conceptions of higher education, aligning literary developments with historical trends within the sector. While these works emphasise fiction's influence on broader social conceptions of higher education, Susan Edgerton and Paul Farber invert this understanding in *Imagining the Academy: Higher Education and Popular Culture*. Popular representations of higher education, Edgerton and Farber argue, highlight 'how the broader public understands the institution of higher education.'<sup>18</sup> This scholarship emphasises fiction's role in constructing the function and authority of the institution itself, however the form's broader social engagement has also been highlighted.

As a significant institution in American society, the relationship between university-set fiction and broader social trends is a frequent consideration throughout scholarship of the genre. In *The College Novel in America*, John O. Lyons argues that '[a] study of the novel of academic life in American must inevitably be concerned more with the history of the novel

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<sup>15</sup> See Susan Ickenberry, 'Education for Fun and Profit: Traditions of Popular College Fiction in the United States, 1875 - 1945' in Susan Edgerton et al. (ed.), *Imagining the Academy: Higher Education and Popular Culture* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2005), pp. 41-53.

<sup>16</sup> Sherrie A. Inness, *Intimate Communities: Representation and Social Transformation in Women's College Fiction 1895-1910* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1995); Gunila Lindgren *Higher Education for Girls in North American Fiction 1886-1912* (Lund: Lund Studies in English, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers. The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 2; William G. Tierney, 'Interpreting Academic Identities: Reality and Fiction on Campus', *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73:1 (2002), pp. 161-72.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Edgerton and Paul Farber, 'Introduction' in Susan Edgerton et al. (ed.) *Imagining the Academy: Higher Education and Popular Culture*, pp. 1-14 (p. 2).

as a literary form *and social document* than with genius.<sup>19</sup> For Lyons, higher education's role in American society makes the institution well-placed to interrogate social norms and experiences. In more recent scholarship, the erasure of this authority has resulted in university fiction's engagement with social anxieties. Jeffrey J. Williams' analysis reveals professors to be conduits for social change: while academics previously signified social detachment, Williams argues that they have now become figures who symbolize the deprofessionalization of the middle class.<sup>20</sup> Anis Shivani argues that Chad Harbach's college novel, *The Art of Fielding*, exemplifies a trend in contemporary American fiction:

The idea of inherent virtue is not something coincidental; it is crucial to imperial self-justification. I want to make the connection between a growing prose style in American fiction and the ideology of quietism, the style paralleling the belief in congenital national goodness.<sup>21</sup>

Both Shivani and Williams reveal a certain paradox at the heart of contemporary college novels – it is due to their social detachment and alienation that academics and college campuses can represent the detachment and alienation of contemporary America particularly well. This scholarship highlights the engagement of fictional representation with broader social change; however, this approach can be contrasted with those who envision the value of university fiction as being its ability to critique dominant trends.

As Foucault, Bod, and Williams highlight, fiction also offers a perspective of higher education institutions which challenges dominant narratives. This function of the form is particularly prominent in discussions which compare fictional representations of university life with other discursive modes. Philip Hobsbaum compares fiction with the development of university policy in parliamentary white papers. '[I]t is in fiction' Hobsbaum argues, 'that experience tends to be most vividly rendered. It is this concern for the individual that tends to be left out of our discussions about universities'.<sup>22</sup> Zoe Hope Bulaitis' discussion of university fiction constitutes a chapter in a work which attempts to reconceptualize the value

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<sup>19</sup> John O. Lyons' *The College Novel in America* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. xiii (italics added).

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey J. Williams, 'The Rise of the Academic Novel', *American Literary History*, 24.3 (2012), pp. 561-89.

<sup>21</sup> Anis Shivani, 'Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*: College Baseball as Allegory for American National Greatness', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 43:1 (2014), pp. 39-59 (pp. 39-40).

<sup>22</sup> Philip Hobsbaum, 'University Life in Modern Fiction' in Merritt Moseley ed., *The Academic Novel: New and Classic Essays* (Chester: University of Chester, 2006), pp. 20 – 32 (p. 20).

of humanities in an increasingly marketized sector. While the humanities' economic value is not easily defined, Bulaitis argues that 'the novel is able to invoke fresh conversations, from defamiliarised perspectives, concerning the values of the humanities.'<sup>23</sup> For one of the most prominent authors of the genre, such defamiliarisation is linked to the academic profession as well as the university setting. In 'The Campus Novel', David Lodge argues that the provision of academic tenure allows academics to be 'less conformist' than other members of society, lending themselves, as characters, to outlandish behaviour.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Lodge continues, 'academic conflicts are relatively harmless, safely insulated from the real world and its somber concerns—or capable of transforming those concerns into a form of stylized play.'<sup>25</sup> While this scholarship emphasises the subversive potential of the university-set novel, Elaine Showalter has argued that such stylization serves to depoliticize the genre: '[o]verall, I think, contemporary academic fiction is too tame, substituting satire for tragedy, detective plots for the complex effects on a community of its internal scandals, revelations, disruptions, disappointments, and catastrophes.'<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the established scholarship of literature featuring higher education institutions, a tendency can be discerned to privilege one aspect of the form's contradictory elements. Scholarship which centralises the social influence of the novel emphasise the genre's 'education function', in Bod's terms, or the extent to which novels reinforce colleges' institutional authority. Conversely, the disruptive, critical function of literature has also been highlighted. However, in order to attest to the ways in which contemporary campus novels engage with the reconceptualization for which Readings calls, both the genre's social engagement and its critical function must be considered. Rather than prioritising the form's didactic function, or its subversive capabilities, a dual approach is required to highlight the genre's engagement with dominant norms, and its methods of critique.

Lavelle Porter's *The Blackademic Life: Academic Fiction, Higher Education, and the Black Intellectual* coalesces these two perspectives, emphasising the genre's social significance and its critical potential. Porter's work establishes a tradition of American academic fiction by Black artists which depicts the engagement of Black characters with

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<sup>23</sup> Zoe Hope Bulaitis, *Value and the Humanities*, p. 116.

<sup>24</sup> David Lodge, 'The Campus Novel' in *The New Republic*, 10<sup>th</sup> March 1982, pp. 34-6 (p. 34)

<sup>25</sup> Lodge, 'The Campus Novel', p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Showalter, *Faculty Towers*, p. 119.

academia. Spanning the period from the genre's emergence in the late-nineteenth century until the contemporary period, Porter adopts an historicist approach which highlights the persistent social engagement of the form. In particular, Porter highlights that 'academic fiction is an essential form for understanding why the black academic is a lightning rod in contemporary American politics, and why white supremacists work so hard to undermine the legitimacy of black students and professors.'<sup>27</sup> However, Porter's work emphasises the critical potential of the genre in two key ways. Firstly:

[ 'Blackademic' novels] take what is usually seen as an insular literary genre and use it as a vehicle to disseminate dynamic representations of black intellectuals, thereby resisting stereotypes of blackness and challenging assumptions about who constitutes the typical university student or professor.<sup>28</sup>

Here, Porter highlights the ways in which blackademic novels constitute a particularly social critique. Furthermore, the texts in Porter's work react against the dominant literary form of the university novel:

[...] this study is also partly about how the hegemonic image of the young white male coming of age on campus persists as the dominant representation of college life, and it's a representation that blackademic fiction directly confronts with its own counternarratives.<sup>29</sup>

By attending to the genre's social engagement and critical function, *The Blackademic Life* constitutes a valuable methodological model for this project. Porter highlights the social engagement of these novels, while also contextualising the novels within a broader literary tradition. In *The Blackademic Life*, however, this contextualisation serves to establish the methods by which these novels *critique* social norms and the dominant forms of the genre. For this project, then, it is similarly vital to appreciate the tradition of the American campus novel, to discern the ways in which the genre has engaged with various aspects of American cultural history in order to appreciate the form of contemporary novels' critiques.

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<sup>27</sup> Lavelle Porter, *The Blackademic Life: Academic Fiction, Higher Education, and the Black Intellectual* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020), p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, p. 34.

## The American Campus Novel: Defining a Genre

While the contribution of fiction to the field of university studies is widely supported in academic scholarship, the definition of the genre itself has resisted similar agreement. Jeffrey J. Williams' discussion highlights some of the terminological difficulties:

Novels set in a college or university [are] typically conflated under the rubric of "the college novel," "the campus novel," or "the academic novel," but I think it is useful to distinguish among novels that center on students and those that center on professors. I would call the former "campus novels" because they tend to revolve around campus life and present young adult comedies or dramas, most frequently coming-of-age narratives. The latter I would designate "academic novels" because they feature those who work as academics, although the action is rarely confined to a campus, and they portray adult predicaments in marriage and home as well as the workplace, most familiarly yielding mid-life crisis plots.<sup>30</sup>

As Williams notes, distinct concerns emerge through the differentiation between what John Kramer terms 'staff-led' and 'student-led' novels in *The American College Novel: An Annotated Bibliography*.<sup>31</sup> This distinction is particularly significant in this project. Like Travis M. Foster and Christopher Findeisen, I use the term 'campus novel' to indicate novels which depict student experiences of higher education. However, Williams' description indicates that concerns outlined by Lavelle Porter and Zoe Hope Bulaitis are justified. For Porter and Bulaitis, the term 'academic fiction' is preferred to 'campus fiction' to highlight how novels engage with the institution of academia, avoiding the restriction to the college campus setting which Williams suggests.<sup>32</sup> However, as the following overview will show, such confinement has never been a feature of novels which centralise undergraduate experiences: preparation for adulthood and citizenship is a crucial consideration of these novels and students' experiences following college are frequently depicted. Lavelle Porter outlines a broader definition, including texts which '[explore] academia as a central concept' regardless of the amount of time spent on college campuses.<sup>33</sup> In this project, a campus novel is one

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<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey J. Williams, 'The Rise of the Academic Novel', pp. 561-2.

<sup>31</sup> John Kramer, *The American College Novel: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> Bulaitis, *The Value of the Humanities*, p. 117; Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Patricia A. Matthew and Lavelle Porter, 'Blackademic Lives Matter: An Interview with Lavelle Porter', *Los Angeles Review of Books* (9<sup>th</sup> September 2020), online:

which adheres to Porter's broad definition, confined to the experiences of those *pursuing* education.

Publication trends, historical events and existing academic scholarship contribute to the periodisation of the genre.<sup>34</sup> The years between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the twentieth century are deemed by Travis M. Foster to be the genre's 'four decades of prominence.'<sup>35</sup> While publication numbers dropped steeply at the turn of the century, the form re-emerged following the First World War. Following a decline between 1930 and the early-1960s, the genre reappeared during the culture wars of the late-1960s and mid-1970s, when college students were once again central to the period's social upheaval. After a subsequent ten-year decline, campus novels emerged again in the middle of the 1980s, the period of this study. Four distinct waves of campus novels can be distinguished in publication trends of the campus novel. These periods broadly align with Lavelle Porter's *The Blackademic Life*, the only academic work to provide an historical overview of university-set fiction from the nineteenth century to present. Significantly for the campus novel in particular, these periods also saw dramatic reconsiderations of youth – embodying the future of the nation in the nineteenth century; re-emerging with the concept of adolescence in 1920s; and the youth counterculture of the 1960s.

While the designation of higher education 'eras' varies throughout historical scholarship of the institution, this periodisation of the campus novel further aligns with significant education legislation and landmark Supreme Court rulings. The following overview of the American campus novels provides literary context for the contemporary novels discussed in this project, revealing literary trends and contingencies. Furthermore, this overview further justifies Porter's critical approach, revealing a literary form which has consistently played a crucial role in the shaping of American conceptions of higher education and national identity, while also critiquing the institutions it depicts.

Campus novels emerged when higher education institutions became central to the definition of a national character. The most numerous and popular form of the genre

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<<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/blackademic-lives-matter-an-interview-with-lavelle-porter/>> [accessed: 21<sup>st</sup> November 2020].

<sup>34</sup> See Jeffrey J. Williams, 'The Rise of the Academic Novel', pp. 567-569 for an overview of the publication history of the academic and campus novels, as well as discussion of the importance of periodisation.

<sup>35</sup> Travis M. Foster, 'Campus Novels and the Nation of Peers', *American Literary History*, 26:3 (2014), pp. 462-482 (p. 464).



reinforced the influential position of colleges following the Civil War. Gilbert Patten's *Frank Meriwell* series, estimated to have sold 125 million copies, depicted its intrepid, athletic hero as '[a] champion of the democratic college environment', according to Susan Ickenberry.<sup>36</sup> However, as Ickenberry further discusses, alongside Patten's egalitarian works, 'a new genteel tradition involved [...] life from the standpoint of the upper-middle class student with plenty of spending money and social connections.'<sup>37</sup> Novels such as *Donald Marcy* (1900) and *Stover at Yale* (1912) attended to life at the Ivy League and found a reading public in adults nostalgically reflecting upon their own time at college, or future white, male elites about to attend college themselves. Like the period's rapidly-expanding higher education sector, these novels played a key part in preparing students for future careers in public service.<sup>38</sup> Fictional students advocated for democracy, while college days often featured as a precursor to military service. Travis M. Foster has particularly noted the deployment of nostalgia in these novels, as college values continue to influence students throughout their lives.<sup>39</sup> Campus novels not only performed a particularly didactic role for the future white, male elite. Works such as Jean Webster's, *Daddy-long-legs* (1912), and Helen Dawes Brown's *Two College Girls* (1886) also aligned college attendance with the inculcation of national values. Significantly, while academic studies were not prominent in stories featuring male protagonists, they were crucial for women attending college, with intellectual failure seen a source of shame. The classical *bildungsroman* form was prominent throughout popular campus novels of this period, however, it was particularly significant in texts featuring female protagonists as education was aligned with personal maturation and, crucially, socialization. These novels played an influential role in the public perception of higher education during an important period for the sector: they aligned college attendance with lives of national service, and assured readers that college imparted the egalitarian democracy which the emerging federalism hoped to represent.

Despite Travis Foster's assertion that 'the genre remains largely consistent across time and space', a hegemonic function was by no means ubiquitous in campus novels of the

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<sup>36</sup> Susan Ickenberry, 'Education for Fun and Profit', p. 42.

<sup>37</sup> Ickenberry, 'Education for Fun and Profit', p. 42.

<sup>38</sup> See Mark R. Nemecek, *Ivory Towers and Nationalist Minds: Universities, Leadership and the Development of the American State* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Travis M. Foster, 'Campus Novels and the Nation of Peers', pp. 469-72.

mid- to late-nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> A number of novels displayed unease with dominant social norms. Axel Nissen has argued that Frederic Loring's *Two College Friends* (1871) gestures outside of heteronormative assumptions by providing 'a paradigmatic example of the fiction of romantic friendship'.<sup>41</sup> However, the death of the central character, Ned, in the Civil War emphasises that such a relationship has no place in American society. Grace Margaret Gallaher's *Vassar Stories* series, published in 1899, and Julia Augusta Schwartz's *Vassar Studies* (1899) featured female protagonists challenging restrictive gender norms. College sports once again featured prominently as an avenue for imparting egalitarian values, however, as Sherrie A. Iness has highlighted, '[i]n the student community created in these texts, women can "act like men" as both athletes and spectators and be praised rather than censured for their aggressiveness.'<sup>42</sup> These novels constituted the challenge to traditional gender norms which was so feared following women's increased college attendance.

Nineteenth century campus novels by Black artists also challenged the role of higher education in American society. Works by W.E.B Du Bois and Sutton Griggs maintained the relationship between a college education and recognition of national values. Rather than egalitarianism, however, students in these fictions become aware of America's white supremacy. The classical *bildungsroman* is abandoned in these novels: in Du Bois' 'Of the Coming of John', John's anti-racism activism results in his murder by lynching; Griggs' Belton concludes *Imperium in Imperio* unable to find a job suitable for his level of education. As Lavelle Porter highlights, Griggs' work gestures towards the 'New Negro' movement, which would shift away from institutionalised education towards urban centres in the years following the Great Migration.<sup>43</sup> This trend can be seen throughout campus novels of the 1920s: while novels of the Victorian era depicted colleges as representations of national values, a fragmentation would emerge in the first decades of the following century.

Following the First World War, the higher education system became more closely engaged with economic concerns and commercial success. Institutional authority was maintained in the popular forms of campus fiction which remained crucial in establishing

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<sup>40</sup> Foster, 'Campus Novels and the Nation of Peers', p. 465.

<sup>41</sup> Axel Nissen, *Manly Love: Romantic Friendship in American Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> Sherrie A. Iness, "'It is pluck but is it sense?": Athletic Student Culture in Progressive Era Girl's College Fiction', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27:1 (1993), pp. 99-123 (pp. 117-8).

<sup>43</sup> Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, p. 53.

public conceptions of higher education institutions which remained out of reach for the majority of American society. The popular formula established by the *Frank Merriweather* series and women's college novels continued in periodical publications, remaining popular until the 1930s. Indeed, the influence of this tradition was mocked in the film *The Freshman* (1925), wherein a new college student learns about life from novels, and is surprised by their inaccuracies.<sup>44</sup> However, new variations also emerged which reflected the appearance of the emerging middle class at higher education institutions. George Fitch's *Siwash* series established the state university as a vehicle for social mobility and cohesion. However, as Jane M. Stangl highlights, such class mobility came at the price of Fitch's deployment of a racial slur against Native Americans.<sup>45</sup> These novels maintain the narrative structure, character tropes, and the prominence of college sport, in particular, to maintain colleges as a site of socialization, now broadened to include international student bodies from a variety of socioeconomic classes, although by no means inclusive. However, the period's most prominent campus novels signalled a sharp shift in the genre, and challenges to the university's authority, and relevance, following the First World War.

Challenges to higher education institutions around the 1920s emerged from two of the most prominent authors of the period. F. Scott Fitzgerald has become a totemic figure of the Jazz Age he helped to define, and his campus novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920) caused outcry due to its depictions of youthful indiscretions and 'petting'.<sup>46</sup> In 1923, Willa Cather won the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours* (1922), a novel which shares its interrogation of higher education with Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918).<sup>47</sup> While Fitzgerald and Cather both undermined higher education's influence, they did so from distinct perspectives. *This Side of Paradise* and Percy Marks' best-selling *The Plastic Age* (1924) both illustrate the abandonment of the

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<sup>44</sup> See Ickenberry, 'Education for Fun and Profit', p. 48 for discussion of this film depiction.

<sup>45</sup> See Jane M. Stangl, 'A Unique College Nickname or Another White Man's Indian? George Helgesen Fitch and the Case of Siwash College', *Journal of Sports History*, 35:2 (2008), pp. 195-220.

<sup>46</sup> Writing in 1931, Fitzgerald defines the period between 1919 and 1929 as the Jazz Age in 'Echoes of the Jazz Age'. For Fitzgerald, this was an apolitical period of sexual liberation which masked the deep uncertainty and anxiety which erupted to the surface following the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

<sup>47</sup> Higher education is a persistent focus of Cather's works. The most direct critique is *The Professor's House* (1925), an academic novel which enacts the commodification of higher education through the experiences of two professors. As this novel focuses on the experiences of professors, it will not be discussed in detail here. For discussion of commodification in Cather's novel, see John N. Swift, 'Fictions of Possession in The Professor's House' in Marilee Lindemann ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 175-90.

previous period's elitist values. Both plots are recognisable from the Victorian era and its popular novels, however, Fitzgerald's Amory Blaine and Marks' Hugh Carver conclude their novels isolated and wistfully reflecting upon college as a prelapsarian idyll.<sup>48</sup> For Amory, college values are of no use during his military service, nor in wider society, undermining the cohesive relationship established in its literary precursors. Intellectual pursuits also alienate Cather's Claude from his military peers in *One of Ours*, while Jim is lured away from his rural childhood home in *My Ántonia*. Cather juxtaposes higher education with the frontier values of the West; higher education symbolises a corrupting commercialism and industrialism which threaten the rural values which formed the foundation of the social cohesion in Cather's home state of Nebraska. Instead of providing seamless socialization, education *causes* students to be alienated from their communities in these novels. Whether lamenting the loss of elite influence or the corruption of the American frontier, these works align higher education institutions with an explicitly damaging form of modernity. It is this critical perspective which proved most resilient in the years to follow. As the popular form of the campus novel fell away, higher education is exclusively aligned with oppressive social mechanics, and widely critiqued, in the novels of the culture wars.

As this overview has shown, the campus novel has always been a politicized form; however, novels of the culture wars depict the political activism which dominated the period's campuses. While Don DeLillo's *End Zone* (1972) is the campus novel most-frequently aligned with canonical literary postmodernism, the text is an outlier in its lack of explicitly political engagement. Several novels engage with the period's second wave feminism. While Mary McCarthy's *The Group* (1963) maintained the earlier period's juxtaposition of higher education and wider society, Dorothy Bryant's *Ella Price's Journal* (1972) and Marilyn French's best-seller *The Women's Room* (1977) engage with higher education's role in achieving gender equality. In 1963, Betty Friedan called for 'a national education program, similar to the GI Bill', to enable the coalescence of domestic life and public service and Bryant's novel particularly depicts this attempt.<sup>49</sup> French's *The Women's Room* articulates the more overt critiques of radical feminism. French's Myra leaves home in order to join a

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<sup>48</sup> See Nancy P. Van Arsdale, 'Princeton as Modernist Hermeneutics' in Jackson R. Bryer, Alan Margolies, Ruth Prigozy ed. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: New Perspectives* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), pp. 39-50 (p. 40).

<sup>49</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1974), p. 347.

female-centred community at college. While these women provide support and fulfilment, the campus activist groups remain patriarchal organisations, illustrating many of the feminist critiques of the period's political activism.<sup>50</sup> In their forms, these novels highlight the blurring of the personal and political which was a central concern of the period's feminist activism. The epistolary form of *Ella Pryce's Journal* presents the public novel in the private form of the journal; the 'panorama' offered in French's novel demystifies the suffocating domestic experiences of women in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>51</sup> However, neither of these novels conclude with women in satisfying communities. While Women's Studies was being institutionalised and feminist criticism was emerging as a defined scholarly field, these novels reject the possibility that higher education can contribute to gender equality, or offer fulfilling experiences for women.

Civil Rights activism also features in campus novels of the culture wars. While Black Studies departments were in the process of being established and education institutions were formally desegregated in 1954, Gil Scott-Heron's *The Nigger Factory* (1972) and Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) reject the possibility that equality could be gained through institutionalised education. It is notable that both of these novels are set in Historically-Black colleges, and both criticise these institutions for their assimilationist approaches. Scott-Heron's novel opens with a particularly overt critique:

Black colleges and universities have been both a blessing and a curse on black people. The institutions have educated thousands of our people who would have never had the opportunity to get an education otherwise. [...] They have never, however, made anybody equal.<sup>52</sup>

As this passage emphasises, and as Lavelle Porter highlights, Scott-Heron criticises 'black colleges where students were indoctrinated into the bourgeois assimilationist politics of "the talented tenth."<sup>53</sup> Indeed, such assimilation is embodied by the college's President – a

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<sup>50</sup> For example, see Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (Middlesex; Maryland: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> Nuala O'Faolain, 'Rereadings: Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*', *The Guardian Online*: <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/sep/13/featuresreviews.guardianreview36>> [accessed 10 March 2019].

<sup>52</sup> Gil Scott-Heron, *The Nigger Factory* (London: Canongate Books, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, p. 120. 'The talented tenth' was a method by which the education of Black elites would further the achievement of racial equality, conceptualized by W.E.B. Du Bois. See pp. 227-8 for further discussion.

former student activist who has become more conservative as his career progressed. In *Meridian*, too, is Saxon College clearly aligned with a particularly gendered assimilationist ideology. A tree named Sojourner which is a point of congregation for the female students has, according to legend, grown out of the tongue of an enslaved woman. At the centre of the campus, this tree poignantly highlights the extent to which the middle-class respectability politics which the institution imparts erases Black women's experiences in America.<sup>54</sup> Both of these novels depict student rebellions which deny the role of colleges in achieving racial equality. Scott-Heron's work depicts a disagreement between militant and non-militant anti-racism activist approaches, however, the novel focuses on the Black nationalist group of football players who form MJUMBE. When their demands are not met, these students force a stand-off on the campus which concludes in a fatal explosion. In *Meridian*, a young girl dies and the college refuses to bury her because she was pregnant, causing the students to rebel. As Deborah E. McDowell's highlights, university is but one of the socially-determined forms of femininity 'which give rise to [Meridian's] self-discovery, to her obsession with finding her own distinctive "step" amid a composite of imitative marchers.'<sup>55</sup> In neither of these novels is higher education a route to racial equality, nor personal fulfilment.

The above overview of the American campus novels reveals the particular ways in which the genre has engaged with contingently American concerns. Campus novels written in the nineteenth century constitute a stark contrast with the British tradition from which they emerged—the preoccupation with egalitarianism and fraternity of the post-Civil War era can be juxtaposed with the belief in an Arnoldian superior culture that dominates British novels of the period.<sup>56</sup> While works by Sutton Griggs and W.E.B. Du Bois reveal such egalitarianism to be a myth, they too engage with debates the dominated American society during Reconstruction. As Lavelle Porter highlights: '[t]his historical background on black higher education and its white opposition is crucial context for interpreting the first black academic

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<sup>54</sup> According to Paisley Harris, respectability politics is an ideology which 'link[s] worthiness for respect to sexual propriety, behavioral decorum, and neatness'. (Paisley Harris, 'Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women's History and Black Feminism', *Journal of Women's History*, 15:1 (2003), pp. 212-238 (p. 213).) The term was originally coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>55</sup> Deborah E. McDowell, 'The Self in Bloom: Alice Walker's *Meridian*', *CLA Journal*, 24:3 (1981), pp. 262-275 (p. 266).

<sup>56</sup> See Carter, *Ancient Cultures of Conceit*, pp. 77 – 98 for discussion of British campus novels and Matthew Arnold.

novels that appear on the scene at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, such historical awareness is vital for appreciation of the critique throughout the history of the American campus novel, and its current form. Willa Cather's critique of higher education is incoherent if removed from the valorisation of frontier values—values that are not only vital to American culture, but inseparable from the American landscape; the alienation of Fitzgerald's Amory Blaine reflects the American identity crisis depicted in George Santayana's withering account of American collectivism, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920), and Walter Lippmann and John Dewey's agreement that the American public was no longer a unified entity.<sup>58</sup> Campus novels of the culture wars, too, explicitly engage with, and depict, student protests that occurred on college campuses across the country. Indeed, at a time when future President Ronald Reagan was calling for university administrators 'to enforce a code based on decency, common sense and dedication to the high and noble purpose of the university', American campus novels depicted the oppressive consequences of this explicitly normative demand.<sup>59</sup> In this way, one of the foundational assertions of this project—that contemporary American campus novels engage with the neoliberalism that has come to dominate American higher education and American society—is supported by the social engagement evident throughout the tradition of the genre.

### **The American Neoliberal University**

While the era of mass higher education can be clearly delineated by the passage of the GI Bill in 1944, the period of interest for this study resists such clear designation. For Christopher Newfield, the current higher education environment can be attributed to three crises which 'characterised the post-World War II period, but became acute and unresolvable in the 1970s.'<sup>60</sup> For Newfield, the excessive partisanship which emerged out of the Civil Rights era; American industrial and economic decline; and the 'eclipsing of qualitative knowledge about

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<sup>57</sup> P. 46. See Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, pp. 46-68 for Porter's detailed engagement with concerns such as over-education, equality, segregation, the resurgence of the KKK and Racial Uplift.

<sup>58</sup> See Robert B. Westerbrook, 'The Phantom Public' in *John Dewey and American Democracy*, pp. 275-318 for discussion of the Lippmann-Dewey debate.

<sup>59</sup> Seth Rosenfeld, 'The Govenor's Race', *SFGATE*, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2002. Available online: <<https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/The-governor-s-race-3311801.php>> [accessed: 18<sup>th</sup> October 2021].

<sup>60</sup> Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 23.

cultures and human relations' were significant causal factors.<sup>61</sup> Supporting Newfield's periodisation is one of the period's most significant higher education policy shifts, the 1972 transference of student aid from institutions to students which created the student consumer. The deindustrialised 'New Economy' of the 1980s and 90s, to which Newfield alludes, particularly affected the higher education sector. The Bayh-Dole Act (1980) and its subsequent amendments allowed universities and corporations to apply for patents on research developed using public funds. For Henry Etzkowitz, the consequent knowledge economy ushered in 'the second academic revolution'.<sup>62</sup> Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie agree that 'the 1980s were a turning point, when faculty and universities were incorporated into the market to the point where professional work began to be patterned differently, *in kind*, rather than in degree.'<sup>63</sup> While Arthur M. Cohen and Carrie B. Kisker designate 1994 as the starting point, they concur that this period is defined by 'privatization, corporatization, and accountability'.<sup>64</sup> While the exact starting point is under debate, Cohen and Kisker provide a summary of trends throughout the sector with which most would agree:

[...] institutions became increasingly entrepreneurial in their search for funds as the historical reliance on public coffers shifted to corporations, individual donors, and students themselves; faculty professionalization essentially came to a halt as colleges and universities employed ever greater numbers of part-time and non-tenure-track instructors; large, centralized public systems gave way to autonomous institutions, some granted charter or enterprise status, which provided greater freedom from governmental restrictions in exchange for increased accountability; and the for-profit sector grew larger.<sup>65</sup>

These dramatic shifts in American higher education have impacted the entire sector, its staff, and students, defining the higher education environment with which the campus novels of this project engage.

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<sup>61</sup> Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University*, p. 24.

<sup>62</sup> Henry Etzkowitz, 'The Second Academic Revolution: The Role of the Research University in Economic Development', in S.E. Cozzens, P. Healey et al. (ed.) *The Research System in Transition* (Netherlands: Springer, 1990), pp. 109-24 (p. 110).

<sup>63</sup> Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie, *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University* (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 12.

<sup>64</sup> Arthur M. Cohen and Carrie B. Kisker, *The Shaping of American Higher Education: Emergence and Growth of the Contemporary System* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), p. 435.

<sup>65</sup> Cohen and Kisker, *The Shaping of American Higher Education*, p. 6.



During this period, the higher education sector became more stratified and extensively privatised. Student-tied funding led to institutional competition for students, especially 'high achievers' who were likely to contribute to the institutional prestige which would, in turn, attract more students in the future. Such competition benefitted already-elite institutions, who were able to draw on large endowments to offer superior conditions. As Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades identify, 'niche markets developed in which a small number of (largely upper- and upper middle-class) students competed for ever more expensive places at a relatively small number of (elite and increasingly private) institutions.'<sup>66</sup> These 'niche markets' contrast with the explosion of for-profit institutions, the largest growing type of institution during the 1980s and 90s. Benefitting from federal funds made available for lifelong learning and legislation which enabled their claiming of federal student aid, proprietary institutions emerged which focus on flexible learning and vocational skills. Frequently accused of unethical student recruitment practices and with substantially higher levels of student loan defaults, Tressie McMillan Cottom argues that these institutions 'thrive off of inequality'.<sup>67</sup> In research universities, changes to intellectual property legislation resulted in the shift of attention, and resources, from teaching towards soliciting private investment. Corporate interests attracted in the form of sports and building sponsorships, and research grants, with funds often tied to specific projects, result in financial imbalances within the institutions themselves.<sup>68</sup> This shift in the sector's priorities particularly influenced staff numbers, roles and conditions throughout higher education institutions.

Contemporary trends throughout the sector resulted in three broad changes in the conditions of staff – the increased prominence of administrative staff; the converse destabilization of academic faculty labour conditions; and the advent of the 'academic entrepreneur'. Non-faculty staff have become an increasingly significant part of university life. The growing importance of private investment has led to a surge in fundraising and

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<sup>66</sup> Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State and Higher Education* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), p. 53.

<sup>67</sup> Tressie McMillan Cottom, 'The Coded Language of For-Profit Colleges', *The Atlantic*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2017. Online: <<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/02/the-coded-language-of-for-profit-colleges/516810/>>. See also Tressie McMillan Cottom, *Lower-Ed: The Troubling Ride of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy* (New York: The New Press, 2018). See Cohen and Kisker, *The Shaping of American Higher Education*, p. 458 for discussion of proprietary institutions.

<sup>68</sup> See Gaye Tuchman, *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) for discussion of corporate mechanics within higher education.

alumni services, as well as monitoring services which are required to meet the growing accountability needs of both private and state finances. College Presidents, frequently called CEOs, increasingly lack experience in higher education institutions and are selected for their fundraising or business management capabilities. The expansion of administrative influence provides a stark contrast to the experiences of academic faculty. As teaching is displaced in universities' priorities, the number of part-time faculty increased from 22% in 1970 to 40% of the academic workforce in 1993, a number which has consistently risen during subsequent years.<sup>69</sup> College teaching is increasingly defined by unstable conditions, a lack of recognition, and the absence of contribution course content.<sup>70</sup> 'Academic entrepreneur' denotes changes in academics' roles, primarily at research institutions. In this context, professors' 'academic entrepreneurship' characterises the ability to attract valuable research grants for the institution. A more traditional consideration of the term designates researchers who launch 'university spinoffs', private enterprises that benefit from publicly-funded research carried out at university institutions.<sup>71</sup> However, increased freedom to participate in the market economy does not equate to academic freedom, which has frequently seceded authority to institutional academic freedom.<sup>72</sup> Changes throughout the sector have had a direct impact on the behaviour of staff, an impact which is further evident in students.

The emergence of students as consumers of educational services implicates not only a change in their collective role, but also their individual behaviour. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program Annual Freshman Survey provides valuable insight into the changing attitudes of college students. Beginning in 1966, the survey is delivered to 350,000 incoming college freshmen at seven hundred institutions each year. In a 1996 overview of the survey's initial thirty years, Alexander W. Astin notes that two periods witnessed dramatic shifts in student attitudes: 'the late 1960s through the early 1970s, and the past

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<sup>69</sup> Cohen and Kisker, *The Shaping of American Higher Education*, p. 223; p. 347.

<sup>70</sup> See Bousquet, *How the University Works* for detailed discussion of labour conditions in contemporary American higher education.

<sup>71</sup> See Scott Shane, *Academic Entrepreneurship: University Spinoffs and Wealth Creation* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2004).

<sup>72</sup> See Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt, 'Academic Freedom' in *Academic Keywords: A Devil's Dictionary for Higher Education* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999) for discussion of challenges to academic freedom.

eight to ten years covering the end of the 1980s to the present time.<sup>73</sup> During the later period which pertains to this project, Astin identifies the following trends:

Since the late 1980s grade inflation has reached new heights, and students are showing signs of increased competitiveness, heightened concern about college finances, and increased stress. The growing inability of federal and state aid to meet the student's financial need is forcing students to borrow more and forcing colleges to rely more on their own resources (primarily tuition) to help pay for college. Although engagement in the political process has reached new lows, student interest and engagement in volunteer and community service work has reached new highs.<sup>74</sup>

Astin further notes a significant change in students' 'values'. '[D]eveloping a meaningful philosophy of life' was the most important value to students at the beginning of the survey, in 1980 this is ranked last; 'the importance of being well-off financially', a value which had been the least of students' concerns in the 1960s, became the most important into the 1980s.<sup>75</sup> These trends highlight that the increased marketization of higher education institutions is mirrored in students' attitudes. Like their institutions, students funding sources shifted from public to private concerns – student grants decreased by 50% between 1975 and 1990, while government loans funding increased by 240%; in 1999/2000, 80% of college students were working during their studies.<sup>76</sup> Students' political disengagement mirrors not only decreased financial support and the rise of proprietary institutions, but also several significant legal decisions which restricted institutional involvement in student affairs. State-sanctioned affirmative action programmes were challenged in 1996 and several college codes designed to restrict racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and sexist behaviour were deemed to breach the First Amendment.<sup>77</sup> And yet, despite the withdrawal of public funds and regulation, higher education institutions continued to expand. Enrolment numbers continued to increase, with the student body across the sector becoming more diverse, although the stratification across different institution types should be considered. Salaries for college graduates during this period remained higher than those who have not attended

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<sup>73</sup> Alexander W. Astin, 'The American College Student: Three Decades of Change' in Joseph Losco and Brian L. Fife (ed.) *Higher Education in Transition: The Challenges of the New Millenium* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing, 2000), pp. 7-28 (p. 19).

<sup>74</sup> Astin, 'The American College Student', p. 27.

<sup>75</sup> 'The American College Student', p. 16.

<sup>76</sup> Cohen and Kisker, *The Shaping of American Higher Education*, p. 404.

<sup>77</sup> Cohen and Kisker, *The Shaping of American Higher Education*, p. 483.

college. Compared with the previous era of higher education, the contemporary sector is defined by the increasing economic concerns, decreased government involvement and increased individualism.

The current conditions of American higher education illustrate the model of neoliberalism outlined by Wendy Brown, whose framework enables consideration of the campus novel's interrogation of the contemporary sector. In 'Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy', Brown offers a definition which outlines neoliberalism's impact on institutions, individuals, and their relationships with wider society.<sup>78</sup> As an overview, Brown offers the following:

[...] the extension of economic rationality to all aspects of thought and activity, the placement of the state in forthright and direct service to the economy, the rendering of the state *tout court* as an enterprise organised by market rationality, the production of the moral subject as an entrepreneurial subject, and the construction of social policy according to these criteria [...]<sup>79</sup>

Brown's model illuminates changes throughout the higher education sector which emerged during the period of this study. As Brown highlights, this period saw the increasing dominance of economic priorities within the higher education sector as institutions and students became increasingly concerned with private investment and securing a return on that investment. This expansion undermined universities' institutional independence; however, colleges' social influence continued to expand, signifying its role in what Brown terms the 'constructivist project' of neoliberalism: higher education institutions perpetuate the economic values under which they operate.<sup>80</sup> As Brown highlights, these market values influence individuals' behaviour. The increased influence of administrators, advent of the academic entrepreneur and unstable adjunct working conditions exemplify this in staff; students, too, exhibit the individualism which defines the 'entrepreneurial subject'. This attitude further implicates individuals' relationship to wider society, as Brown highlights:

[...] a "mismanaged life," the neoliberal appellation for failure to navigate impediments to prosperity, becomes a new mode of depoliticising social and

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<sup>78</sup> Wendy Brown, 'Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy' in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 37-59.

<sup>79</sup> Brown, 'Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy', p. 44.

<sup>80</sup> Brown, 'Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy', p. 40.

economic powers and at the same time reduces political citizenship to an unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency. The model neoliberal citizen is one who strategies for her- or himself among various social, political, and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options.<sup>81</sup>

The prioritisation of financial interests and the resultant individualistic attitudes have impacted students' and institutions' ability and desire to engage with a broader public.

Brown's articulation of neoliberalism provides a clear model through which to interrogate how campus novels engage with contemporary concerns in the higher education sector. The simultaneous erosion and exertion of institutional power is prevalent throughout the genre, while students' often precarious lives following their educations illustrates how higher education creates the entrepreneurial subject. Furthermore, the prevalent detachment of both the university and students from a wider public sphere signals campus novels' interrogation of contemporary social fragmentation. However, these novels do not merely reflect current conditions in the sector. Rather, this framework illuminates the variety of ways in which campus novels interrogate current conditions and offer alternative visions of American higher education.

### **Overview of Chapters**

Guided by the dualistic nature of the genre, this project contextualises the contemporary American campus novel within its broader literary tradition in order to discern the ways in which contemporary texts critique the role of higher education in American society. Each chapter of this project attends to a specific literary feature of the campus novel, evident from an overview of the genre. The overlap with other literary genres, narrative devices, and the distinct literary traditions of the representation of white, male elites; white women; and African American students each constitute a significant form of the campus novel's engagement with, and critique of, the higher education sector. Each chapter will begin by identifying the significance of these forms in the campus novel tradition, while highlighting their relationship with the American higher education sector. Subsequently, three textual analyses reveal the ways in which these literary elements engage with the features of

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<sup>81</sup> Brown, 'Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy', pp. 42-3.

neoliberalism identified by Wendy Brown, and by which the contemporary higher education sector can be defined. While these characterisations are prevalent throughout contemporary campus novels, analytical frameworks applied to each text particularly reveal their engagement with the three key features identified by Brown: the simultaneous exertion and erosion of institutional power; the creation of the student-entrepreneurial subject; and the fragmentation of the public sphere. Mirroring their introductions, the conclusions of each chapter will summarise the ways in which these novels engage with the broader literary trends and frameworks.

Each textual analysis presented in this thesis inhabits the nexus between two frameworks. The three significant features of neoliberalism operate 'laterally', structuring each chapter throughout the thesis. This framework supports the contention that the contemporary American campus novel is defined by its engagement with the neoliberal university institution. An additional framework operates in each chapter 'vertically'. This framework is determined by the specific formal or representational consideration of each chapter. For example, the white, male elite tradition of the campus novel has been historically concerned with a particular form of liberal education so the three literary analyses in this chapter discuss the extent to which liberal education is under threat in the neoliberal university. The African American campus novel tradition has been predominantly concerned with the role of higher education in achieving racial equality; the three analyses in this chapter highlight the extent to which this role is undermined by the features of neoliberalism defined by Brown. A central concern of this thesis is to emphasise the extent to which the campus novel constitutes an invaluable tool for engaging with debates surrounding the state of higher education under neoliberalism, therefore, the novels' engagements with these debates is emphasised throughout this thesis.

This thesis is a study of contemporary trends and definitive features of the contemporary American campus novels, and the texts discussed herein were selected to support this objective. Most significant was the definition of the American campus novel itself, the difficulty of which has already been discussed in this chapter. According to the definition previously outlined, it is of particular note that novels attending to the experiences of PhD candidates, such as Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold* (1992), were not considered, as the role of PhD candidates differs significantly from those of students as 'those pursuing education'. In addition, the texts in this project were chosen to highlight the extent to which

common characterisations of the genre are partial or, on occasion, inaccurate. Thus, texts that exhibit extensive formal experimentation that contradict the assertion that the genre is formulaic are discussed; while the extent to which these novels engage with crucial concerns within higher education and American society offer defence against accusations of insularity. To the extent to which these accusations are used to undermine the value of genre, or popular, fiction, the boundary between the 'popular' and 'literary' is also challenged in this thesis. Another way in which this challenge is achieved is through the range of novelists included—alongside relatively unrecognised authors are two winners of the Pulitzer; novels that have been adapted into a film and a television series are included alongside authors who have received sustained academic attention across decades. While the attempt made in this thesis to explicitly define the genre of the campus novel aligns this work with studies of popular fiction, the variety of texts and authors discussed, as well as their consideration through a range of frameworks, exhibits the 'critiques of the apparent rigid binary of [literary and popular fiction]' that Matthew Sneider-Mayerson identifies in recent studies of popular fiction.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, this critique is particularly exemplified in the first chapter of this thesis.

The overlap between campus novels and other established literary genres is the focus of the first chapter of this project. Literary genres have played a significant part in reinforcing the intellectual and social authority of higher education throughout its fictional representations. Most prevalently, features of the sports novel and detective novel emphasise the institution's role as the bastion of national values and rationality. However, contemporary campus novels deploy genre to particularly engage with the current condition of higher education in America. This chapter will discuss the contemporary campus novel's engagement with three genres which traditionally align the acquisition of knowledge with institutional power, personal development and social stability. In Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams' *S.* (2013), tropes of detective and crime fiction direct the novel's critique towards the university institution. However, while the primacy of rationality is maintained in this work, Dorst and Abrams' Pollard State University is institutionally corrupt, signalling the erosion of its institutional authority. Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* (2009) is a fantasy novel, part of a genre which aligns the acquisition of knowledge with personal development. However, *The*

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<sup>82</sup> Matthew Sneider-Mayerson, 'Popular Fiction Studies: The Advantages of a New Field', *Studies in Popular Culture*, 33:1 (2010), pp. 21-35 (p. 30).

*Magicians* persistently rejects this possibility – in Grossman’s novel, the acquisition of knowledge leads to meaningless, aimless lives. In Greek tragedy, the journey from ignorance to knowledge concludes with the re-establishment of stable social norms, reinforcing the genre’s role in Athenian society. This idea is rejected in Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* (1992). While replete with references and allusions to the ancient form, Tartt’s novel rejects the stability of Greek tragedy, rather depicting a fragmented society which precludes meaningful engagement. These three novels exhibit distinct approaches to literary genre – generic tropes and concerns are either respected, or subverted. This variety is indicative of the ambiguity with which the contemporary campus novel approaches the established role of American higher education.

The second chapter of this project discusses the ways in which the narrative devices of three contemporary American campus novels engage with the current condition of higher education. To enable a holistic and political discussion of narrative form, this chapter follows the methodology outlined by Andrew Gibson in *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*. In this work, Gibson exemplifies a method by which postmodern philosophy, in particular, can be utilised to analyse a formal literary element. This chapter particularly deploys philosophies which attend to mechanics of institutional power, personal subjectivity, and social fragmentation, to enable consideration of the way in which narrative devices engage with the condition of neoliberal higher education institutions. The prevalence of Shakespearean allusions in M.L. Rio’s *If We Were Villains* (2013) is discussed in the context of Michel Foucault’s critiques of neoliberal governmentality. Such a reading highlights the mechanics by which institutional power is exerted through academic discourse, as well as the ways in which such academic discourse undermines the social influence of the university. Christopher Yates’ *Black Chalk* (2013) engages with the personal fate of a student carried away by the Enlightenment narrative of progress proffered by Yates’ version of University of Oxford. The work of Jean-François Lyotard illuminates not only the extent to which such grand narratives require the erasure of personal subjectivity, but also the rebellious potential of art, which Yates’ novel similarly discusses. The social fragmentation which constitutes the broader social context of the contemporary university is a defining feature of Jean Baudrillard’s later work on communication-based societies. Bret Easton Ellis’ evocation of Baudrillard’s philosophy has been well-noted, and it is his campus novel, *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), which embodies this fragmentation and meaningfulness of contemporary



society. The deployment of postmodern frameworks in this chapter offers the opportunity to situate the contemporary campus novel in relation to broader discussions of postmodern literature. In particular, these works exemplify the critiques of modernity inherent in these postmodern philosophies, while challenging accusations of postmodern apoliticism.

In the third chapter, a distinct literary tradition in which the experiences of white, male elites at university is delineated, and three contemporary novels are discussed within this literary context. The most prominent early forms of the American campus novel attended to student experiences at Ivy League colleges. These novels reinforced the role of higher education in the construction of national values, particularly significant following the Civil War, and presented college students as the future leaders of America. This was also the time of a significant pedagogical shift in American higher education, when a distinct tradition of pragmatic liberal education emerged, particularly under Charles Eliot's stewardship of Harvard University. Nineteenth century campus novels reinforced this tradition, by aligning a broad conception of liberal education with public service, students' personal development and the establishment of a functioning public sphere in America. Subsequent novels featuring white, male elite students have interrogated the ways in which these three poles of liberal education have been challenged throughout the genre's iterations. Novels published following the First World War evinced concerns regarding the fragmentation of the public sphere and national unity; novels of the culture wars further queried whether the period's challenge to epistemological stability rendered future leaders aimless. The three contemporary campus novels discussed in this chapter interrogate the ways in which the tradition of liberal education established in elite novels of the nineteenth century is under threat in the neoliberal university. Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* (2011) depicts the ramifications of excessive academic specialization in the contemporary university. In this novel, the identities and experiences of three students are defined by their academic interests; these interests, in turn, define the particular ways in which each student is isolated from their communities. Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding* (2011) exemplifies the ways in which paradigms of human flourishing are undermined in contemporary university. In particular, this novel highlights the ways in which neither a human ideal, nor social necessities, nor students' own interests serve as sufficient determinants for education in contemporary America. Rather, the students in this novel remain isolated from wider society, exemplifying the experiences of the entrepreneurial subject following higher education. Tom

Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons* (2004) depicts the role of one higher education institution in the creation of a wider society which precludes public engagement. In particular, Wolfe's novel shows how the university operates as an institutionalization of elite power, reinforcing existing inequalities and precluding students' critical engagement with social norms. The conclusion of this chapter compares these three novels with the established tradition of the public school novel. As a genre which is similarly engaged with the creation and education of social elites, this comparison illuminates the ways in which contemporary American higher education no longer contributes to the educations of future leaders of America.

Campus novels featuring women attending university have remained engaged with the concerns of broader feminist, political activism since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When the campus novel first emerged, so too did women emerge from the domestic to the public sphere. Indeed, as feminist activists agitated for the vote and access to education, campus novels equated women's attendance at university with women's entry into society. A similar objective emerged during the culture wars, as 'second wave' feminism enacted a range of consciousness-raising initiatives which were mirrored in campus novels of the period. A range of feminist theorisations provide theoretical context for the concerns of the three novels discussed in this chapter. Pamela Dean's *Tam Lin* (1991) contextualises the university within a broader, patriarchal social order. Dean's novel indicts both the university and literary studies, emphasising the extent to which these institutions deny female agency. However, the university's authority is also undermined by the novel's anti-intellectual fantasy elements – these too, however, deny the possibility of higher education for women. Dean's novel illustrates Wendy Brown's articulation of neoliberal institutional authority – *Tam Lin* depicts the university as a tool of patriarchal oppression which is simultaneously undermined by anti-intellectualism. Amanda Brown's *Legally Blonde* (2001) depicts the creation of a female entrepreneurial subject. Brown's Stanford University endorses Elle's embodiment of a feminine ideal which is exclusionary and exploitative, precluding the possibility of feminist collective action which could challenge the novel's dominant male order. The final novel discussed in this chapter, Joyce Carol Oates' *I'll Take You There* (2002) depicts the instability and alienation resultant from the social fragmentation which characterises neoliberal society. In particular, Oates' novel interrogates the extent to which anti-essentialist notions of identity undermine the relationship between individuals and wider society, as well as the psychological instability resultant from the loss of a firm foundation for individual

subjectivity. The conclusion of this chapter contextualises these campus novels within established, feminist, literary forms and theorisations for feminist collective action.

The fifth chapter of this project defines the tradition of the African American campus novel and discusses three contemporary novels – T. Geronimo Johnson’s *Welcome to Braggsville* (2015); Connie Briscoe’s *Big Girls Don’t Cry* (1996); and C. Kelly Robinson’s *Between Brothers* (2008). Emerging alongside the white forms of the campus novel, African American campus novels have persistently engaged with higher education’s role in achieving racial equality. While the earliest forms of the genre particularly engaged with the theorisations of racial uplift which emerged following the Emancipation Proclamation, subsequent novels have engaged with a range of issues such as respectability politics, Black nationalism; and grassroots activism. Contemporary novels continue this engagement, particularly interrogating the role of the neoliberal university institution, students’ embodiment of the entrepreneurial subject, and higher education and students’ roles in African American communities. *Welcome to Braggsville* places Berkeley University within a broader context of institutional racism. In Johnson’s work, the university is both revealed to be an arm of white supremacy – contributing to such institutionalised racism – while also redundant – the theoretical position for which Berkeley advocates prove useless when faced with such institutionalised oppression. Johnson’s work particularly illustrates the role of the neoliberal institution outlined by Wendy Brown. Connie Briscoe’s *Big Girls Don’t Cry* presents a nuanced vision. Briscoe’s novel presents university as a space wherein its protagonist, Naomi, engages with social mechanics of racist discrimination and Naomi’s education results in an individualistic detachment which characterises the entrepreneurial subject. However, Briscoe’s novel also depicts methods by which individuals can contribute to their communities outside of those dominant institutions. *Big Girls Don’t Cry* offers a particularly productive response to the individualism which dominates neoliberal society, and the university. This optimism is mirrored in C. Kelly Robinson’s *Between Brothers*, although this novel offers a particularly idealistic depiction of the relationship between higher education and a broader African American community. Robinson depicts student-protagonists who achieve personal fulfilment through engagement with their community, while also using their educations to contribute to community uplift. In this way, Robinson’s novel illustrates a particularly idealistic vision of W.E.B. Du Bois, a vision he was to abandon in his later writings. The conclusion of this chapter situates these texts within broader conversations regarding

the nature of African American literature, arguing that they evoke an earlier tradition, from the Jim Crow era, which further emphasises the continued segregation of higher education in America.

Aligning with the two objectives of this project, the conclusion of this thesis situates the contemporary campus novel within theorisations of the neoliberal novel and the discussions of neoliberal higher education in America. The expansion of neoliberalism has evoked a number of discussions regarding the role of literature and culture within an increasingly dominant market rationalism. This conclusion argues that the contemporary American campus novel exemplifies the ways in which literature can continue to offer critique of neoliberalism, contradicting assertions that no such rebellion is possible within neoliberalism. In order to justify this argument, elements of neoliberal literary form and aesthetics are discussed, as they relate to the contemporary American campus novel. Particularly pertinent are discussions of the neoliberal form of the *bildungsroman*, which emphasise the contemporary campus novel's deviation from its classical form, and aesthetic devices which reveal the genre's continued loyalty to established forms of human subjectivity. This attachment, in turn, highlights the extent to which the contemporary campus novel is unable to fully detach itself from humanistic theorisations which are challenged under neoliberalism. This faith could be explained by the genre's definitive engagement with the university institution. Indeed, while the contemporary American campus novel does depict the increasing redundancy and damage caused by higher education in American society, these novels are unable to fully conceptualise a mode of reforming the institution itself. In this way, the conclusion to this thesis argues, contemporary American campus novels offer scathing critiques of American higher education, while remaining unable to conceptualise a methodical, systemic mode for change.

## Chapter 1: Genre

University novels have often been criticised for their formulaic structure and predictability, however, these critiques overlook extensive variation within the genre.<sup>1</sup> Since the original appearance of university students in American literature, the sports novel has occupied a particularly dominant position. In the nineteenth century, campus novels frequently depicted the college football field as a site wherein egalitarian values reigned. As a national sport, American football also allowed these novels to align college principles with national values. This function is maintained in campus-sports novels of the nineteenth century featuring female protagonists, in which women's participation in college sports constituted a significant form of argument that women should be included in such egalitarianism. Subsequently, tropes of the sports novel have enabled consideration of campus novels' critique of American society. Considering F. Scott Fitzgerald's depictions of spectator sport, including in the campus novel *This Side of Paradise*, Jarom Lyle McDonald argues:

[Fitzgerald] saw within spectator sport a consistent structure of stratification and hierarchy, even in the face of sport's own attempts to put forth the story that sport erases lines of difference and allows for egalitarian social relationships as a model of success—one built on individual talent rather than social ideologies.<sup>2</sup>

In this way, tropes of the sports novel operate as an American cultural myth, exemplifying how literary genres enabled contemporary social critique throughout literary modernism. Campus-sports novels of the culture wars exhibit further genre-play. In Don DeLillo's *End Zone* (1972), college football players are also intellectuals, contradicting the anti-intellectualism which is prevalent in the sports genre. In this way, DeLillo's diversion from the standardised sports novel is a manner in which the fragmentation of masculine identity and broader epistemological instability is interrogated. In Gil Scott-Heron's *The Nigger Factory*, it is the college football players who advocate for Black nationalism as an ideology with which to challenge American white supremacy. Once again, college football players embody

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<sup>1</sup> In *Ancient Cultures of Conceit*, Ian Carter laments that 'almost all British university novels play modest variations on one of the three linked stories' (p. 15); Elaine Showalter also notes the repetition throughout the genre in *Faculty Towers*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Jarom Lyle McDonald, *Sports, Narrative, and Nation in the Fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), p. 2.

nationalistic values, although the players' race and their critical position emphasises how Black Americans are excluded from national egalitarianism. Throughout the tradition of the campus novel, genre tropes of the sports novel have enabled the interrogation of national values and the role of higher education in their perpetuation.

The genre of detective fiction has a similarly prominent position in the tradition of university-set fiction, particularly engaging with the epistemological authority of higher education institutions. With the appearance of fictional professors in the American literary tradition, detective and spy novels were also encompassed within the university's walls. As discussed below, these novels align the detective with the academic, presenting both as figures which represent epistemological authority and social stability. In these novels, the university campus operates in much the same way as the country house of Golden Age detective fiction, depicting the university as a stable community which is dominated by rationality. However, such a cohesive relationship has been undermined in more recent novels. In postmodern fiction, both the figure of the academic and the value of resolving crime are themselves undermined. In Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), academic research is useless; in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) and *Pale Fire* (1962), academics and their discourse are dangerous and unreliable. Mysteries, too, become textual word games which encompass the novels themselves, as in Thomas Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49* (1965) or Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1987, 1988). These novels exemplify a sub-genre which Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney define as the 'metaphysical detective story', a genre which 'parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions [...] with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot.'<sup>3</sup> As Merivale and Sweeney's definition highlights, university-set metaphysical detective stories undermine the institutional authority of the university itself – their epistemological authority and their pedagogic role in personal development.

Engagements with other literary genres throughout the campus novel tradition exemplify varying relationships to the role of genre itself. In their emergent forms, campus novels are not only loyal to a defined role of the university, but also to the established forms of the genres themselves: standardised tropes such as the detective and sports competition

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 2.

faithfully represent the search for truth and a microcosm of a national community, respectively. This cohesion between individual tropes and the broader concerns of the genre illustrates E.D. Hirsch's discussion of genre in *Validity in Interpretation*. Hirsch presents a particularly proscriptive understanding of genre: communication 'is like learning the rules of a game'; '[t]here must be some kind of overarching notion which controls the temporal sequence of speech, and this controlling notion of the speaker, like that of the interpreter must embrace a system of expectations.'<sup>4</sup> This 'overarching notion', Hirsch continues, is genre: '*that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand any part in its determinacy.*'<sup>5</sup>

This fulfilment of readers' expectations provides epistemological stability: Hirsch reveals that his conceptualisation of genre 'has been conceived as a contribution to general hermeneutic theory with special emphasis on the problem of validity.'<sup>6</sup> For Hirsch, '[a]t stake ultimately is the right of *any* humanistic disciple to claim genuine knowledge':

Since all humane studies [...] are founded upon the interpretation of texts, valid interpretation is crucial to the validity of all subsequent inferences in those studies.

The theoretical aim of a genuine disciple, scientific or humanistic, is the attainment of truth, and its practical aim is agreement that truth has probably been achieved.<sup>7</sup>

Similar to Hirsch's description, genre acts as a reassuring hermeneutic frame in early campus-sports novels and university-set detective fiction: genres establish the expectations of the reader, which are subsequently met. In these novels, the cohesion between genres' concerns and novels' plots reinforce the epistemological stability which endorses the institutional authority of the university. Subsequent campus novels exemplify how the stable hermeneutic frame which Hirsch ascribes to genre has been challenged, constituting a continued critique and challenge to the role of higher education in American society.

For Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins, genre constitutes a particularly useful framework through which to consider contemporary cultures' engagements with neoliberalism. Elliott and Harkins employ an explicitly formalist approach, arguing that 'genre enables specific

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<sup>4</sup> E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 71; p. 78

<sup>5</sup> Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, p. 86 (original italics)

<sup>6</sup> Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, p. viii

<sup>7</sup> *Validity in Interpretation*, p. ix

formations of aesthetics and politics [...] to appear as mere forms.’<sup>8</sup> Deploying terms recognisable from Hirsch, Elliott and Harkin argue that genres ‘transform historical specificity into formal universality, enabling rules of discourse to potentially transcend, transfigure, or even transvalue changing modes of (re)production.’<sup>9</sup> This transcendence is crucial to the critique enabled by genre under neoliberalism economic conditions. Elliott and Harkins outline particular impacts of neoliberalism which genre can resist:

Studies of neoliberalism have proposed that both these modes of culture come together in the collapse of modern aesthetic and political economic formations. In this view, temporal and territorial modes of culture are seen to lose their pertinence as neoliberal policy and transnational capitalism come to equate social practice and aesthetic product as modes of human commodification.<sup>10</sup>

In response:

[Elliott and Harkin] turn to the category of genre in order to make use of specifically aesthetic or humanist genealogies of inquiry to study how and when culture and neoliberalism are useful as intersecting categories for analysis, and what we might better understand by gathering together nonhegemonic and transnational accounts of specific aesthetic texts variously linked to the policies and practices of neoliberalism.

This chapter is a continuation of the ‘ongoing dialogue in the humanities about the practices of reading aesthetic artefacts in our political present’ which emerges from Elliott and Harkins’ discussion.<sup>11</sup> Attending to formal elements of literary genre and their established significance in literary culture, this chapter articulates the ways in which contemporary campus novels exemplify the ‘mutation of genres’, resisting the normalizing tendencies of neoliberalism and directly critiquing the very conditions of the neoliberal university.<sup>12</sup>

The three novels discussed in this chapter exemplify methods by which contemporary campus novels deploy tropes of other literary genres to enable critique of higher education institutions, student experiences, and contemporary American society. Doug Dorst and J.J.

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<sup>8</sup> Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins, ‘Introduction: Genres of Neoliberalism’, *Social Text*, 31:2 (2013), pp. 1-17 (p. 1).

<sup>9</sup> Elliott and Harkins, ‘Genres of Neoliberalism’, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Genres of Neoliberalism’, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Genres of Neoliberalism’, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Genres of Neoliberalism’, p. 3.



Abram's *S.* (2013) is a novel which sits uneasily alongside various sub-genres of crime fiction. Tropes of golden age detective fiction, noir, and metaphysical detective fiction co-exist in Abrams and Dorst's work, however, *S.* can be confidently aligned with none of these sub-genres, resulting in a contradictory text which reflects the ambiguous role of higher education in contemporary America. Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* (2009) constitutes a more explicit rejection of a central feature of the fantasy genre itself – personal development. In Grossman's work, the defined epistemology of the university signifies the dominance of 'reality', preventing the liberating potential of fantasy lands. While *The Magicians* rejects one of the central features of fantasy literature, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) exhibits a more ambiguous relationship with Greek tragedy. In Tartt's work, some tropes of Greek tragedy are faithfully deployed, while other features of the ancient genre are subverted. This contradictory relationship signals the social fragmentation of contemporary society, particularly when juxtaposed with the social stability which Greek tragedy reinforced. Despite their divergent relationships with established literary genres, these campus novels' engagements with literary genres are significant aspects through which their critique of neoliberal higher education can be interrogated. *S.* depicts the enforcement and simultaneous erosion of institutional authority; *The Magicians* emphasises the extent to which higher education results in an aimless, meaningless and individualistic existence; *The Secret History* contextualises the university within a broader, fragmented, social context.

### **S.: The Campus-Crime Novel and Institutional Critique**

In J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's co-authored *S.*, two students are concerned with the resolution of a mystery. On the pages of a library book, *The Ship of Theseus*, Jen and Eric meet and discuss the identity of the novel's fictional author, V.M. Straka. The students search the text for clues and, through their research, develop a romantic relationship. While *S.* may seem to equate academic research, socialization and epistemological stability, this affiliation is in fact undermined in several ways. The overlap between the campus and crime novels particularly emphasises the novel's institutional critique. Throughout *S.* tropes of various sub-genres of crime fiction serve to establish, and undermine, the university's institutional authority. Tropes of golden age detective fiction signify the dominance of rationality, while also revealing the institution's detachment from broader social concerns. Noir tropes reveal

the institutional corruption of higher education, while also indicating the campus novel's continued engagement with social life, contradicting the detachment of golden age fiction. The relationship between *S.* and metaphysical detective stories emphasises the destabilization of intellectual authority. Throughout Abrams and Dorst's work, evocation of crime sub-genres themselves signify the ambiguity of the contemporary university institution, while exemplifying the complexity of the relationship between the contemporary campus novel and other literary genres.

Engagement with social institutions is a particularly definitive feature of crime fiction, justifying Andrew Pepper's assertion that 'crime fiction's political vision remains tied, always awkwardly and unwillingly, to the state because it cannot, in the end, ever fully escape its securitizing tendencies'.<sup>13</sup> Whether upholding or critiquing the role of social institutions, crime fiction relies upon the belief that these bodies are ultimately significant for the public good.<sup>14</sup> As Pepper argues in a discussion of crime fiction's engagement with police brutality against the Black community in America, the genre is incapable of conceptualising a world wherein the state commits acts of violence *against* its citizens.<sup>15</sup> As Pepper further notes, 'crime fiction tends to produce a contradictory account of the state as both necessary for the creation and maintenance of collective life and central to the reproduction of entrenched socio-economic inequalities.'<sup>16</sup> This duality characterises the treatment of the university institution in *S.* Indeed, tropes of crime fiction sub-genres are crucial to the consideration of the various modes of critique in Abrams and Dorst's work.

In *S.* the evocation of a variety of conflicting sub-genres of crime fiction are indicative of the ambiguity of the contemporary university institution. Different iterations of crime fiction are suggestive of various relationships with social institutions. As Warren Chernaik has noted, '[i]t has often been argued that detective fiction is an intrinsically conservative form.'<sup>17</sup> In its narratological thrust towards the resolution of crimes, as well as the reassuring

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Pepper, 'Race, violence and neoliberalism: crime fiction in the era of Ferguson and Black Lives Matter' *Textual Practice*, 33:6 (2019), pp. 963-982 (p. 974).

<sup>14</sup> This is the central thesis of Andrew Pepper, *Unwilling Executioner: Crime Fiction and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> See Pepper, 'Race, violence and neoliberalism'.

<sup>16</sup> Pepper, *Unwilling Executioner*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Warren Chernaik, 'Mean Streets and English Gardens' in Warren Chernaik, Martin Swales and Robert Vilain (ed.) *The Art of Detective Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 104-123 (p. 104).

presence of the detective, fiction of the golden age represents crimes as events which destabilize the social norms which are reassuringly restored at the novels' denouements. Contrastingly, criminality and immorality are definitive characteristics of noir fiction, even enveloping the figure of the detective himself.<sup>18</sup> As Andrew Pepper has noted, 'an unknowable, morally compromised protagonist who is implicated in the sordid world he inhabits' is a definitive feature of the American noir tradition, alongside 'an overwhelming sense of fatalism and bleakness, and a socio-political critique that yields nothing and goes nowhere.'<sup>19</sup> The primacy of rationality and the consequent faith in social institutions of detective fiction is contorted in the noir tradition – unfailing morality becomes unfailing immorality. In postmodern treatments of crime, Susan Elizabeth Sweeney notes '[a] shift from the earlier stories' positivistic detection to the sense, in postmodernism, that all one can hope for in response to mystery is "an illusion of meaningfulness."<sup>20</sup> Postmodern crime fiction exemplifies the broader epistemological and social scepticism by which the movement has been broadly defined. In these three iterations of crime fiction, rationality is central to the critiques of individual novels – the primacy of rationality in golden age detective fiction signifies a dominant state; noir's prevalent *irrationality* signifies the corruption of the state; rationalism's fallibility in postmodern crime fiction signifies the crumbling of institutional authority. In this way, crime fiction is a particularly appropriate genre through which to interrogate the role of the contemporary university, an institution whose authority is inextricably bound to rationalism. In *S.* tropes from golden age detective fiction, noir, and postmodern crime fiction appear, all of which serve to highlight the ambiguous nature of institutional authority in the neoliberal university.

The ambiguity with which *S.* approaches intellectualism and rationality is evident from the book's unusual form. According to the terms outlined by Alison Gibbons in a reading of

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<sup>18</sup> Detectives in noir fiction are ubiquitously male. See Heather Worthington, 'Hard-boiled Detective Fiction' in *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 121–130, and Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London and Basingstoke, The Macmillan Press, 1980), pp. 135-167 for further discussion.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Pepper, 'The American Roman Noir,' in Catherine Ross Nickerson (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 58-71 (p. 58).

<sup>20</sup> Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, 'Crime In Postmodernist Fiction' in Catherine Ross Nickerson (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, pp. 163-177 (p. 164).

the work, *S.* is an example of ‘multimodal fiction’ which creates ‘transmodal storyworlds’.<sup>21</sup> These terms highlight the variety of forms which comprise the text on an extradiegetic level, and the interaction between ‘storyworlds’ intradiegetically. Extradiegetically, the various modes which Gibbons identifies establish a multitude of narrative layers. The majority of the work is housed within *The Ship of Theseus*, a novel presented as a work by the fictional V.M. Straka. In the footnotes to the novel, Straka’s translator communicates through a series of encoded messages. In the ‘margin world’ of the novel, Jen and Eric communicate by writing notes to each other.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the ‘multimodality’ of *S.* is indicative of the novel’s various ‘storyworlds’ – the novel depicts fantasy lands; footnotes gesture beyond *The Ship of Theseus*, to the experiences of its translator; the notes of Jen and Eric create their own world. While this relationship is particularly cohesive, the form of *S.* also serves to fragment the text. Each page contains a typographical divide – between Straka’s narrative and the students’ peripheral notes; multiple temporalities also co-exist, particularly between the stable chronology of *The Ship of Theseus* and the students’ notes; the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is both asserted and undermined – Straka’s work is presented in the form of a library book with Jen and Eric’s notes constituting an invasion of ‘reality’, a reality which is further undermined by the fictional nature of Jen and Eric’s communications themselves. Approaching *S.*, the work’s form immediately poses a challenge to the possibility of singular meaning, stable narratives, and the value of literary interpretation itself.

This textual instability and hermeneutic fallibility is symptomatic of metaphysical detective fiction. Several of the key features of the genre, identified by Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, characterise the form of *S.* In particular, ‘the profound questions it raises about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality, and the limits of knowledge.’<sup>23</sup> As Merivale and Sweeney intimate, metaphysical detective fiction raises these ‘profound questions’ while generally refusing to offer reassuring answers. Rather, *S.* illustrates the rhizome structure which Umberto Eco has ascribed to his own fictional library in *The Name of the Rose* (1980), a seminal work of metaphysical detective fiction:

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<sup>21</sup> Gibbons, ‘Reading *S.*’, p. 321.

<sup>22</sup> Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams, *S.* (London: Mulholland Books, 2013), p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> Merivale and Sweeney, *Detecting Texts*, p. 1.

The rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite. The space of conjecture is a rhizome space [...] that is, it can be structured, but is never structured definitively.<sup>24</sup>

Eco's articulation is illustrated in *S.* – the text resists any reassuring centre; the quest for such stability is persistently undermined. However, the contorted narratives of *S. do* lead somewhere, although to a conclusion which is explicitly outside of the text itself – the web of communications in *S.* lead Jen and Eric to fall in love, and their extratextual relationship at the novel's conclusion. In this way, *S.* problematizes the distinction drawn by Joel Black between a 'key text' and a 'prize text', the confusion between which is a central component of metaphysical detective fiction's hermeneutic fallibility.<sup>25</sup> Rather than juxtaposing the two, *S.* is *both* a key text – *The Ship of Theseus* contains clues to Straka's identity – *and* a prize text – Jen calls the novel 'a scrapbook of [their] younger selves.'<sup>26</sup> The manner in which *S.* evokes the concerns of metaphysical detective fiction, while refusing the sub-genre's persistent nihilism, is indicative of the work's relationship to rationalism and institutional authority. *S.* consists of a form which undermines the authority of rationality and the university, while refusing to abandon it altogether.

Indeed, the division between Straka's text and the students' communication enable new potentialities for meaning. *The Ship of Theseus* sparks new conversations between Jen and Eric, forming new narratives and conversations – themes emerge on several pages, such as when the students discuss their families, events from their past, or their thoughts about the text itself. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of Jen and Eric's communication with the novel's events enables a number of parallels to be drawn between the two textual worlds. By falling in love through the written word, Jen and Eric mirror the experiences of Straka and their translator, F.X. Caldeira; Straka and Caldeira communicate through the text of *The Ship of Theseus*, like Jen and Eric; the students' experiences are also mirrored in motifs of *The Ship*

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in *Detecting Texts*, pp. 187-8.

<sup>25</sup> Joel Black, '(De)feats of Detection: The Spurious Key Text from Poe to Eco' in Merivale and Sweeney (ed.) *Detecting Texts*, pp. 75-100. Black defines both the key and prize text:

As important as such a "key text" may be, it is not itself the ultimate object of the detective's quest. The detective uses the information supplied by the key text to achieve his final goal, which is to discover or recover a prized object that may well be another text.' ('(De)feats of Detection', p. 79).

<sup>26</sup> Dorst and Abrams, *S.*, p. 76.

*Theseus* – as well as personal isolation, ‘THE BAD-CHILDREN MYTHS’ which Eric identifies in Straka’s work are mirrored by Jen and Eric’s difficult childhoods.<sup>27</sup> While such self-reflexive doubling is a method by which uncanniness and uncertainty can be introduced into detective fiction, in *S.* they emphasise the students’ growing intimacy.<sup>28</sup> The novel’s inserts also engage the reader in the resolution of the text’s central mystery, reinforcing the potential for epistemological certainty. A wheel is provided which enables the decoding of some messages within the text; while Jen and Eric decode some of these messages, others are left for the reader to decipher. As Brendon Wocke emphasises: ‘[t]he book demands an active reader, one who engages with the material, who is interpolated by the mystery in *a very real sense*.’<sup>29</sup> In these ways, the form of *S.* also reinforces the primacy of rationality and intellectualism. Rather than abandoning the potential for a singular meaning, the site of such meaning is shifted outside the text, to Jen and Eric and the reader.

The value of intellectualism is particularly emphasised by the students’ dedication to their research. At the beginning of the text, Jen and Eric strive to determine the true identity of V.M. Straka, with Eric searching *The Ship of Theseus* for clues to answer ‘QUESTIONS BOTH WITHIN + WITHOUT THE STORY...’<sup>30</sup> For this reason, Jen and Eric mine the text for clues regarding Straka’s identity, identifying other known associates in the novel’s characters; demarcating key historical events, and even noting portions of the text which align with Straka’s biography. Jen and Eric’s work is particularly tied to the university library – it is in the library that Jen initially finds Eric’s copy of *The Ship of Theseus* and they exchange the text by ‘leav[ing] it on the shelf in the south stacks’; as their investigations become more perilous, Jen confesses that she ‘[doesn’t] feel safe anywhere but the library.’<sup>31</sup> Eric and Jen are particularly appropriate figures to be carrying out such a task. From the beginning of the work, Eric is presented as a figure of intellectual authority – he is a former PhD candidate who has been studying Straka’s work since the age of fourteen and he is able to explain several of Jen’s uncertainties. While Jen is less experienced than Eric in the field of Straka studies, she too is a figure associated with rationality. She reveals ‘[she] took a library science

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<sup>27</sup> *S.*, p. 380.

<sup>28</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “The Purveyor of Truth.”, *Yale French Studies*, 52 (1975), pp. 31-113 for discussion of doubling and uncanniness in Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’.

<sup>29</sup> Brandon Woke, ‘The Analogue Technology of *S*: Exploring Narrative Form and the Encoded Mystery of the Margin’, *Between*, 4:8 (2014), pp. 1-21 (p. 18). (original italics)

<sup>30</sup> Dorst and Abrams, *S.*, p. 129.

<sup>31</sup> *S.*, title page; p. 139.

class [her] sophomore year. One of [her] favourite classes ever' and is 'pretty good at finding things' during their research.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, it is Jen who determines that Caldeira is a woman, a key clue in determining her identity and relationship with Straka.

The objective, detective-figures and setting of *S.* emphasise the work's inability to abandon the epistemological stability prevalent in golden age detective fiction. The text presents a particularly defined relationship between literature and its author, relying upon the assumption that a text has a singular meaning, one which will reveal the personality and ultimate identity of its author. This assumption is reinforced by the students' approach to literary studies – they view the text as a series of puzzles which must be decoded in order to reveal the ultimate meaning – Straka's identity. Furthermore, Jen and Eric reinforce the relationship between the intellectual and detective figure – they are figures imbued with the intellectual authority to reveal the truth which *The Ship of Theseus* conceals. This confidence in rationality, and the students' characterisations are prominent in the tradition of golden age detective fiction. In this sub-genre, intellectual detectives are able to decode clues in order to reveal the identity of criminals. In particular, Jen and Eric's methodology is evocative of Sherlock Holmes who, Stephen Knight notes, frequently decodes 'clue-puzzles' in written form.<sup>33</sup> The students' confinement and association with the university library shares features of the country house which provided the setting for much golden age detective fiction. As Laura Marcus has highlighted, '[t]he academic arena offers not only the advantages of a (relatively) closed community, but brings to the fore the concept of literary scholarship as a form of detective work.'<sup>34</sup> In *S.*, the university library functions in much the same way as the 'country house' of golden era detective fiction: a detached setting defined by the logic and rationality embodied by the figure of the detective, or academic.

While reinforcing the primacy of rationality, Jen and Eric's investigation and the setting of *S.* also undermine the relevance of rationality in contemporary society. By evoking the country house setting of golden age detective fiction, *S.* alludes to the conservatism of the form – for John Scaggs, the country house, and thus the university, is symptomatic of the 'pastoral idyll' for which Golden Age detective fiction grasps: '[t]he characteristic desire of

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<sup>32</sup> *S.*, p. 58; p. 200.

<sup>33</sup> Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, p. 76.

<sup>34</sup> Laura Marcus, 'Detection and Literary Fiction', in Martin Priestman (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 245-268 (p. 203).

Golden Age fiction to restore or return to *a lost order* that, in all respects, is superior to the present world'.<sup>35</sup> By evoking the country house setting of much Golden Age detective fiction, the relevance of the rationalism of the university is undermined. Abrams and Dorst's Pollard State University is both an institutional representative of a conservative social order, and particularly detached from the reality of contemporary life. The detachment of intellectualism is emphasised by the students' embodiment of the intellectual-detective figure. Jen and Eric's method of deduction – the resolution of the various 'clue-puzzles' which constitute the text – signifies the dominance of rationality and the potential for a singular meaning.<sup>36</sup> However, while Eric's methods may reinforce a rationalistic approach, it is also particularly individualistic. Discussing Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional detective, Stephen Knight has highlighted Holmes' significance in a broader social context:

Great emotional value was found in an individual who seemed to stand against the growing collective forces of mass politics, social determinism and scientific, super-individual explanation of the world, all of which appeared as mechanistic threats to the free individual. A figure like Holmes, who treated all problems individualistically and who founded his power on the very rational systems which had inhumane implications was a particularly welcome reversal of disturbing currents.<sup>37</sup>

In this way, Jen and Eric's embodiment of the Holmes archetype emphasises the detachment of rationality from broader social instability. While S. maintains faith in the value of academic research, it is particularly detached from contemporary experience, exemplifying the ambiguity of the neoliberal university institution.

However, while Jen and Eric employ intellectual approaches to determine a singular meaning, their quest is ultimately problematized. Rather than leading them unfalteringly to the identity of Straka, Jen and Eric's investigations lead them into a world of complexity and danger. Rather than a singular author, Jen and Eric's discover 'THE COMPOSITE THEORY – [THAT] "V.M. STRAKA" [IS] JUST A NAME ALL THE OTHER WRITERS COULD USE'.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the students' research leads to their embroilment with a number of threatening figures: Jen is stalked by several 'suit guys' whom she laments she 'keep[s]

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<sup>35</sup> John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 50 (italics added).

<sup>36</sup> Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, p. 76.

<sup>37</sup> *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, p. 80.

<sup>38</sup> Dorst and Abrams, *S.* p. 292.



seeing'<sup>39</sup> and several fires are 'set near [her]'.<sup>40</sup> Eric must particularly face the threat posed by his former supervisor Professor Moody, a figure whom Eric accuses of enacting 'A RIDICULOUS + EVEN OFFENSIVE PANTOMIME OF ACTUAL SCHOLARSHIP' and whom Jen frequently sees so intoxicated that 'his breath just about knocked [her] over.'<sup>41</sup> Eric's experiences with his uncle further exemplify the damaging consequences of literary studies. Reading Straka's work as a teenager, '[ONE] WHOLE SCENE GAVE [ERIC] NIGHTMARES WHEN [HE] FIRST READ IT. AND THEN THE NEXT SUMMER, [HE] WAS SUPPOSED TO SAIL TO VANCOUVER WITH [HIS] UNCLE [HE] BACKED OUT AT THE LAST MINUTE.'<sup>42</sup> Subsequently, it is revealed that Eric's uncle died in an accident on the trip. Similarly, Jen's Straka obsession leads her to break into Moody's office; she claims she 'was out of [her] head [because] everything's so crazy right now'; and her parents are so concerned about her erratic behaviour that they consider committing her to a psychiatric institution.<sup>43</sup> In this way, *S.* undermines the primacy of rationality and intellectualism. In Dorst and Abrams' work, the students' investigation leads them into a world of immortality, instability, and danger.

This narrative arc, and the consequent questioning of rationality, is prevalent in noir fiction. The institutional corruption which Professor Moody embodies in *S.* is a definitive feature of noir fiction. In 'The Simple Art of Murder', Raymond Chandler outlines 'a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of moneymaking, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practising', to cite but a few instances of the institutional corruption he notes.<sup>44</sup> It is into this world that the hard-boiled detective is led by his dedication to resolving criminal activity, an embroilment which mirrors the students' envelopment within a dangerous world. The treatment of crime in noir novels further reflects this broader social perspective. As Anissa Belhadjin notes, for noir 'what's more important than the crime is the road that leads to the crime, and its implications':

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<sup>39</sup> *S.*, p. 402.

<sup>40</sup> *S.*, p. 128.

<sup>41</sup> *S.*, p. 227; p. 18.

<sup>42</sup> *S.*, p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> Dorst and Abrams, *S.*, p. 359. (original formatting)

<sup>44</sup> Raymond Chandler, 'The Simple Art of Murder' in *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Random House, 1950), pp. 1-9 (p. 8).

And one can say that the roman noir [...] is produced when there is a plot based on a crime or an offense, along with the expression of an anxiety—not an individual one but usually social—an anxiety expressed through violence which leads to a pessimistic or indeed hopeless vision of the world.<sup>45</sup>

In *S.* the institution which is particularly depicted as a ‘road that leads to the crime’, the site of ‘a pessimistic or indeed hopeless vision of the world’ is the university. The appearance of noir tropes in *S.* signals the extent to which rationality, and the institutional authority of the university, has been corrupted in contemporary America. As well as immoral institutional figures, the novel questions the value of academic research, so firmly established at the novel’s beginning. While tropes from golden age detective fiction signify the divorce of rationality from wider society, noir tropes emphasise the corruption of rationality and the extent to which the university is implicated in broader social decay.

At the end of *S.*, Jen and Eric abandon institutional intellectualism altogether. Having finally graduated and with Eric receiving financial support, Jen and Eric move together to Prague. While they have left the university institution, Eric and Jen have not abandoned their research. Indeed, having established a reputation as experts in Straka studies, they are approached to publish work by an academic publisher. However, Jen and Eric refuse this task due to the publisher’s refusal to publish their own work on Straka. As such, Jen and Eric decide to pursue publication independently. While academic institutions have failed them, they do not abandon their ultimate goal of the dissemination of knowledge. Similarly, despite their relationship and co-habitation, Jen and Eric do not abandon their communication in the margins of *The Ship of Theseus*. Straka’s novel becomes an addendum to their relationship, one which enables further means of analysis, such as when Eric claims he ‘CAN READ [JEN’S] FACE + GUESS THE TONE OF THE NOTE [SHE’S] JUST WRITTEN.’<sup>46</sup> The conclusion of Dorst and Abrams’ work exemplifies the novel’s dedication to rationality and its institutional cynicism. The split introduced by the novel’s form, the confidence in rationality, and the corruption of the university results in the students’ abandonment of institutional academic work, in favour of their own pursuits.

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<sup>45</sup> Anissa Belhadjin, ‘From Politics to the Roman Noir’, *South Central Review*, 27:1 and 2, pp. 61-81 (p. 61).

<sup>46</sup> *S.*, p. 454.

The conclusion of *S.* resists noir nihilism, golden age rationality, and postmodern indeterminacy. Dorst and Abrams' work shifts through engagements with multiple sub-genres of crime fiction which signal the work's ambivalent relationship with institutional authority. The institutional destabilization of the text's form gestures towards the divide which is evident from the novel's co-existent depictions of the dominance of rationality, and its corruption in contemporary society. The novel's framing contains, as much as it can, the dominance of rationality and the institutional authority it reinforces. However, this dominance proves to be a façade, as the students' investigations reveal institutional corruption and the dangers of the pursuit of truth. At the end of the novel, the students have neither abandoned their ultimate goal, nor allowed it to dominate their lives. At the end of the novel, then, rationality and intellectualism are detached from the university institution, signalling a further shift away from crime sub-genres. In previous iterations, the resolution of crime – whether successful or unsuccessful – signalled novels' relationship to the state. In *S.* institutions are no longer relevant to the resolution of mysteries. In this way, *S.* embodies the ambivalence of the neoliberal university – the novel depicts the university institution as destabilized, detached, and corrupt; the students' dedication to epistemological stability is only possible beyond the university walls.

### ***The Magicians: Campus-Fantasy and the Impossibility of Personal Development***

Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* is the first in a trilogy and now adapted into a successful TV series. The novel follows Quentin Coldwater who yearns to escape into the magical world of his favourite books, *Fillory and Further*. Instead of attending an Ivy League institution, Quentin is admitted into Brakebills, a magic college. With his friends Eliot, Janet, Alice, Penny and Josh, Quentin completes his university degree and the group decide to travel to Fillory in search of a quest. However, the journey into the mystical world fails to offer the meaning for which Quentin searches. The narrative structure of *The Magicians* emphasises the role of university education in Quentin's life. As with other fantasy fiction, Quentin's attendance at Brakebills signifies his initiation into a magical community, however, while Grossman's novel suggests a narrative arc by which a protagonist may transition from self-ignorance to self-awareness, *The Magicians* undermines several of these established plot points. *The Magicians* can be viewed as two cycles – Quentin's time at Brakebills and his life immediately

after graduation; and his quest into Fillory and life upon his return to Earth. These cycles establish two moments during which personal fulfilment is denied.

Educational institutions within fantasy literature have signified the supremacy of rationality and provided opportunities for personal development. Formal education in fantasy literature most often takes the form of magic schools, famously in novels such as Ursula Le Guin's *The Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series.<sup>47</sup> Education at these schools introduces Harry and Le Guin's Ged to communities organised around clearly-defined epistemologies, suggestive of Tolkienesque 'secondary worlds' which prioritise a coherent inner logic.<sup>48</sup> H.P. Lovecraft's Miskatonic University is also situated in a world preoccupied with epistemological stability. Like Le Guin and Rowling, Lovecraft remained dedicated to consistency and logic throughout his Cthulu Mythos stories.<sup>49</sup> As the setting for classes, research, and often magical libraries, these educational institutions represent worlds of rationalized fantasy, however, such rationalism is not consistently commended.<sup>50</sup> In Lovecraft's tales, the quest for knowledge unfailingly results in horrifying events; ignorance is the preferred human state.<sup>51</sup> In *The Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged performs a spell which unleashes the shadow which haunts him for the rest of the novel; education is the beginning of a lifelong journey towards maturity. The *Harry Potter* series more

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<sup>47</sup> The *Harry Potter* series consists of seven novels: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007).

<sup>48</sup> In 'On Fairy Stories', Tolkien argues: 'If [the author] indeed achieves a quality that can fairly be described by the dictionary definition: "inner consistency of reality," it is difficult to conceive how this can be, if the work does not in some way partake of reality. The peculiar quality of the 'joy' in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth.' (J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tolkien On Fairy Stories* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 77).

<sup>49</sup> The Cthulu Mythos is a fictional universe initiated by H.P. Lovecraft, particularly developed in the story 'The Call of Cthulu' (1928). Philip Smith highlights Lovecraft's interest in science, astronomy, and history, and argues that 'Lovecraft's world was a concrete one with established and unchanging laws.' ('Re-visioning Romantic-Era Gothicism: An Introduction to Key Works and Themes in the Study of H.P. Lovecraft', *Literature Compass*, 8 (2011), pp. 830-39 (p. 836).)

<sup>50</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* provides three definitions of rationalized fantasy. The most relevant definition for these novels is when 'fantasy elements are given a rationale which provides them with internal consistency and coherence.' John Clute and John Grant (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (London: Orbit Publishing, 1997), p. 801).

<sup>51</sup> See Guillaume Bogiaris, "Love of Knowledge is a Kind of Madness": Competing Platonism in the Worlds of C.S. Lewis and H.P. Lovecraft', *Mythlore*, 36 (2018), pp. 23-41.

comfortably equates education and personal development, although Rowling's novels prioritise socialization and independent learning over classroom lessons.<sup>52</sup>

While these individual fates differ, characters consistently experience moments of recognition, realising their own positions within a fantasy world, for better or for worse. Derived from Aristotelean *anagnorisis*, a moment of recognition signifies a character's increased knowledge and self-awareness within a specific narrative. According to *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, '[i]t is at this moment of recognition that the inherent Story at the heart of most full fantasy texts is most visible, most "artificial", and most revelatory. [...] [Characters] understand, in other words, that they are in a Story; that, properly recognized (which is to say properly told), their lives have the coherence and significance of Story'.<sup>53</sup> Such recognition coheres the knowledge, personal development and stable social position so fundamental to universities. Educational institutions in Le Guin, Rowling, and Lovecraft's works signify the transitions from ignorance to knowledge and immaturity to maturity, maintaining the relationship between higher education and the development of a defined subjectivity.

The alignment of knowledge and personal development is increasingly destabilised within contemporary campus-fantasy novels. The desirability of knowledge is challenged in universities featured in Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series, and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. While Miskatonic University lay at the centre of the consistent Lovecraftian universe, Pratchett's Unseen University is embedded within the particularly subversive *Discworld*.<sup>54</sup> Philip Pullman's version of University of Oxford is derided in favour of Lyra's instinctual learning; her ability to attend the prestigious institution at the conclusion of the

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<sup>52</sup> See Elizabeth A. Galway, 'Reminders of Rugby in the Halls of Hogwarts: The Insidious Influence of the School Story Genre on the Works of J. K. Rowling', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 37 (2012), pp. 66-85; Elisabeth Rose Gruner, 'Teach the Children: Education and Knowledge in Recent Children's Fantasy', *Children's Literature*, 37 (2009), pp. 216-35.

<sup>53</sup> Clute and Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, p. 804.

<sup>54</sup> *Discworld* includes a series of forty-one novels, beginning with *The Colour of Magic* (1983), and numerous companion publications. Various *Discworld* scholars have discussed Pratchett's challenge to the norms of society, fantasy tropes, and literary devices. See Lian Sinclair 'Magical Genders: The Gender(s) of Witches in the Historical Imagination of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*', *Mythlore*, 33:2 (2015), pp. 5-18 for Pratchett's challenges to gender norms; see Daniel Lüthi, 'Toying with Fantasy: The Postmodern Playground of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* Novels', *Mythlore*, 33:1 (2014), pp. 125-42 for broader social instability. Janet Brennan Croft particularly relates this subversive instinct to education in 'The Education of a Witch: Tiffany Aching, Hermione Granger, and Gendered Magic in *Discworld* and *Potterworld*', *Mythlore*, 27:3/4 (2009), pp. 129-99.

series is reliant upon her ability to fulfil specific gender norms.<sup>55</sup> Increasing textual instability challenges the transition from uncertainty to stability at university. In *S.*, the fantasy novel *The Ship of Theseus* is annotated by the notes of students – in this novel, reality and fantasy coexist on the same page. Rainbow Rowell's *Fangirl* (2013) features passages from a Harry Potter-inspired fantasy series, a series whose textual integrity is further challenged by *Fangirl's* student-protagonist Cath, who writes fanfiction inspired by the series. In *S.* and *Fangirl*, the blurring of fantasy and reality challenges the epistemological certainty of fantasy worlds, with universities representing an uncertain contemporary experience. This gesturing outside of the novels precludes recognition: as protagonists exist outside fantastic narratives, they cannot recognise their position within those narratives. These novels emphasise the impossibility of personal development at university, and Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* expands upon this theme. In this work, the university signifies a particularly oppressive rationality which ultimately fails to underwrite the maturation of its students.

When Quentin is called to attend the magical Brakebills College, he assumes he will be entering a world of magical opportunities which will mimic his favourite fantasy books. *The Magicians* begins at a recognisable crossroads in Quentin's life: his transition from high school to college. While preparing for interviews at a number of Ivy League institutions, Quentin receives an enigmatic invitation to Brakebills. Entrance into Brakebills involves a written entrance exam which features mathematical exercises Quentin recognises, as well as the creation of a language, culture and geography of an imaginary land.<sup>56</sup> When Quentin is called upon to perform magic, he does a magic trick which he learned as child. Unexpectedly impressed, the interview panel admit him to the prestigious magical institution. The institution of Brakebills is particularly detached from reality – the college enjoys a perennial summer; time moves at a different pace; and the students must hide the true nature of their education from family and friends. Brakebills, then, constitutes a threshold between childhood and adulthood; fantasy and reality, fulfilling the role of frequently performed by formal education institutions in fantasy fiction.

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<sup>55</sup> The trilogy includes *Northern Lights* (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997) and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000). Stephen Maddison discusses Lyra's individual development in 'The Good Liberal and the Scoundrel Author: Fantasy, Dissent and Neoliberal Subjectivity in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*', *Extrapolation*, 55:2 (2014), pp. 199-219.

<sup>56</sup> Lev Grossman, *The Magicians* (London: Viking, 2009), p. 27.

Magical college, however, is as mundane as the entrance exam implies. Learning magic requires the memorisation of complex incantations and gestures as well as proficiency in ‘Middle English, Latin, and Old High Dutch’.<sup>57</sup> Quentin concludes that it was ‘as tedious as it was possible for the study of powerful and mysterious supernatural forces to be.’<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the novel features several recognisable educational elements, from research to exams to school uniforms. The institution of Brakebills is also particularly tied to reality — Grossman has confirmed that the college was modelled on *Brideshead Revisited*’s version of an Oxford college.<sup>59</sup> As well as forming the threshold to a magical world, Brakebills also encapsulates magic’s reliance upon the real world. In this way, Grossman’s magical college is symptomatic of the fantasy sub-genre of supernatural fiction, wherein fantasy worlds are particularly tied to reality.

Brakebills’ evocation of the sub-genre of supernatural fiction implicates Quentin’s personal development. Supernatural fiction represents fantasy worlds as full of danger and instability, rather than liberation and certainty. As Everett F. Bleiler highlights, supernatural fiction features ‘a mirror world based on direct contradiction to what most of us believe, related through the strong principle of positive negation.’<sup>60</sup> John Clute’s discussion of the sub-genre particularly highlights the paradoxical role of Brakebills: in supernatural fiction, Clute notes, ‘didacticism about the supernatural creates an atmosphere of doubt.’<sup>61</sup> Clute’s observation is indicative of rationalism’s function in *The Magicians*: oppressive rationality fails to offer clarity. Quentin’s arrival at Brakebills signals his entry into a world of uncertainty. This epistemological instability precludes recognition. With no ultimate meaning or story to reveal, both explanation and recognition are impeded in the fantasy worlds of university fiction.

Indeed, the insignificance of Quentin’s education is revealed by *The Magicians*’ depictions of life after college. The novel’s first depiction of adult magicians outside of Brakebills’ walls is when Quentin and Alice visit her parents. Alice’s parents are alienated from each other: her mother is focused upon obscure academic research while her father is

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<sup>57</sup> Lev Grossman, *The Magicians*, p. 63.

<sup>58</sup> *The Magicians*, p. 67.

<sup>59</sup> Lauren Herstik, ‘Interview: Lev Grossman on *The Magicians Land*’, *Nerdist*, 7<sup>th</sup> August 2014 <https://nerdist.com/interview-lev-grossman-on-the-magicians-land/> [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> March 2018].

<sup>60</sup> Everett F. Bleiler, *The Guide to Supernatural Fiction* (Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1983), p. 553.

<sup>61</sup> Clute and Grant (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, p. 909.

dedicated to architectural magic, frequently amending their house to resemble various historical and international styles. Alice explains their aimlessness to Quentin:

You don't have to do anything. This is what you don't understand! You don't know any older magicians, except our professors. It's a wasteland out there. Out here. You can do nothing or anything or everything, and none of it matters. You have to find something to really care about to keep from running totally off the rails. A lot of magicians never find it.<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, after graduating from Brakebills Quentin and his friends have difficulty finding 'something to really care about'. Furnished with magical funds provided by Brakebills, the group spend their time drinking and hosting elaborate parties; it is only Alice who maintains her dedication to academic study. The abandonment of intellectualism is accompanied by the students' amorality – Quentin and his friends mock the religious beliefs of an acquaintance; Quentin subsequently sleeps with Janet, despite his 'monogamous' relationship with Alice. In *The Magicians*, the education which the students received at Brakebills fails to ignite any academic curiosity or moral values in the students. Instead, Quentin and most of his friends become immersed in a hedonistic lifestyle which rejects any faith in a higher meaning.

The second cycle of the students' magical journey arrives in the form of Penny, who dropped out of Brakebills before graduating. Penny meets a wandering salesman who, one unexpected day, appears with a magical button which will take the students to Fillory. Like Quentin's arrival at Brakebills, this call to quest fails to offer any deeper meaning. Just as Brakebills constitutes a threshold between fantasy and reality, the students arrive in Fillory in the middle of a forest, an established fantasy trope signifying a rite of passage.<sup>63</sup> However, like Brakebills, they discover that Fillory is particularly mundane: they cannot escape the necessity of warm clothing, their social conflicts, or the incessant ticking of a clock which permeates the forest. Furthermore, just as Brakebills signifies the dominance of rationality, so too does Fillory. While Fillory bears similarities to C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* series, Fillory's animal-gods have been dethroned, symbolising the devaluation of religious mysticism in favour of an

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<sup>62</sup> Grossman, *The Magicians*, p. 253.

<sup>63</sup> Clute and Grant (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, p. 503.



oppressive rationalism.<sup>64</sup> Of Fillory, Grossman has confessed to ‘taking a Narnia-style fantasy world and forcing it to behave consistently.’<sup>65</sup> Quentin’s second opportunity for recognition is ultimately denied. Despite his literal entry into a story, any consequent liberation is denied by the inescapability of the everyday.

During the novel’s final battle, self-realization is either subverted, impossible, or destructive. Quentin’s group of friends realise that Martin, the hero of the *Fillory and Further* series, has become the magical world’s tyrannical ruler. The youngest of the *Fillory* protagonists, Martin always resisted growing up; in *Fillory*, he has become frozen in time: ‘a middle-aged man with the mannerisms of a little English schoolboy [...] as if he’d stopped growing the moment he’d run away into [Fillory’s] forest.’<sup>66</sup> Martin wants to stay in Fillory forever and he needs the students’ teleportation device to ensure he can never be returned to Earth. During the ensuing battle, Quentin attempts to unleash his cacodemon – a demon implanted in the students’ backs during their college graduation. However, while Dean Fogg assured the students’ that each cacodemon would be ‘[a] vicious little fellow’, Quentin’s is ‘uncertain’; easily defeated, and eaten, by Martin.<sup>67</sup> Alice defeats Martin by using powerful magic, however, this power destroys all human essence, transforming her into a *niffin* – ‘a spirit of raw, uncontrolled magical energy.’<sup>68</sup>

Martin, Quentin and Alice’s experiences problematize moments of recognition in various ways. While recognition aligns characters’ realization of themselves within fantasy narratives as moments of self-awareness, Martin’s insistence that he remain in Fillory is a sign of his immaturity. Alice’s transformation also problematizes recognition. While self-awareness can project characters forward into the future, resulting in their metamorphosis into their true form, Alice’s metamorphosis leads to her destruction.<sup>69</sup> The liberation of

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<sup>64</sup> *The Magicians*, p. 426. The *Fillory* series shares *Narnia*’s sibling protagonists and anthropomorphic animal inhabitants. In Lewis’ *Narnia* series, the lion Aslan represents Christ. See Walter Hooper ed. *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 3: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950 – 1963* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 160.

<sup>65</sup> Caroline Stanley, ‘Exclusive: Time Magazine’s Lev Grossman on His New Book, *The Magicians*’, *Flavorwire*, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2009 <<http://flavorwire.com/34037/exclusive-time-magazines-lev-grossman-on-his-new-book-the-magicians>> [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> March 2018]

<sup>66</sup> Grossman, *The Magicians*, p. 431.

<sup>67</sup> *The Magicians*, p. 441.

<sup>68</sup> *The Magicians*, p. 107.

<sup>69</sup> ‘At this moment [of recognition], characters might be thought of as gazing simultaneously into the past and into the future – backwards at the BONDAGE or AMNESIA of their beginnings (when their story was still leading them INTO THE WOODS), forwards through resolutions and (perhaps)

Quentin's cacodemon particularly implicates the role of the university and rationality. Embedded during graduation, and requiring a specific 'naming' in order to be released, the failure of Quentin's cacodemon highlights Brakebills' redundancy. Not only does university fail to provide Quentin with a sense of stability, but his subsequent dedication to those principles results in his alienation.

Quentin's ultimate fate in the novel mirrors his aimless existence immediately after college. After Alice's transformation in Fillory, Quentin abandons magic and takes up a role in a consultancy firm. The position is supplied by Brakebills, requires little work and carries substantial financial benefits. While none of his colleagues are aware of his background, they assume he is sufficiently qualified because of his prestigious educational background and his white hair, which gives him a distinguished air. However, one of Quentin's colleagues knows the truth. Emily Greenstreet is also a former Brakebills student who left the magic community after a tragic accident. For Emily, magical knowledge is dangerous and shouldn't be entrusted to children. The conclusion of *The Magicians* juxtaposes knowledge with the employment opportunities which Brakebills provides. Indeed, stable employment requires no thinking; the position requires the abandonment of the magical principles Quentin learned at Brakebills.

*The Magicians* particularly depicts the relationship between Quentin's education and his failure to develop a fulfilling sense of his own identity. In Grossman's novel, Quentin's journey from ignorance to self-awareness is persistently denied, particularly by the exertion of rationality which precludes the self-awareness which are a defining feature of many fantasy stories. In *The Magicians*, rationality has become rationalization; students' educations serve to prepare them for lives of elite hedonism, or utilitarian professional roles. Fantasy tropes in *The Magicians* emphasise Quentin's embodiment of the entrepreneurial subject. Education at Brakebills results in the students' individualistic nature and subsequent lives which are devoid of meaning. Furthermore, Quentin's ultimate fate exemplifies the entwinement of contemporary higher education institutions with commodified, vocational, anti-intellectual concerns.

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METAMORPHOSIS at the MIRROR of the future which reflects their true being.' (*The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, p. 804 (original capitalization).)

### ***The Secret History: Campus Fiction, Greek Tragedy and Social Fragmentation***

*The Secret History* by Donna Tartt tells of the experiences of six Classics students at Hampden College, in Vermont. The book is narrated by Richard Papen, a new arrival who quickly becomes embroiled in the lives of five other students: Henry, Francis, twins Charles and Camilla, and Bunny, the group's second murder victim. The group of students form an elite. They are enthralled by classical, particularly Greek culture, which they learn about under the mentorship of their sole professor Julian Morrow. This fascination leads the group to attempt a bacchanal, with tragic consequences. Escaping their mortal selves, running wildly through the countryside, the group encounter a local farmer who they disembowel in a gruesome murder.

The similarities between the group's first murder and Euripides' *Bacchae* constitute just one of the references to Greek tragedy which permeate Tartt's novel. As well as shaping the events of the novel's plot, tragedy's influence can be seen in *The Secret History's* settings and characters. However, Tartt's novel also undermines the established concerns of the ancient genre. Froma I. Zeitlin has called Greek tragedy 'the epistemological form par excellence', emphasising tragedy's confidence in the unstoppable journey from ignorance to knowledge.<sup>70</sup> This stability reflects the tragedians' faith in Athenian society: tragedies were performed during public festivals, deployed institutional language, and reinforced social norms and values.<sup>71</sup> It is this kind of stability that is undermined in *The Secret History*. Tartt's novel challenges the epistemological and social certainty which formed the foundation of tragedy's concerns, instead depicting a fragmented society which resists closure. Hampden College, and the classics students, exemplify contemporary society in institutional and personified forms: in *The Secret History*, the university and its students signify social and moral corruption and instability.

The plethora of diverse intertextual references in *The Secret History* create a fragmented text which reflects the instability of contemporary society. The novel references literary works from a range of periods. *The Secret History's* plot and form are informed by

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<sup>70</sup> Froma I. Zeitlin, 'Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama', in John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (ed.), *Nothing to Do with Dionysus? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context* (Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 63-96 (p. 76.)

<sup>71</sup> See P. E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), for further discussion. In particular, see P.E. Easterling, 'A Show for Dionysus', (pp. 36-53), Simon Goldhill, 'The Language of Tragedy: Rhetoric and Communication,' (pp. 127-150), and Edith Hall, 'The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy', (pp. 93-126).

Greek tragedy and direct references to ancient works crowd Tartt's novel.<sup>72</sup> The modernist literary canon is also prominently represented by T.S. Eliot, who shares a number of characteristics with Henry and from whom Richard quotes at length.<sup>73</sup> Allusions are also made to contemporary culture – Julian is friends with movie stars and Bunny reads *The Bride of Fu Manchu*. As well as alluding to a range of periods, intertextual allusions have a range of functions within the text. Intertextual references reinforce Julian's superficiality and Bunny's anti-intellectualism, while mentions of classics texts, in particular, create a realistic academic atmosphere. These allusions support the novel's characterisation. Conversely, other references undermine readers' expectations. Richard's comparison of his own narrative to Jay Gatsby foreshadows his failure and represents a challenge to American meritocracy, just as Fitzgerald's novel indicts the American Dream.<sup>74</sup> The transposition of *The Bacchae* undermines Hampden's institutional authority: *The Bacchae*, Richard notes, depicts 'the triumph of barbarism over reason.'<sup>75</sup>

The frequency and prominence of intertextual references in *The Secret History* evokes the use of myth in Greek tragedy. In a discussion of tragedy's relationship to myth, Peter Burian argues that 'tragedy is not casually or occasionally intertextual, but always and inherently so'; 'variation in the shape and emphases both of known legendary material and of familiar formal constituents, can forcefully direct or dislocate spectators' attention, confirm, modify, or even overturn their expectations.'<sup>76</sup> Like intertextual allusions in *The Secret History*, the mythical frameworks of tragedy can fulfil, or frustrate, readers' interpretations. The use of myth also lent tragic plays cultural authority, by developing well-known stories which formed the foundation for social values.<sup>77</sup> The co-existence of mythological frameworks and contemporary values establishes a number of contrasts within Greek tragedy: between past and present; myth and reality; established traditions and

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<sup>72</sup> See Francois Pauw, 'If On a Winter's Night a Reveller'. The Classical Intertext in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (Part 1)', *Akroterion* XXXIX (1994), pp. 141-63.

<sup>73</sup> See Tracey Hargreaves, *Donna Tartt's The Secret History* (London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 56-61 for discussion of the implications of intertextual references to Eliot.

<sup>74</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 79.

<sup>75</sup> *The Secret History*, p. 43.

<sup>76</sup> Peter Burian, 'Myth into muthos: the shaping of tragic plot' in P. E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 178-208 (p. 179).

<sup>77</sup> See Burian 'Myth into muthos', p. 191.

developing social institutions.<sup>78</sup> Establishing these binaries within tragic plays enabled them as social critique, as the genre questioned the relevance of traditional principles to fifth century B.C. Athens. This social critique is frustrated in *The Secret History*. Rather than referencing a single, established, mythical canon, the numerous allusions in *The Secret History* emphasise the various systems of meaning in contemporary society: not only do Greek tragedies carry meaning, but so do contemporary and popular culture. Intertextual references in Tartt's novel constitute a complex and contradictory text which resists a stable system of binaries. This multifaceted linguistic fabric undermines the institutional and intellectual authority of *The Secret History's* university setting. Universities' epistemological stability is no longer possible in a society based upon this complex network of signifiers.

The various settings of *The Secret History* also emphasise the diversity of contemporary society. The novel moves through five distinct locales: from Richard's hometown in California, to various locations in Vermont, to Connecticut for Bunny's funeral. During his childhood in Plano, California, Richard spends listless days walking through the local mall, overcome by its commercialism and superficiality.<sup>79</sup> He believes '[his] unhappiness was indigenous to that place', concluding:

Nowhere, ever, have the hideous mechanics of birth and copulation and death – those monstrous upheavals of life that the Greeks call *miasma*, defilement, been so brutal or been painted up to look so pretty...<sup>80</sup>

While commodification and corruption are 'painted up' in Plano, the depravity of Hampden town is evident from the moment of Richard's first visit. Hampden town is particularly associated with the subversion of social values: Richard purchases clothes to falsely convey an elite status; the town's mechanics are 'a bunch of born-agains [...] but they'll shake you down pretty good if you don't keep an eye on them.'<sup>81</sup> Plano and Hampden town initially seem to contrast with Francis' idyllic country house, where the students have long dinners

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<sup>78</sup> These binaries, and their role in the generation of social values, are discussed in structuralist scholarship of Greek tragedy. See Charles Segal 'Greek Tragedy and Society: A Structuralist Perspective' in J. Peter Euben *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 43-75 for an overview of this approach.

<sup>79</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> *The Secret History*, p. 8; p. 9.

<sup>81</sup> *The Secret History*, p. 26. Richard buys a second-hand tweed jacket and 'a funny old tie that had pictures of men hunting deer on it', showing his identification with British aristocracy (*The Secret History*, pp. 26-7).

and visit the beach.<sup>82</sup> The country house provides escape from Hampden, and reality – Richard dreamily imagines an idealised future and the students toast each other proclaiming they will live forever. These memories create an atmosphere of utopian escapism, however, the house’s environs are the scene of the group’s frenzied murder, revealing it, too, to be a site of corruption and violence. At Bunny’s funeral, the students must face reality: Richard is particularly shocked to be confronted by the intensity of the Corcorans’ emotions. This setting is also contradictory, juxtaposing the Corcorans’ grief with their concern over superficial social norms and celebrity. These settings are each in their own ways sites of hypocrisy, juxtaposing contrasting values and behaviour. Furthermore, contradictions between the settings themselves emphasise contemporary society’s fragmentation.

Hampden College particularly represents the disintegration of contemporary society. The college is a microcosm of the novel’s broader social duplicitousness and disintegration. When Richard first arrives at Hampden, descriptions of the college challenge the boundary between imagination and reality: the college seems ‘like pictures in a storybook one loved as a child’; Richard disembarks from the bus and sees ‘a country from a dream,’ nights are ‘bigger than imagining’ and the clock tower is ‘spellbound in the hazy distance.’<sup>83</sup> The college community is similarly unstable: professors are old-fashioned and paranoid; the student community is dominated by cliques who communicate through gossip.<sup>84</sup> Richard’s arrival in the Greek class, a significant moment in the novel’s plot, is also shrouded in uncertainty: Richard is unable to recall the conversation which leads to Julian accepting him into the class.<sup>85</sup>

The various locations in Tartt’s novel signify specific values, mirroring the duality at the heart of the Greek word *topos*. Discussing the significance of settings in Greek tragedy, Froma I. Zeitlin has highlighted that *topos* signifies both ‘a designated place, a geographical locale, and figuratively, as a recurrent concept or formula, or what we call a

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<sup>82</sup> Richard recounts the group’s ‘happiest times’ at Francis’ country house on pp. 85-113 (*The Secret History*, p. 97).

<sup>83</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p. 10; p. 12.

<sup>84</sup> Richard works as a research assistant to Dr. Roland who has ‘a senile manner’ and whose colleague, Dr. Blind, teaches a course ‘which was noted for its monotony and virtually absolute unintelligibility’. (*The Secret History*, p. 25; p. 47). Richard hears ‘all sorts of contradictory but fascinating information’ about Julian; Georges LaFogue complains of ‘several formidable enemies in the Literature Division’. (*The Secret History*, pp. 16-17; p. 14.)

<sup>85</sup> The majority of Richard’s conversation with Julian is omitted from the novel, and Francis says something in Latin which Richard doesn’t understand. (*The Secret History*, p. 30; p. 34.)

“commonplace.”<sup>86</sup> In tragedy, the dual meaning of this term manifests in tragic settings’ symbolism – Athens signified social stability; Argos: instability; Thebes: corruption.<sup>87</sup> *Topos* encapsulates the detachment from concrete, earthbound reality towards abstract concepts, and this detachment characterises contemporary society in *The Secret History*. Moreover, Hampden College specifically evokes the setting of Thebes in Greek tragedy. Thebes is the setting of *The Secret History*’s most overt intertext, *The Bacchae*, as well as the archetypal tragic play, *Oedipus Rex*.<sup>88</sup> Vermont and Thebes also have similar mountainous landscapes, and like the group of classics students, Theban aristocracy was frequently depicted as transgressive and incestuous.<sup>89</sup> Zeitlin’s description of Thebes’ ‘towering walls and circular ramparts [which] close off and protect its physical space’ evoke the closed campus and ivory tower, so symbolic of the university.<sup>90</sup> This evocation emphasises the disintegration of the college’s social functions. Froma I. Zeitlin argues that Thebes is the location where ‘tragic action may be pushed to its furthest limits of contradiction and impasse’ – Hampden College does not provide epistemological stability, but is the site of conflict.<sup>91</sup> Zeitlin continues, arguing that Theban drama ‘can experiment with the dangerous heights of self-assertion that transgression of fixed boundaries inevitably entails.’<sup>92</sup> In *The Secret History*, the university is no longer a site of socialization, but social transgression.

This transgression is personified by the corrupt student elite around whom the novel’s tragic events revolve. The classics group is established as a social elite in *The Secret History*, a position which emphasizes the students’ social detachment. The classics group is overtly aligned with the aristocracy. Charles and Camilla’s names are shared by the British aristocracy and the title of the novel reinforces the status of the group, alluding to Procopius’

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<sup>86</sup> Froma I. Zeitlin, ‘Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama’ in J. Peter Euben (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 101-141 (p. 102).

<sup>87</sup> Zeitlin discusses these definitions in ‘Thebes: Theater of Self and Society’.

<sup>88</sup> Aristotle presents *Oedipus Rex* as the ideal tragic play in *Poetics* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 18-19.

<sup>89</sup> Francois Pauw notes topographical similarities between Thebes and Vermont in ‘The Classical Intertext in Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* (Part 1)’, p. 158; Zeitlin, highlights the nature of Theban aristocracy in ‘Thebes: Theater of Self and Society’, p. 21.

<sup>90</sup> ‘Thebes: Theater of Self and Society’, p. 121.

<sup>91</sup> Zeitlin, ‘Thebes: Theater of Self and Society’, p. 117.

<sup>92</sup> Zeitlin, ‘Thebes: Theater of Self and Society’, p. 117.

*Secret History*, a text recounting the debaucheries of Emperor Justinian of Greece.<sup>93</sup> These aristocratic references are reinforced by the students' academic environment. Richard wants to take Greek classes which his advisor, Georges Laforgue, believes to be impossible. Julian Morrow, the Greek professor, 'accepts only a limited number of students' and 'conducts the selection on a personal rather than academic basis'.<sup>94</sup> Julian's method is contrasted with Laforgue's policy for his own French classes, which is 'very democratic'.<sup>95</sup> The contrast between Julian and LaForgue is mirrored in the contrast between the classics students and the broader student body. Henry, Camilla, Charles, and Francis avoid campus parties and view themselves as superior to the other students; their own elite status is contrasted with elites of the student body – the raucous class president and vice-president, Jud and Frank. While previous works of campus fiction reinforced elites' authority, *The Secret History* depicts the elite students' downfall. Following Bunny's murder, the students descend into paranoia, alcohol dependency and psychological instability. The students' transgression of social norms also intensifies, as Charles and Camilla's incestuous relationship is revealed and Charles' jealousy of Camilla's relationship with Henry tears the group apart.<sup>96</sup> The novel concludes with Henry's death and the group's dissolution.

Like tragedy, *The Secret History* interrogates broader social travails through the behavior of an elite class. As in the mythological frameworks of classical tragedy, the elevated positions of social elites facilitate tragedy's social critique – for Aristotle, tragedies must represent 'people who are held in great esteem and enjoy great good fortune', as their downfall would be more significant for the audience.<sup>97</sup> Tragic elites were detached from the reality of the Greek polis, functioning as symbols of superior ability and morals.<sup>98</sup> The superiority of elites also reinforced an immutable set of desirable social values which remained intact in Greek tragedy, often following the exile of the tragic hero. Both Greek tragedy and *The Secret History* feature the shallow characterization of an elite class. The

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<sup>93</sup> The reference to Procopius is noted by Francois Pauw in 'The Classical Intertext in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (Part 1)', p. 142.

<sup>94</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p. 13.

<sup>95</sup> *The Secret History*, p. 13.

<sup>96</sup> Charles kisses Camilla in front of Richard on p. 511. Richard and Francis discuss the extent of their relationship, including incidences of Charles' jealousy, on pp. 513-517.

<sup>97</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 21.

<sup>98</sup> See Edith Hall, 'The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy' in P. E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, pp. 93-126 for further discussion.



classics students are detached from their social milieu and fail to develop into well-rounded individuals, instead remaining mere symbols.<sup>99</sup> This failure indicts the university: Hampden College is not the site of personal maturation and socialization.

While *The Secret History* shares tragedy's symbolic deployment of elite characters, the novel challenges the binary between the superior social position of elites and their downfall. The co-existence of the classics students, and Jud and Frank, results in a society with numerous elite groups, rather than a clear binary distinction between elite and non-elite. Furthermore, rather than superior values, the classics students signify social and psychological corruption. Already debased, there is no contrast between the students' values and their downfall; the binary established in Greek tragedy is undermined. As with the fragmentation of the contrast between myth and reality, this destabilization renders the students' downfall meaningless. The students' expulsion at the end of the novel also negates the social function of the university. In *The Secret History*, it is not an individual who is exiled, but the entire group of students. While an individual's exile at the end of tragic plays reinforced community values, exile of a group was associated with the actions of a political tyrant.<sup>100</sup> In this context, the students' exclusion results from the university's exertion of political power; rather than an institution of social cohesion, the university excludes students from society.

The duality between tyrannical restraints and personal development is particularly embodied by the group's leader, Henry Winter. Henry is an uncompromising genius whose desire to escape social confines motivates the group's disastrous behaviour. Henry is logical and rational, cultured and disciplined. Henry is also an imposing figure, orchestrating the group's plans for the bacchanal, and subsequently, Bunny's murder. Henry's control extends as far as the narrative itself: Richard realises that Henry has manipulated him throughout the novel, controlling what he sees, does and, to a certain extent, thinks.<sup>101</sup> While Henry is

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<sup>99</sup> This lack of depth was noted in contemporary reviews of *The Secret History*: in a series of articles for *The Guardian*, John Mullan noted that '[the characters] thoroughly irritated some critics, who regarded them as "cardboard" stereotypes.' John Mullan, 'The Secret History: characters', *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/feb/01/featuresreviews.guardianreview33>> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> February 2018].

<sup>100</sup> See Sara Forsdyke, *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy: The Politics of Expulsion in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 241. Zeitlin has also noted that 'Thebes is the paradigmatic home of tyrants.' See 'Thebes: Theater of Self and Society', p. 122.

<sup>101</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p. 550.

introduced as a figure of control and restraint, he yearns to free himself from the constraints of civilization, a desire which attracts him to the bacchanal. Initially, Henry's plan is a 'success': the group's committing of murder allows him 'to live without thinking', liberating him from the binds of rationalism.<sup>102</sup> However, this liberation results in the anarchic events of book 2. As Henry recedes from the narrative, the classics group disintegrates. Henry's control over the group is weakened: Richard becomes aware of his manipulation and Charles refuses to follow Henry's orders.<sup>103</sup> The novel's narrative structure also reflects the absence of Henry's manoeuvrings by following a more consistent chronology, without flashbacks and retrospective signification. The group's final confrontation at the Albermarle Hotel emphasises Henry's complete loss of control. Henry adopts a 'belligerent, bullying tone' and attempts to exert physical control over the situation. However, Charles has already shot Richard.<sup>104</sup> Henry kills himself, a last attempt to control a narrative which once again eludes his grasp: '[t]he story at the Albermarle was simple,' Richard notes, 'it told itself'.<sup>105</sup>

Like the tragic hero of Ancient Greece, Henry embodies the conflict between social constraints and individual freedom. Despite Francois Pauw asserting that *The Secret History* is 'devoid of Sophoclean tragic heroism', Henry shares many traits with the figure outlined in Bernard Knox's detailed study, *The Heroic Temper*.<sup>106</sup> Knox presents a particularly individualistic portrait of the Sophoclean hero, highlighting his detachment from society and physical superiority, traits shared by Henry.<sup>107</sup> While Knox emphasises the Sophoclean hero's responsibility for his own actions, Joel D. Schwartz's analysis of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, reveals a play concerned with 'the relationship between character and destiny, the hand of Oedipus and the hand of Apollo'.<sup>108</sup> Rather than being free, Schwartz argues that Oedipus enacts a divine plan: Oedipus' predicament is orchestrated by Apollo, yet '[n]one of Apollo's prophecies – the murder, the incest, the discovery – could have been fulfilled were it not for

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<sup>102</sup> *The Secret History*, p. 556.

<sup>103</sup> Richard realises that Henry was concerned about the police from Charles on pp. 504-509, and that Henry was incriminating Richard on pp. 523-4. Henry reveals a fight with Charles on p. 501, after which Charles becomes increasingly more erratic.

<sup>104</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p. 602.

<sup>105</sup> *The Secret History*, p. 612.

<sup>106</sup> Francois Pauw, 'If On a Winter's Night a Reveller' pp. 2-29 (p. 5); Bernard M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>107</sup> Knox, *The Heroic Temper*, p. 5.

<sup>108</sup> Joel D. Schwartz, 'Human Action and Political Action in *Oedipus Tyrannus*' in J. Peter Euben *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, pp. 183-209 (p. 188).

Oedipus' characteristic acts.<sup>109</sup> *The Secret History* undermines these divine influences, placing responsibility firmly in Henry's hands. While Henry is under the influence of Julian's teachings, Julian disappears upon discovery of the group's murder. Furthermore, while Schwartz argues that Apollo orchestrates the events of *Oedipus Rex*, this role is played out by Henry in *The Secret History*. Like Oedipus, Henry's own hand becomes a sign of his guilt and personal responsibility at Bunny's funeral.<sup>110</sup>

Rather than establishing a dichotomy between individual agency and divine control, the conclusion of Tartt's novel more fully illustrates Knox's understanding of the tragic hero's 'loyalty to the guiding principle of his life mean[ing] suffering or even death.'<sup>111</sup> Richard believes that Henry's death was 'a noble gesture, something to prove to us and to himself that it was in fact possible to put those high cold principles which Julian had taught us to use. *Duty, piety, loyalty, sacrifice.*'<sup>112</sup> Indeed, Henry's experiences demonstrate that escape from these principles is impossible; self-determination, similarly so. Henry's experiences undermine Hampden College's social function. Henry craves escape from rationalism and the assertion of individual control; his research intensifies his desire to escape epistemological stability. Furthermore, the absence of divine figures in Tartt's novel reflects the destabilization of society. While divine figures in Athenian tragedies signified the social demands of the *polis*, their absence in *The Secret History*, signifies civilization's disintegration.<sup>113</sup> Not only are Henry's attempts to exert control ultimately unsuccessful, but society lacks the stability personified by the gods in Greek tragedy.

Likewise, Richard's experiences in *The Secret History* emphasise *his* lack of control. Throughout the novel, Richard continually responds to external forces. Richard's decision to study medicine is motivated by money, which is the only way to escape his unhappy life in

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<sup>109</sup> Schwartz, 'Human Action and Political Action in *Oedipus Tyrannus*', p. 203.

<sup>110</sup> After picking up 'a handful of dirt' at Bunny's grave, '[Henry] stepped back and absently dragged the hand across his chest, smearing mud upon his lapel, his tie, the starched immaculate white of his shirt.' (*The Secret History*, p. 474). Francois Pauw argues that the gesture 'is nothing but ritual defilement, the besmirching of the suit symbolizing the uncleansed miasma of the soul.' (Pauw, 'The Classical Intertext in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (Part 2)', *Akroterian XL*, 2:29 (1995), pp. 2-29 (p. 20)). Joel D. Schwartz discusses the significance of Oedipus' hands in 'Human Action and Political Action in *Oedipus Tyrannus*', pp. 194-195.

<sup>111</sup> Knox, *The Heroic Temper*, p. 58.

<sup>112</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p. 612 (original italics).

<sup>113</sup> Schwartz, 'Human Action and Political Action in *Oedipus Tyrannus*', pp. 207-8.

Plano.<sup>114</sup> His decision to go to Hampden occurs by chance and his initial meeting with Charles, Camilla, Bunny and Henry is, similarly, ‘a curious coincidence’.<sup>115</sup> Richard’s personal instability is further reflected in his own inventions and deceptions regarding his childhood: he lacks a defined identity.<sup>116</sup> From these early, hapless experiences, Richard falls under the spell of the classics students. The group ‘incorporate [Richard] into their Byzantine existence’, and Richard’s passivity is further reflected in the unquestioning loyalty which follows his discovery of the group’s murder:

I suppose it would be interesting to say that at this point I felt torn in some way, grappled with the moral implications of each of the courses available to me. But I don’t recall experiencing anything of the sort. I put on a pair of loafers and went downstairs to call Henry.<sup>117</sup>

During the disarray of Book 2, Richard attempts to keep the group together, however, he is ultimately unsuccessful and unable to prevent the novel’s fatal conclusion. *The Secret History*’s narrative further illustrates Richard’s lack of control: despite the fact that ‘[t]his is the only story [he] will ever be able to tell’, Richard remains unable to exert authority and create a stable narrative from the events at Hampden. Despite his reactive nature, Richard considers himself a tragic hero – he muses on his ‘fatal flaw’ and considers himself ‘tainted’.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, it is Richard’s experiences which illustrate Aristotle’s definition of the tragic plot structure of *desis* and *lusis*.<sup>119</sup> Throughout Tartt’s novel, Richard’s experiences align higher education with exposure to an unstable society, rather than a period of individual empowerment.

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<sup>114</sup> *The Secret History*, p. 8.

<sup>115</sup> *The Secret History*, p. 19.

<sup>116</sup> Richard especially lies about the school he attended, for which Bunny mocks him on pp. 246-249.

<sup>117</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p. 93; p. 277.

<sup>118</sup> *The Secret History*, p. 5; p. 6.

<sup>119</sup> Froma I. Zeitlin defines *desis* and *lusis* as ‘binding’ and ‘unbinding’, respectively. Zeitlin outlines the relevance of these terms:

the tragic world works its ruinous effects through modes of entrapment and entanglement which cause characters first to stumble through ignorance and error and then to fall. In the elaborate tragic game, the metaphoric patterns of binding and unbinding continually exhibit reciprocal tension; signs of constraint and necessity, on the one hand, and of dissolution and death, on the other, define the parameters between which characters are caught in the “double bind.” (Froma I. Zeitlin, ‘Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama’ in John J Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin, *Nothing to Do with Dionysus? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context* (Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 63-96 (p. 78.))

However, unlike Henry, Richard's experiences are firmly beyond his control. Richard's prominent passivity evokes the Aeschylean hero, presented by Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet as evidence for the tragedians' complex understanding of personal agency. While the Sophoclean hero's downfall is due to his own integrity, the Aeschylean hero is fundamentally reactive: '[t]he action does not emanate from the agent as from its source; rather, it envelops him and carries him away'.<sup>120</sup> However, while Vernant and Vidal-Naquet assert that Aeschylus emphasises the demands placed upon the tragic hero, personal choice is by no means disregarded. Faced with the need to act, the Aeschylean hero reflects and considers his options; '[decisions are] taken after an internal debate, a considered deliberation as a result of which the final decision takes root in the soul of the protagonist.'<sup>121</sup> This contradiction between individual agency and divine machinations constitute the fundamental conflict of the tragedians' conception of free will:

Thus in Aeschylus the tragic decision is rooted in two types of reality, on the one hand *ēthos*, characters, and on the other *daimōn*, divine power. Since the origin of action lies both in man himself and outside him, the same character appears now as an agent, the cause and source of his actions, and now as acted upon, engulfed in a force that is beyond him and sweeps him away.<sup>122</sup>

Vernant and Vidal-Naquet identify this fundamental tension at the heart of Aeschylean drama, however, such tension is absent from Richard's experiences of higher education in *The Secret History*. Unlike the Aeschylean hero, Richard asks no such questions of the students, he fails to exert even this limited personal choice. Furthermore, Richard is not the victim of divine power, but manipulated by Henry through flattery; divine forces are reduced to human manipulations. As with Henry, Richard's university education does not enable his development of individual agency, indicting the university's role in developing and empowering students. The university's pedagogical function is also challenged. As Vernant and Vidal-Naquet note of the tragic hero, '[b]ecause his actions take place within a temporal order over which he has no control and to which he must submit passively, his actions elude

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<sup>120</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, (Massachusetts: Zone Books, 1998), p. 63.

<sup>121</sup> *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, p. 51.

<sup>122</sup> Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, p. 77.

him; they are beyond his understanding.<sup>123</sup> Despite his time at Hampden College, Richard is unable to understand the events of the novel. Such awareness is undermined throughout *The Secret History*. While tragedies maintained confidence in stable social principles by imparting moral lessons, this didacticism is rejected in Tartt's novel.

*The Secret History's* conclusion rejects Greek tragedy's potential for moralization. The novel itself is evidence that Richard has not learned Henry's lesson: Richard is unable to control the narrative, as Henry himself did. Richard has been unable to put the 'high cold principles' to use – he remains embroiled and emotionally engaged. The conclusion of the novel emphasises Richard's uncertainty: after meeting Henry in an enigmatic dream, Richard remains stranded in a liminal dreamworld. *The Secret History* resists the closure offered by catharsis at the end of tragic plays. For Aristotle, tragedies' arousal of pity and fear led to their purification in the audience.<sup>124</sup> In order to feel pity, the audience must believe that characters' suffering is genuine, serious, and undeserved. Tragedy's audience must also feel vulnerable to the threat depicted in the play, which causes fear. For Aristotle, these genuine emotions rely on a stable belief system, which rationalises and justifies the feelings of pity and fear. In *The Secret History*, Richard is unable to experience these emotions. While the events which befall the students are genuine and serious, they are not undeserved: the students' murders and Henry's control over events emphasise the students' own responsibility for their fates. Furthermore, Richard lacks the stable moral code which forms the foundation of legitimate emotion: he 'watched [Bunny's murder] happen quite calmly – without fear, without pity, without anything but a stunned curiosity'.<sup>125</sup>

### **Conclusion: Literary Genres in the Contemporary American Campus Novel**

The relationship between the contemporary campus novel and crime, fantasy, and Greek tragedy reveals three distinct engagement with literary genre in contemporary American campus fiction. Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams' *S. jostles* between various sub-genres of crime fiction. The novel features the prominent textual instability of metaphysical detective fiction;

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<sup>123</sup> *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, p. 82.

<sup>124</sup> Aristotle mentions catharsis in *Poetics*, p. 10. The conditions outlined here are derived from Martha C. Nussbaum's discussion of catharsis in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 383-7.

<sup>125</sup> Tartt, *The Secret History*, p. 310.

the genius detective and isolated setting typical of detective fiction; and isolated protagonists and institutional corruption which are recognisable tropes from noir fiction. This novel shares the broader concerns of each genre: metaphysical detective fiction's institutional destabilization, the institutional corruption of noir and detective fiction's dedication to rationality, in particular. While *S.* exhibits an uncomfortable relationship with crime fiction, a more antagonistic association is evident in Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*. *The Magicians* rejects the possibility for socialization and personal development; fantasy worlds are incorporated within 'realities' dominated by uncertainty and mundane concerns. Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* prominently engages with tropes and themes derived from Greek Tragedy, however, the novel exhibits a more ambiguous relationship – the thematic use of setting, elite characters and the concern with personal agency are illustrated in Tartt's work, while *The Secret History* rejects the fixed mythical frameworks, divine figures, individual awareness and catharsis which are prominent features of Greek tragedy.

According to Ralph Cohen in 'Genre Theory, Literary History, and Historical Change', this challenge to established genres is symptomatic of contemporary texts' relationship with genre. Cohen highlights that '[m]embers of a genre add, vary, modify, or abandon constituents so that the genre is modified by additional instances.'<sup>126</sup> Such work 'undermine[s] the assumptions of objectivity of received critical and theoretical genres.'<sup>127</sup> The body of work that Cohen discusses fragments the immutable hermeneutic frame established by E.D. Hirsch. These novels threaten the epistemological stability which is fundamental to Hirsch's work: they deny readers' expectations and reject the possibility of a single, 'correct' interpretation. The subversions from tragedy's established form in *The Secret History* are similarly consistent with Ralph Cohen's discussion of contemporary genre: Tartt's subversion of Greek tragedy challenges authoritative institutions and ideologies. In particular, deviations from Greek tragedy in *The Secret History* directly challenge the university and the dominance of rationalism. In *The Secret History*, the university is not a source of enlightenment or wisdom; Hampden College fails in its pedagogical function, with students abandoned and isolated at the novel's conclusion.

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<sup>126</sup> Ralph Cohen, 'Genre Theory, Literary History, and Historical Change' in David Perkins ed. *Theoretical Issues in Literary History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 85-113 (p. 88).

<sup>127</sup> Cohen, 'Genre Theory, Literary History, and Historical Change', p. 90.

The use of genre in these works is contradictory. Cohen emphasises the political motivations for contemporary novels' modifications of established genres: alterations undermine dominant modes of interpretation, and Cohen particularly highlights that such rebellion is valuable to Marxist, feminist and African American scholars and novelists.<sup>128</sup> While undermining the institutional relevance of the university on a textual level, the subversion of literary genres reinforces the political significance of the campus fiction genre, and one of its primary concerns – the university.

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<sup>128</sup> Cohen, 'Genre Theory, Literary History, and Historical Change', p. 88.





## Chapter 2: Narrative

Ian Carter has identified a 'lack of formal ambition' in British university fiction, however, contemporary American campus novels deploy a range of complex narrative structures and stylistic devices.<sup>1</sup> The narratives of contemporary campus novels are increasingly complex when compared with the genre's earlier incarnations. In novels of the nineteenth century, a realistic narrative style was employed to support the genre's didactic ambitions, a pedagogical function which was further reinforced by the use of nostalgic narrative flashbacks to emphasise the persistent relevance of university principles throughout students' lives. This narrative consistency has largely been abandoned. Mirroring both modernist and postmodernist challenges to the mimetic and didactic functions of literature, campus novels have adopted increasingly unstable narrative forms: texts incorporate a variety of narrative arcs, adopt a variety of narrative perspectives, and frequently abandon chronological consistency.

This narratological complexity resists analysis using a fixed theoretical framework such as defined by Gerard Genette's influential *Narrative Discourse*.<sup>2</sup> Genette clearly outlines the objective of his study of narrative – he aims to 'see clearly this area [of narratology]'; carry out 'a study of relationships'; and, throughout his work, seeks 'to avoid confusion and semantic difficulties' by distinguishing and naming various aspects of narrative.<sup>3</sup> As Jonathan Culler lauds in his introduction to Genette's work, 'Gerard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* is invaluable because it fills this need for a systematic theory of narrative.'<sup>4</sup> However, a prevalent concern of contemporary campus texts is the problematization of 'subjecthood' and any associated stable sense of identity. Furthermore, the textual surfaces of these novels are frequently self-contradictory, undermining previously established identities, priorities,

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Ancient Cultures of Conceit*, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Genette is called 'one of the most influential theorists of narratology' in Mciver, Mia L., 'Genette, Gérard' in Michael Ryan (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011) Online: [https://search-credoreference-com.gold.idm.oclc.org/content/entry/wileylitcul/genette\\_g%C3%A9rard/0?institutionId=1872](https://search-credoreference-com.gold.idm.oclc.org/content/entry/wileylitcul/genette_g%C3%A9rard/0?institutionId=1872). [accessed 02 Dec. 2020.] Genette's terminology can also be found naming chapters in David Herman (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 25; p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 7.

and values. This complexity resists analysis using a fixed framework such as defined by Genette. Rather, the experimentation and intricacy throughout contemporary campus novels justifies Andrew Gibson's work in *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*. In previous narrative theory such as Genette's, Gibson laments that 'boundaries [...] are clearly defined and categories clearly distinguished.'<sup>5</sup> For Gibson, however, this 'mental space of classical kinds of thought [...] is rapidly beginning to look obsolescent.'<sup>6</sup> Using 'terms culled from a range of works by contemporary critical theorists', Gibson attempts to deconstruct narratology, using postmodern philosophical terms 'as a means of destabilising a given system or interrogating its boundaries.'<sup>7</sup> Following Gibson, this chapter analyses the narratives of three contemporary campus novels using three disparate philosophical frameworks which illuminate the relationship between the novels' narrative form and the neoliberal university.

The three philosophers discussed in this chapter are seminal figures of the postmodern movement who placed consideration of neoliberalism within broader critiques of modernity. Michel Foucault's critique of neoliberalism in a series of lectures in 1979 contextualise the system within the philosopher's broader critique of liberal humanism, institutionalisation, and the relationship between power and knowledge. Just as Foucault depicted modernity as a shift in the exertion of forms of power, so too is neoliberalism presented as a continuation of this process, albeit one wherein the rationale for government has changed, and the mechanics of oppression have multiplied. Similarly, Jean-Francois Lyotard aligns capitalism and neoliberalism with the grand narratives of modernity which were the subject of persistent critique throughout his work. In particular, Lyotard highlights the fate of individual subjectivity within these narratives, presenting a perspective wherein individuals are persistently excluded to enable the 'objective' and reassuring narratives upon which modernity relies. Jean Baudrillard's characterisation of postmodern society includes several features which have come to be definitive of neoliberalism. Baudrillard's discussion of speed and fragmentation resulting in a loss of criticality, is particularly definitive of the social context of the neoliberal university in contemporary America. As the conclusion to this

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Gibson *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Gibson, *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Gibson, *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*, p. 25; pp. 25-6.

chapter discusses, the works of Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard offer key contexts through which to consider and critique the role of neoliberalism in contemporary society, refuting concerns of postmodern apoliticism.

The narrative devices of the novels discussed in this chapter engage with universities' relationship to institutional power, personal subjectivity, and social cohesion. In its persisting framing by Shakespearean drama, M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* (2017) interrogates the oppressive function of academic discourse in contemporary society. Considered through the work of Michel Foucault, the narrative and form of Rio's work reflects the exertion of institutional power, as well as the extent to which this influence is self-defeating and detaches students' educations from their later lives. In Christopher Yates' *Black Chalk* (2013), the influence of the university in the post-university life of its student-protagonist, Jolyon, is emphasised: Jolyon's time at University of Oxford has rendered him a mindless automaton. However, the complex chronology and form in Yates' novel offers artistic production as a method of counteracting this oppressive education. *Black Chalk* depicts several concerns articulated by Jean-Francois Lyotard, particularly the extent to which Enlightenment conceptions of progress – of which the university is an institutional representative – exclude personal agency, and the extent to which literature itself can challenge these oppressive narratives. While *If We Were Villains* and *Black Chalk's* narratives interact with specific concerns of these canonical philosophers, Bret Easton Ellis' *The Rules of Attraction* (1987) fully embodies the conditions of contemporary American society as described by Jean Baudrillard. In Ellis' work, the persistent first-person narration and fragmented chronology reflect the novel's broader social fragmentation, precluding critical engagement. Whether interrogating the social function of discourse, the relationship between narrative and social progress, or the fragmentation of contemporary society, the narrative devices of all of these novels challenge the institutional authority of American colleges, while depicting students who are either trapped within, or adrift of, contemporary society.

### ***If We Were Villains: Academic Discourse as Institutional Critique***

Analysis of the narrative devices of *If We Were Villains* through a Foucauldian lens reveals how in this novel institutional discourse becomes a means by which individuals are oppressed. In M. L. Rio's work, the pervasiveness of dramatic form, plots and dialogue is apt

for the Dellecher Conservatory, an institution which solely teaches the drama-student protagonists Shakespearean plays. However, allusions to Shakespearean form also reveal the students' entrapment within canonical literary discourse: elements of drama, such as acts and scenes and dramatic dialogue, serve to confine and delineate students' experiences and agency. Furthermore, the dominance of dramatic form undermines the significance of elements of the novel presented in prose, in particular the novels' Prologues and Epilogue, the sections which depict the fates of the students after college. In this way, personal development is not one of the concerns of the Dellecher Conservatory. The significance of William Shakespeare in Rio's novel also highlights the extent to which neoliberalism presents a direct challenge to the liberal humanist tradition, of which Shakespeare is emblematic.

This novel particularly engages with the oppressive institutional role which Michel Foucault identifies within neoliberalism. Cited in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* as 'arguably the most influential European writer and thinker of the second half of the twentieth century', Foucault's own critiques of neoliberalism particularly focus on the changing mechanics of institutional power.<sup>8</sup> When deploying a Foucauldian frame in order to analyse the welfare state under neoliberalism, Michael A. Peters reveals the key benefits of a Foucauldian approach. Firstly, Foucault's work enables Peters 'to reconfigure [neoliberalism] as a form of governmentality with an emphasis on the question of *how* power is exercised.'<sup>9</sup> Secondly, Foucault's work centralises the relationship between the individual and institutions, in particular 'the active reconstruction of the relation between government and self-government.'<sup>10</sup> As well as these structural mechanics, Peters argues that Foucault's discussion of neoliberalism highlights its historical contingencies: Foucault 'proposes an investigation of neoliberalism as an intensification of an economy of moral regulation first developed by liberals' while also 'enabl[ing] an understanding of the distinctive features of neoliberalism.'<sup>11</sup> The Shakespearean allusions in *If We Were Villains* operate in these ways in

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<sup>8</sup> Vincent B. Leitch et al. ed. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 1615. See Gary Gutting, 'Introduction, Michel Foucault: A User's Manual' in Gary Gutting ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), for discussion of the difficulties deploying a so-called 'Foucauldian' approach.

<sup>9</sup> Michael A. Peters, *Poststructuralism, Marxism, and Neoliberalism: Between Theory and Politics* (Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001) p. 73 (original italics).

<sup>10</sup> Peters, *Poststructuralism, Marxism, and Neoliberalism*, p. 73.

<sup>11</sup> *Poststructuralism, Marxism, and Neoliberalism*, p. 73.

Rio's work – they exemplify mechanics of institutional control; provide a frame wherein the experiences of students can be discerned; and provide an avenue through which to consider the challenge to liberal institutions mounted by neoliberalism.

The form of *If We Were Villains* illustrates the extent to which Dellecher's Shakespearean focus determines the narrative arc of the text. Rio's novel is divided into five acts, with between seven and eighteen scenes per act. Mirroring the five-act structure shared by Shakespearean plays, the novel similarly follows a recognisable narrative arc.<sup>12</sup> The first act introduces the students as protagonists and provides background information, while the second act depicts the intensification of tension between Richard and his friends. The climax appears in the third act, during which the other students leave Richard to drown in a lake. James' behaviour deteriorates in the fourth act and Oliver begins to find clues which suggest foul play; the final catastrophe occurs in act five, during which Oliver takes responsibility for Richard's murder. As well as dividing the text into its constituent parts, the use of Acts and Scenes also determines the events within each Act, each scene.

A similar defining function is performed by the narrative foreshadowing provided by Shakespearean plays throughout Rio's work. The plays which the students perform are strictly delineated at Dellecher – Shakespearean comedies are performed by third year students; tragedies are reserved for the final year protagonists of Rio's novel. In this way, the students' specialism foreshadows the tragic events of the text. Indeed, the students' acts are further prefigured by the plays in which they are performing. At the beginning of the novel, the students are staging a performance of *Julius Caesar* – it is Richard who plays Caesar; like Caesar, it is Richard who is murdered by his peers. When Richard repeatedly injures James and Meredith during rehearsals, the boundary between the play and the students' realities blurs even further:

“Listen,” [Alexander] said, “Richard can't fight off all three of us at once. Tomorrow, if he tries anything, instead of assassination we give him a righteous ass-kicking.”

“Here is my hand,” James said, after a split second's hesitation. “The deed is worthy doing.”

I hesitated also, a split second longer. “And so say I.”

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<sup>12</sup> The narrative arc noted here is derived from Gustav Freytag, *Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1900).

Alexander squeezed my arm. “*And I and now we three have spoke it, let the stupid bastard do his worst.*”<sup>13</sup>

Here, Alexander, James and Oliver – performing the roles of Cassius, Brutus and Casca – conspire against Richard – Caesar. A similar destabilisation is exemplified during the performances of *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* – James and Oliver’s roles as Macbeth and Banquo prefigure James’ murder of Richard, and Oliver’s role as his accomplice; it is James and Wren’s performances as Romeo and Juliet which reveal their romantic connection to Oliver. At the end of the novel, the students are performing *King Lear*, a play preoccupied with the psychological instability which similarly characterises the students’ final days. Throughout the novel, the experiences of the students are explicitly defined by the very plays they are performing.

The erasure of students’ personal agency is further highlighted by the novel’s dialogue. The novel shifts between prose and dramatic presentation of dialogue. For example, when the students discuss their next course of action after allowing Richard to drown:

Filippa: “We need to decide what to tell the police about what happened.”

Alexander: “To him? Who knows. I don’t even know where I was half the night.”

Meredith: “You can’t say that. Someone’s dead and you don’t know where you were?”

Me: “Jesus, it’s not like one of us did this.”

Filippa: “No, of course not—”

Me: “He was drunk. He drank himself blind and went crashing into the woods.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite the use of punctuation to indicate speech, this section is a particularly sparse example of dramatic dialogue – there are no reporting verbs, nor stage directions to define the students’ actions or psychological states. While the dramatic structure and Shakespearean foreshadowing perform a definitive function, the dramatic dialogue is particularly exclusionary.

The formal elements of drama which define the structure of Rio’s work highlight the extent to which the institutionalized discourse of the Dellecher Conservatory serves an oppressive function. The division of Rio’s novel into Acts and Scenes evokes a narrative arc

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<sup>13</sup> M.L. Rio, *If We Were Villians* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2017 [Apple Books Edition]), p. 159.

<sup>14</sup> Rio, *If We Were Villians*, p. 214

which undermines the students' personal development. Rio's novel illustrates the *desis* and *lusis* of Aristotlean tragedy; the 'strife and counter-strife, rising and sinking' by which Gustav Freytag defines dramatic structure.<sup>15</sup> Discussion of dramatic structure, and its implications, were significant considerations in the formalist approach deployed in Freytag's *Technique of the Drama* (1863). For Freytag, it is the structure of a drama which reveals 'the accomplishment of a deed and its reaction on the soul' – the use of acts and scenes to delineate sections of Rio's text evokes a form wherein structure mediates the relationship between an individual's actions and their consequences. Furthermore, the specific plot trajectory evoked by *If We Were Villains* is one wherein characters' agency is established, only to be undermined. Illustrating one type of dramatic structure Freytag discusses, the opening sections of *If We Were Villains* depicts Oliver 'strid[ing] victoriously forward to an unrestrained exhibition of his life [...] working from within outward, changing by [his] own force the life relations in which he came upon the stage.'<sup>16</sup> 'From the climax on,' Freytag continues:

[...] what he has done reacts upon himself and gains power over him; the external world, which he conquered in the rise of passionate conflict, now stands in the strife above him. This adverse influence becomes continually more powerful and victorious, until at last in the final catastrophe, it compels the hero to succumb to its irresistible force.<sup>17</sup>

By dividing the novel into acts and scenes, *If We Were Villains* evokes a dramatic form wherein structure has a particularly influential role and wherein the hero's agency is ultimately denied. The overarching structure of *If We Were Villains* leads Oliver to ruin; the institutionalised division of *If We Were Villains* determines the students' detachment from wider society.

The use of dramatic dialogue in *If We Were Villains* operates in a similar way. In *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), Percy Lubbock's discussion of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* includes the delineation between two distinct forms of narration which relate to the dramatic and prose dialogue in *If We Were Villains*. Particularly pertinent is the distinction between scenes

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<sup>15</sup> Freytag, *Technique of the Drama*, p. 104.

<sup>16</sup> *Technique of the Drama*, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> *Technique of the Drama*, p. 106.



which are 'pictorially treated' and those which are represented 'dramatically'.<sup>18</sup> Pictorial treatment includes 'the reflection of events in the mirror of somebody's receptive consciousness', whether a character or an extradiegetic narrator.<sup>19</sup> The significance of events treated pictorially is characters' responses or considerations, which cannot be represented in drama:

[...] if you took the dialogue, what there is of it, together with the actual things described, the people and the dresses and the dances and the banquets—took these and placed them on the stage, for a theatrical performance, the peculiar effect of the occasion in the book would totally vanish.<sup>20</sup>

Conversely, during scenes treated dramatically, 'the reader has only to see and hear, to be present while the hour passes'.<sup>21</sup> In the exemplary scenes from *Madame Bovary* which Lubbock discusses, 'Emma's mood counts for very little, and we get a direct view of the things on which her eyes casually rest.'<sup>22</sup> Lubbock's discussion illuminates the operation of dramatic dialogue in *If We Were Villains*. When characters' words are presented in dramatic form, their thoughts and responses are insignificant; attention is paid to only their actions, their words. Like the dramatic structure which defines Rio's work, dramatic dialogue serves an exclusionary role, excluding the students' subjectivity.

The operation of institutionalized discourse in *If We Were Villains* aligns with the mechanics of neoliberal institutional control identified by Michel Foucault. Foucault's conception of the exertion of neoliberal institutional power relies upon the theory of governmentality outlined in an earlier lecture of the same name.<sup>23</sup> In this work, Foucault juxtaposes sovereign forms of power with governmentality or 'the art of government'.<sup>24</sup> A key distinction between the two is the split between rationale and implementation. Under sovereign forms of power, Foucault identifies a 'self-referring circularity of sovereignty and principality': 'what characterizes the end of sovereignty, this common and general good, is in

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<sup>18</sup> Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1921), p. 70; p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup> *The Craft of Fiction*, pp. 75-6.

<sup>21</sup> *The Craft of Fiction*, p. 71.

<sup>22</sup> *The Craft of Fiction*, p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> See Michel Foucault, 'Governmentality' in Graham Burchell et al. (ed.) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality with Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 87-104.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, 'Governmentality', p. 87.

sum nothing other than submission to sovereignty.<sup>25</sup> Governmentality, conversely, contains what David Burchell has defined as 'its own distinctive form of internal political reason (reason of state), and [...] a kind of science (police).'<sup>26</sup> In the particularly neoliberal form of governmentality which Foucault defines, the split which is evident in liberal forms of governmentality is accompanied by increasing attention paid towards the 'science' of government, its external mechanics. Foucauldian neoliberalism, Thomas Lemke highlights, 'focuses not on the players, but on the rules of the game, not on the (inner) subjugation of individuals, but on defining and controlling their (outer) environment.'<sup>27</sup> This consideration is illustrated in *If We Were Villains* in two key ways. Firstly, the dramatic form of the novel constitutes an external frame which defines the experiences of the students in the novel and at college. Secondly, dramatic dialogue represents the actions of students, shifting institutional attention away from their thoughts and individual subjectivity.

The extent to which neoliberal institutions create an external, confining environment does not preclude the mechanics of individual control. Under forms of governmental control:

[...] the finality of government resides in the things it manages and in the pursuit of the perfection and intensification of the processes which it directs; and the instruments of government, instead of being laws, now come to be a range of multiform tactics.<sup>28</sup>

Here, Foucault highlights the remaining significance of individuals within governmental forms of control. Rather than self-referential sovereign power, governmentality requires the performance of the specific values which are defined by governmental institutions. This significance is particularly emphasized in *If We Were Villains* – the students are drama students who enact the Shakespearean plays, both upon and off the stage. Foucault also highlights an *expansion* of the 'multiform tactics' by which neoliberal economized behavior is enforced. Returning to Foucault's lectures on neo-liberalism, Thomas Lemke highlights the different functions of neoliberal governmentality:

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<sup>25</sup> 'Governmentality', p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> David Burchell, "'Liberalism' and Government: Political Philosophy and the Liberal Art of Rule' in Clare O'Farrell (ed.) *Foucault: The Legacy* (Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology, 1997), pp. 374-84 (p. 375).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Lemke, "The birth of bio-politics': Michel Foucault's lecture at the Collège de France of neo-liberal governmentality', *Economy and Society*, 30:2 (2001), pp. 190-207 (p. 200).

<sup>28</sup> Foucault, 'Governmentality', p. 95.

[...] the state in the neo-liberal model not only retains its traditional functions, but also takes on new tasks and functions. The neo-liberal forms of government feature not only direct intervention by means of empowered and specialized state apparatuses, but also characteristically develop indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them.<sup>29</sup>

The plethora of techniques Foucault identifies here evoke the deployment of institutional discourse throughout *If We Were Villains*. Shakespearean discourse serves to define the structure of the novel, the speech of the students, their actions and thoughts. In this way, the direct influence of institutional control is ambiguous, allowing for a withdrawal of institutional responsibility.

Shakespearean discourse of *If We Were Villains* also illustrates the mechanics by which individual students are controlled by institutional power. The students' quotation of Shakespearean dialogue juxtaposes their thoughts with Shakespeare's works. Even when not performing, the students frequently quote various Shakespearean works. After the students perform *Julius Caesar's* violent assassination scene, Richard, Oliver, James and Alexander 'relaxed into the text again, as if nothing unusual had happened'; as James is struggling with his guilt over Richard's death, he retreats further and further into Shakespearean dialogue, confessing that '[i]t's easier now to be Romeo, Macbeth, or Brutus, or Edmund. Someone else.'<sup>30</sup> While Oliver asserts that 'speaking someone else's words as if they are your own is [...] a desperate lunge at mutual understanding', the students in fact retreat into Shakespearean dialogue in order to escape their traumatic realities.<sup>31</sup> The way the students engage with Shakespearean dialogue introduces a juxtaposition between Shakespeare's words and the thoughts of the students. As James highlights, recounting Shakespeare's words allows the students to escape the reality of their lives.

The narrative structure of *If We Were Villains* also undermines the relevance of college education in the lives of the students. In the present, confined to the Prologues of each act, Oliver recounts his experiences to the investigating officer, Joseph Colborne. On the novel's first page, it is revealed that Oliver has been in prison and Colborne believes that he is innocent. In the prologue to the second act, the fates of the other students are revealed –

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<sup>29</sup> Lemke, 'The birth of bio-politics', p. 201.

<sup>30</sup> Rio, *If We Were Villains*, p. 394.

<sup>31</sup> *If We Were Villains*, p. 160.

Meredith is working in TV; Alexander in 'immersive' theatre; Filippa remains at Dellecher as a teacher.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Filippa's relationship with Milo is revealed in the Prologues, although no indication is evident during her time as a student. The novel's prologues are clearly demarcated from the main portions of the text. Oliver's recollections are formally distinct – they eschew the dramatic form of the majority of the novel – while also chronologically distinct – they are ten years after the action in the main narrative has ended. In this way, *If We Were Villains* emphasises the detachment of the university, in the past, from the present lives of the students.

The novel's epilogue further undermines the role to be played by the Dellecher Conservatory in the personal development of its students. The Epilogue depicts the end of Oliver's conversation with Colborne. During this conversation, Colborne asks Oliver about his plans for the future and Oliver reveals that his only desire is to see James. At this point, Filippa reveals James' death, four years' prior. It is this information which is crucial for the events of the novel, as Oliver reflects:

For the first time in ten years, I look at the chair that had always been Richard's and find it isn't empty. There he sits, in lounging, leonine arrogance. He watches me with a razor-thin smile and I realize that this is it—the *dénouement*, the counterstroke, the end-all he was waiting for. He lingers only long enough for me to see the gleam of triumph in his half-lidded eyes; then he, too, is gone.<sup>33</sup>

As Oliver remarks, the ultimate climax of *If We Were Villains* is depicted in the novel's Epilogue – James' death is Richard's ultimate triumph. It is this event which supplies the catharsis which constitutes the emotional message and ultimate lesson of tragic plays. In *If We Were Villains*, this epistemological clarity is provided not by the university, but in the present; it is Oliver's recollections which help Colborne to 'make sense of' the students' experiences.<sup>34</sup> By shifting catharsis into the present, and detaching it from Oliver's time at Dellecher, the novel's ultimate educational content is distinctly delineated from the Dellecher Conservatory.

The experiences of the students that are not presented in the Shakespearean form that dominates *If We Were Villains* undermines the subjectivity of the novel's students. The

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<sup>32</sup> Rio, *If We Were Villains*, p. 126.

<sup>33</sup> Rio, *If We Were Villains*, p. 510.

<sup>34</sup> *If We Were Villains*, p. 138.

juxtaposition of the students' words with canonical literature particularly evokes the dichotomy of primary and commentary discourses discussed by Foucault. Shakespeare's work exemplifies 'discourses which, over and above their formulation, are said indefinitely, remain said, and are said again'; contrastingly, the students' are words which 'are said in the ordinary course of days and exchanges, and which vanish as soon as they have been pronounced'.<sup>35</sup> Already, these definitions emphasise the transitory nature of the students' dialogue. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of these discourses reinforces the authority of the primary discourse and destabilises their commentaries:

Commentary exorcises the chance element of discourse by giving it its due; it allows us to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is this text itself which is said, and in a sense completed. The open multiplicity, the element of chance, are transferred, by the principle of commentary, from what might risk being said, on to the number, the form, the mask, and the circumstances of the repetition.<sup>36</sup>

In *If We Were Villains*, the juxtaposition of the students' words with the canonical work of Shakespeare shifts the contingency – chance element – to their own interpretations; when compared with the immortal words of Shakespeare, the students' contemporary utterances are fallible.

The novel's prologues and epilogue exemplify the ambiguity which defines the Dellecher Conservatory's role in *If We Were Villains*. The prologues conflict with the literary form of the majority of the novel – the Shakespearean drama. As such, they fail to conform to the rules of the novel's governing discipline – the Prologues do not 'use conceptual or technical instruments of a well-defined type', which Foucault argues is one of the conditions for belonging to a discipline.<sup>37</sup> Not only does the discipline define the form of discourse but it also defines what is included in discourse itself, as Foucault explains:

Within its own limits, each discipline recognises true and false propositions; but it pushes back a whole teratology of knowledge beyond its margins. [...] In short, a proposition must fulfil complex and heavy requirements to be able to belong to the

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<sup>35</sup> Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', p. 57.

<sup>36</sup> 'The Order of Discourse', p. 58.

<sup>37</sup> 'The Order of Discourse', p. 60.

grouping of a discipline; before it can be called true or false, it must be 'in the true', as Canguilhem would say.<sup>38</sup>

Inhabiting the prologues and epilogue, the post-university lives of the students, their personal development, and the ultimate meaning of Oliver's education is excluded from the institutional discipline and the behaviour endorsed by the institution.

The prologue and epilogue of *If We Were Villains*, as well as the use of Shakespearean dialogue, emphasise the extent to which the individual subjectivity of the students is excluded from Dellecher's institutional concerns. In Foucault's terms, these narrative devices illustrate the expulsion of the rational subject as 'the *basis of government*.'<sup>39</sup> Under liberal forms of governmentality, Foucault argues that individual freedom must be guaranteed in order to enable governance; however, neo-liberalism places the entrepreneurial subject at its heart:

Now, neo-liberalism admittedly ties the rationality of the government to the rational action of individuals; however, its point of reference is no longer some pre-given human nature, but an artificially created form of behaviour. Neo-liberalism no longer locates the rational principle for regulating and limiting the action of government in a natural freedom that we should all respect, but instead it posits an artificially arranged liberty: in the entrepreneurial and competitive behaviour of economic-rational individuals.<sup>40</sup>

Here, Foucault identifies two mechanics: the rational subject is excluded from institutional concerns; its place is taken by an unstable and 'artificially created form of behaviour'. Both of these mechanics are evoked by the narrative device of *If We Were Villains*. The personal development and literal emancipation of individuals are depicted in the novel's prologues, outside of the institutional concerns of the Shakespearean discipline; additionally, the use of Shakespearean dialogue emphasises the extent to which institutionally-endorsed behaviour is a fictional construction, juxtaposed with the individual concerns of each student.

The changing significance of William Shakespeare himself reveals the fundamental challenge to the university institution under neoliberalism. In *The Genius of Shakespeare*,

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<sup>38</sup> Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', p. 60. Foucault refers here to Georges Canguilhem (1904-1995); see Samuel Talcott, 'Georges Canguilhem' in Leonard Lawler and John Nale (ed.) *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, pp. 580-7 for an overview of Foucault's engagement with Canguilhem's work.

<sup>39</sup> Lemke, 'The birth of bio-politics', p. 200 (original italics).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Jonathan Bates divides consideration of the Bard into two distinct sections, one which details what is known of Shakespeare's life and a second entitled 'The Shakespeare Effect'. In justifying this structure, Bates states:

It is my argument that neither Shakespeare's life nor his career can account for his genius. I propose that the genius of Shakespeare is not co-extensive with the life of William Shakespeare. A knowledge of the 'pre-life' and the 'after-life' of his art is essential to an understanding of his power.<sup>41</sup>

Chronologically, Bates' sections delineate between concerns regarding Shakespeare's life and his institutionalization, particularly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During this latter period, reconsideration of Shakespeare's work was central to a number of broader conflicts: between a particularly French neoclassicism and a particularly British Romanticism; between Britain and France itself, during the Napoleonic wars.<sup>42</sup> During this time, Shakespeare was also institutionalised at the heart of the emergent field of literary criticism: Shakespeare was heralded as the prime example by which Henry Home, Lord Kames, outlined a new conceptualisation of literary criticism in *Elements of Criticism* (1762). Kames was the eventual sponsor of the Regius Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh in 1762; Hugh Blair, the chair's first incumbent, wrote *Lectures of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), which was also influential in America, also signalling the establishment of literary criticism across the Atlantic. As a figure who occupies the heart of literary criticism, and was central to the shift to a more humanistic intellectual perspective, Shakespeare is an apt representative of the liberal university institution.

In the work of Michel Foucault, Shakespeare's changing significance exemplifies the emergence of governmental forms of control.<sup>43</sup> In *Madness and Civilization*, in which Foucault adopted his archaeological approach, Andrew Cutrofello argues that Shakespeare's life 'is located on the cusp of a historical divide.'<sup>44</sup> In particular, Foucault argues that Shakespeare's works are symptomatic of a Renaissance ideology which equated madness with death, a position which is juxtaposed with the conceptualization of madness as a

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<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador Classic, 2016 [Apple Books]), p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> See Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, pp. 327-376.

<sup>43</sup> See Andrew Cutrofello, 'William Shakespeare' in Leonard Lawler and John Nale (ed.) *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, pp. 689-692 for an overview.

<sup>44</sup> Cutrofello, 'William Shakespeare', p. 690.

temporary state which could be resolved through psychiatric treatment. In subsequent lectures, Foucault discusses *King Lear* in the context of political sovereignty, wherein Lear's madness is aligned with his abdication and emergence as a political subject. As Cutrofello notes, Shakespeare lived during a period during which Foucault would identify the emergence of 'the administrative state' and the weakening of the previously-dominant 'state of justice'.<sup>45</sup> During this period, 'a society of laws [...] involving a whole reciprocal play of obligation and litigation' was replaced by 'a society of regulation and discipline'.<sup>46</sup> These disciplinary mechanics expanded under governmental forms of control, of which Shakespeare is also emblematic during his reconsideration around the eighteenth century. Indeed, in 'What is an Author?' (1969), Foucault presents Shakespeare as a particular embodiment of institutional power. Foucault's allusions to the authorship controversy illustrate the broader significance of the figure of an author:

The disclosure that Shakespeare was not born in the house that tourists now visit would not modify the functioning of the author's name, but, if it were proved that he had not written the sonnets that we attribute to him, this would constitute a significant change and affect the manner in which the author's name functions.<sup>47</sup>

Foucault continues:

We can conclude that unlike a proper name, which moves from the interior of a discourse to the real person outside who produced it, the name of the author remains at the contours of texts-separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence.<sup>48</sup>

Here, Foucault identifies the way in which Shakespeare's name itself exerts a form of power, by delineating and affecting the texts to which it is assigned. In this context, Shakespeare's embodiment of the university institution reveals his role as an apparatus of institutional power within 'a governmental state'.<sup>49</sup>

Shakespeare's role in *If We Were Villains* highlights the extent to which this form of institutional power is contorted under neoliberalism. In *If We Were Villains*: the structure,

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<sup>45</sup> Foucault, 'Governmentality', p. 104.

<sup>46</sup> 'Governmentality', p. 104.

<sup>47</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in Vincent B. Leitch et al. (ed.) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, pp. 1622-1635 (p. 1627).

<sup>48</sup> Foucault, 'What is an Author?', pp. 1627-8.

<sup>49</sup> 'Governmentality', p. 104.



dialogue and narrative foreshadowing create an institutional environment which defines the behaviour of the students. However, the individual subject at the heart of liberal humanism – a position Shakespeare himself has occupied – is replaced by unstable individuals – Rio’s student-actors. In this way, the changing role of Shakespeare illustrates the relationship between liberalism and neoliberalism which Thomas Lemke highlights that Foucault discerned:

By means of the notion of governmentality the neo-liberal agenda for the ‘withdrawal of the state’ can be deciphered as a technique for government. The crisis of Keynesianism and the reduction in forms of welfare-state intervention therefore lead less to the state losing powers of regulation and control (in the sense of a zero-sum game) and can instead be construed as a reorganization or restructuring of government techniques, shifting the regulatory competence of the state onto ‘responsible’ and ‘rational’ individuals.<sup>50</sup>

The narrative of *If We Were Villains* illustrates the mechanics Foucault identifies. Despite the detachment of Shakespeare from the lives of the students, dramatic form and Shakespearean allusions continue to order and define the lives of students. At the heart of the university institution is the unstable actors, rather than William Shakespeare himself; personal development and the students’ own subjectivity is excluded from institutional concerns, ‘shifting the regulatory competence’ onto the students themselves. The exclusion of individual subjectivity is a particularly definitive characteristic of modern narratives in the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard and similarly crucial to Christopher Yates’ campus novel *Black Chalk*, a text which highlights the personal instability at the heart of contemporary American higher education.

### ***Black Chalk: Narratives and Personal Development***

Christopher Yates’ *Black Chalk* is a novel wherein university education results in the erasure of personal subjectivity. In Yates’ work, however, literary production is presented as a manner by which this dehumanization can be counteracted, and the university’s damaging influence resisted. In both its depiction of the alienation required for personal progress, as well as its presentation of art as a method of rebellion, Yates’ work aligns with

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<sup>50</sup> Lemke, ‘The birth of bio-politics’, pp. 201-2.

conceptualisations central to the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard. Perhaps most well-known as the author of *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) and its seminal definition of postmodernism, this later work of Lyotard is an extension of the philosopher's own scepticism towards narratives which is consistent throughout his oeuvre. From considerations of abstract art, language, politics and capitalism, Lyotard places individual subjectivity at the heart of a modernist worldview which is ultimately artificial, and constitutes a boundary around authentic experience. The destabilization of this boundary, and its associated conception of personal agency, is the method by which such control can be overcome.

Jean-Francois Lyotard's critiques of neoliberalism align with the philosopher's broader critiques of modernity. In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard defines the narrative form of the 'modern':

[...] modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure.<sup>51</sup>

In 'A Svelte Appendix to the Postmodern Question' (1982), Lyotard defines capitalism as one of these grand narratives, baldly stating that '[c]apitalism is one of the names of modernity.'<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Lyotard describes capitalism in similar terms to modern narratives:

The finality of capitalism is not a technical, social, or political creation built according to rule, its aesthetic is not that of the beautiful but of the sublime, its poetics is that of the genius: capitalist creation does not bend to rules, it invents them.<sup>53</sup>

Here, Lyotard identifies features which align capitalism with other modern narratives – capitalism advocates for a 'metaphysical' aesthetics of the sublime, centralises the individualistic, humanistic figure of the genius, and 'invents' its own rules. For these reasons, Lyotard concludes that 'the politics of neoliberalism [...] is itself an illusion.'<sup>54</sup>

So too, Lyotard argues, is the rational subject. While modern narratives align the acquisition of knowledge with the emancipation of the human subject from social forces,

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<sup>51</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 108.

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'A Svelte Appendix to the Postmodern Question' in *Political Writings* (London: UCL Press, 1993), pp. 25-32 (p. 25).

<sup>53</sup> Lyotard, 'A Svelte Appendix to the Postmodern Question', p. 26.

<sup>54</sup> 'A Svelte Appendix to the Postmodern Question', p. 28.

Lyotard critiques this conception, instead arguing that this 'grand narrative' signifies 'the withdrawal of the real', as Andrew Gibson has explained:

So, too, in [narratives'] orientation towards an end, its gradual alignment of dissymmetrical features, its final ordering, it pacifies difference, puts it in place within a system, transforms it into opposition [...] The unrepresentable, indiscernible, inarticulable, fleeting life of the body, for instance – desire, inchoate emotion – leaves no trace.<sup>55</sup>

As Gibson highlights, 'modern' narratological organisation results in erasure; 'the unrepresentable' is excluded from narratives which insist on a defined subjectivity and clear narrative structure. In 'A Svelte Appendix to the Postmodern Question', Lyotard also gestures towards the experiences of individual subjectivity under (neoliberal) capitalism, suggesting that 'monopolitical monsters [...] can act as hindrances to the will'; 'it seems that labor in the nineteenth-century sense is what must be suppressed'.<sup>56</sup>

It is this 'unrepresentable' for which Lyotardian postmodernism grasps:

The postmodern would be that which [...] puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.<sup>57</sup>

Here, Lyotard highlights several fundamental elements of postmodern narratives. Postmodern work denies existing frameworks of meaning – the modern's narratives - in favour of the search for the unrepresentable itself. For Lyotard, postmodern art is active, searching for the gaps and conflicts which are excluded from established thought. It is this activity which defines postmodern narratives as an 'event' in themselves, detaching them from the reassuring speaking subject.<sup>58</sup> *Black Chalk* engages with Lyotard's theorisations in a number of ways – the novel aligns university education with modernity's narratives which result in the erasure of individual subjectivity, while also highlighting the rebellious

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<sup>55</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 106; Gibson, *Towards a Postmodern Theory of Narrative*, p. 187.

<sup>56</sup> Lyotard, 'A Svelte Appendix to the Postmodern Question', p. 28

<sup>57</sup> *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 108.

<sup>58</sup> Bill Readings defines 'event' as 'the fact or case that something happens, after which nothing will ever be the same again. The event disrupts any pre-existing referential frame within which it might be represented or understood.' (Readings, *Introducing Lyotard*, p. xxiii).

potentiality of literature. In this way, Yates' novel suggests a method by which the personal oppression at the heart of neoliberal education can be resisted.

The narrative form of *Black Chalk* undermines Jolyon's personal subjectivity by challenging his authorial control. During the novel's opening chapters, it is unclear who is writing the text itself. The present-day sections are told from the first-person perspective, while the flashbacks are uniformly third-person. The implication is, in fact, that the author is Chad, as much attention is paid to Chad's isolation and insecurity at Oxford which mirror that of Jolyon's later life. When Jolyon does reveal his identity, he articulates the impact of this narrative device:

But I have just spent some time looking over everything I have written and it seems I might not have properly introduced myself. This failure was merely an oversight. Or perhaps it was my subconscious intention only to illustrate the distance I have travelled from my youth, another continent.<sup>59</sup>

As Jolyon identifies here, the opening sections of *Black Chalk* depict Jolyon's time at university as one during which his identity is particularly stable – emphasised by the third-person narration of his actions; in the present, however, his identity has been erased, particularly reflected by the instability of his position as narrator.

Jolyon's authority is further undermined by the novel's narrative structure. The novel is divided into short, episodic segments which shift between Jolyon's time at University of Oxford, and the present. As Jolyon notes in his introduction, this juxtaposition emphasises the contrast between Jolyon's time at university and his post-university life. However, this chronological shifting also undermines Jolyon's authority as the author of the text in two key ways. *Black Chalk's* narrative device has been described in a review as 'the suspenseful IV drip of information', highlighting the novel's unstable atmosphere.<sup>60</sup> In this context, the structure of the novel undermines Jolyon's ability to present a cohesive narrative of his own life. Furthermore, the structure of *Black Chalk* prominently highlights the role of Christopher Yates. In an interview, Yates has confessed to narrative manipulation: '*I think every writer is playing games with the reader, and I want the reader to question that. Why should you trust*

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<sup>59</sup> Christopher Yates, *Black Chalk* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013 [Kindle edition]), p. 65.

<sup>60</sup> Jaime Lubin, 'The Most Dangerous Game: Christopher Yates' *Black Chalk*', *Huffpost*, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2017 <[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jaime-lubin/the-most-dangerous-game-c\\_b\\_5296132.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jaime-lubin/the-most-dangerous-game-c_b_5296132.html)> [accessed 18th March 2018] (original italics).

someone who's trying deliberately to manipulate you through their words?'<sup>61</sup> As Yates articulates here, the narrative of *Black Chalk* has abandoned claims to mimetic or didactic authority, rather, *Black Chalk* is particularly manipulative, a novel wherein narratives create instability and doubt, rather than clarity.

Jolyon's personal instability is particularly attributed to his time at University of Oxford. In *Black Chalk*, the characters' time at university is characterised by a preoccupation with origins and identities. While Chad comes to Oxford from America to 'escape that part of himself from which he longed to break free', the other students proudly discuss their upbringings:

What they did have was background and so lack of privilege or money became the medals of honour they polished in public each day. They were the brightest of the blooms that had sprung from the harshest soils, like a long-distance runner from Kenya who had trained in the dust with no shoes.<sup>62</sup>

Dee, Emilia, Jack, Jolyon and Mark all highlight the difficulties of their upbringings, which give particular meaning to their attendance at University of Oxford. However, the Game which the friends play comprises of 'psychological dares, challenges designed to test how much embarrassment and humiliation the players can stand.'<sup>63</sup> Central to this game is the students' ability to create dares which they know will prove difficult for their peers. The dares become increasingly personal, forcing the students to betray their firmest principles and the people closest to them. Dee, Jack and Mark recuse themselves from the Game due to their inability to compromise their own integrity. For Emilia, a consequence which would force her to espouse support for Margaret Thatcher's economic policy is impossible. Her father having been a miner, Emilia proclaims that '[she] will never, ever show any disloyalty to the memory of what [her] dad went through, you understand?'<sup>64</sup> For the students, the Game is a particular challenge to their responsibilities to the past and the present; the Game forces the students to alienate themselves from their communities. While the majority of the players

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<sup>61</sup> Jaime Lubin, 'The Most Dangerous Game: Christopher Yates' *Black Chalk*', *Huffpost*, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2017 <[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jaime-lubin/the-most-dangerous-game-c\\_b\\_5296132.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jaime-lubin/the-most-dangerous-game-c_b_5296132.html)> [accessed 18th March 2018] (original italics).

<sup>62</sup> Yates, *Black Chalk*, p. 3; p. 60.

<sup>63</sup> *Black Chalk*, p. 35.

<sup>64</sup> *Black Chalk*, p. 199.

leave the Game, Jolyon and Chad continue, a participation which particularly results in Jolyon's social isolation.

While Emilia, Dee, Jack and Mark prefer to leave the game, Jolyon remains, causing numerous losses in his life. Following Mark's death, Jolyon leaves Oxford, '[his] life's ambition – crusader for justice, defender of the innocent – destroyed.'<sup>65</sup> After gaining a position in a newspaper, Jolyon hopes to forge a career in journalism, however, this too is impossible due to the emotional distress caused by The Game: he finds it difficult to form personal relationships; is wary of intrusion and causing offence. Jolyon marries a woman, Blair, in London and they move to New York together, however, he remains unable to establish a stable livelihood. At the beginning of the novel, Jolyon reveals that he has barely left his New York apartment for three years. As Jolyon reflects: 'the Game has taken everything from me. My education, the career I craved, the career I had, my wife, my happiness...'<sup>66</sup> Jolyon's time at university, dominated by The Game, causes his alienation from wider society and his inability to form productive relationships throughout his life.

Jolyon's social detachment is mirrored in his psychological instability. In the present day, Jolyon's actions are determined by a series of 'physical mnemonic[s]'.<sup>67</sup> These objects control his daily routine, propelling him from one task to the next. However, the underlying logic is unclear to him: 'What ludicrous notion first caused me to make the mnemonic link between salad and genitals?'<sup>68</sup> These objects, alongside the erasure of his identity, reduce Jolyon to a mindless automaton, reflected in his description of his life: 'Work, play. Wake, sleep. Stimulant, narcotic. My snug skin, my cosy mind, the gentle hum of me. Check.'<sup>69</sup> Jolyon's reliance upon these reminders emphasises the extent to which disengagement from the past and present results in the erasure of Jolyon's agency. Unable to influence his surroundings nor engage with his community, Jolyon is both isolated and psychologically bereft.

The narrative structure of *Black Chalk* evokes Jean-Francois Lyotard's discussion of modern narratives. Jolyon's position illustrates the narratological perspective adopted during modernity in Lyotard's work, as articulated by Bill Readings:

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<sup>65</sup> Yates, *Black Chalk*, p. 75.

<sup>66</sup> *Black Chalk*, p. 76.

<sup>67</sup> *Black Chalk*, p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> *Black Chalk*, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> *Black Chalk*, p. 49.

Modernism presents a rigid division, a binary opposition. On the one side the present, modernity, the moment (temporal space) of an overview, of research and writing, secure in its self-presentation precisely because it is modern; on the other side the past, a history that surrenders itself to the gaze of modernity.<sup>70</sup>

As Readings outlines, modernist history is 'a history that surrenders itself to the gaze of modernity', just as Jolyon's past exposes itself to his view.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, Jolyon's narrative position outside of his story is fundamental to modernist conceptions of narrative for Lyotard: '[t]he subject is concrete, or supposedly so, and its epic is the story of its emancipation from everything that prevents it from governing itself.'<sup>72</sup> Readings and Lyotard's discussions highlights features of modern narratives which are shared by the narrative device of *Black Chalk*. In both, a clear distinction between past and present is defined; in both, the narrating subject is detached from the story being told.

Paradoxically, by emphasising the power of narratives within his own narrative, Jolyon subjugates himself. For Lyotard, in 'a culture that gives precedence to the narrative form [...] [i]t is hard to imagine such a culture first isolating the post of narrator from the others in order to give it a privileged status'; in such cultures, '[t]he narratives themselves have this authority [to legitimize themselves]. In a sense, the people are only that which actualizes the narratives'.<sup>73</sup> Lyotard's analysis characterizes narrators like Jolyon as mere ventriloquist dummies, espousing and repeating existing cultural narratives. Indeed, this characterisation is reinforced by Jolyon's depiction as an initially-anonymous figure whose life is controlled by external forces. In this context, Jolyon's narration of his own experiences at university in fact signify his 'depend[ence] on the institutions within which that subject is supposed to deliberate and decide', a dependence which denies his 'full humanity [and] the effective realization of mind as consciousness, knowledge and will.'<sup>74</sup> While Jolyon attempts to present his narrative as a reliable version of the events at University of Oxford, this project ultimately fails – the precarious foundation of narrative legitimacy is undermined. By revealing the authority of narratives, Jolyon is denied the possibility of self-defined subjectivity, instead

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<sup>70</sup> Readings, *Introducing Lyotard* p. 44.

<sup>71</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 123.

<sup>72</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 35.

<sup>73</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 22; p. 23.

<sup>74</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 30-1.

having to operate within defined limits offered by social institutions, particularly the university.

In the latter sections of *Black Chalk*, writing is presented as a method of challenging the social isolation resulting from artificial narratives of progress. Dee is a particular embodiment of this motif. Donning eccentric clothes and adopting a gothic demeanour, the other students are aware that 'as soon as she inks the final line of [her] five hundredth verse...she's going to kill herself.'<sup>75</sup> The social influence of writing is further evinced during Mark and Jolyon's conflict following Mark's expulsion from the Game. While Jolyon is well-liked amongst the college community, Mark distributes copies of Jolyon's diary which reveals his personal opinions. Jolyon is subsequently alienated from his peers. While Dee and Mark's behaviour suggest that art leads to isolation and death, Jolyon's writing in the present forms the site of social bonds. Chad is able to control Jolyon by writing notes in the text, encouraging him to venture outside his apartment.<sup>76</sup> Subsequently, Jolyon uses the text to communicate with Dee, as the two write notes to each other. Off-campus, then, Jolyon's writing constitutes a space within which social relationships are formed and maintained, challenging the social isolation for which his university education prepared him.

The erasure of personal subjectivity is further challenged by the flashback in Yates' novel. Revisiting and revealing the past is fundamental to Jolyon's success in the Game. Writing allows Jolyon to process his own past through the flashbacks in the novel, in particular allowing him to process feelings of guilt for his role in Mark's death. By recounting the past, Jolyon can reveal what has been repressed – his own identity.<sup>77</sup> Following the recollection of these events, Jolyon is reinvigorated and motivated to participate in the Game. Indeed, Jolyon also writes 'to understand the real Chad, the one he kept hidden.'<sup>78</sup> Reflecting upon their time at Oxford alerts Jolyon to the dare which Chad would not be able to complete – visiting his own parents. Chad's fate contrasts with the other students' abandonment of the Game. While Emilia, Dee, Mark and Jack refused to compromise their values, Chad is unable to face his past, causing his failure. Fundamentally, the flashbacks resist the forward momentum of progress by returning to the period during which Jolyon's

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<sup>75</sup> Yates, *Black Chalk*, p. 71.

<sup>76</sup> *Black Chalk*, p. 74.

<sup>77</sup> *Black Chalk*, p. 32.

<sup>78</sup> *Black Chalk*, p. 65.



identity was erased – his time at university. Furthermore, it is with these memories, using that which Chad had erased from his past, that he is able to succeed in the Game.

While Jolyon is able to process his past and succeed in the Game, the conclusion of *Black Chalk* resists narratological closure. Following his loss, Chad is pursued by the organisers of the Game, in order to resolve his final dare, to be decided by the organisers themselves. Chad disappears from New York, Jolyon's life, and his marriage with Dee. Dee is similarly adrift. Remaining with Jolyon, she reflects upon how little she knew her husband, and wonders whether he will return to her. Jolyon, however, is liberated, and concludes *Black Chalk* with 'a gentle itch for something new' but a multitude of questions which ultimately form the novel's final words.<sup>79</sup> The conclusion of *Black Chalk* emphasises the importance, but consequences, of liberation from historical progress. Like Jolyon at the novel's beginning, Chad remains under the lure of the past, abandoning his social connections in order to avoid processing that past. Dee remains similarly entangled with her past social connections, her marriage to Chad. Jolyon, having productively engaged with his past and achieved liberation in the present, faces a future defined by hopeful uncertainty.

*Black Chalk's* ambiguous conclusion emphasises the difficulties of abandoning the stability offered by modern narratives. In its active role, Jolyon's novel itself illustrates Lyotard's discussion of the role of postmodernism:

The postmodern would be that which [...] puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.<sup>80</sup>

Here, Lyotard highlights several fundamental elements of postmodern narratives which are shared by Jolyon's text. Like Jolyon's writing, postmodern work denies existing frameworks of meaning – such as the university's narrative of progress - in favour of the search for the unrepresentable itself. Postmodern art is active, searching for the gaps and conflicts which are excluded from established thought. It is this activity which defines postmodern narratives as

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<sup>79</sup> Yates, *Black Chalk*, p. 342.

<sup>80</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 108.

an 'event' in themselves, detaching them from the reassuring speaking subject.<sup>81</sup> Lyotard's conception of postmodernism also illuminates the difficulties facing Jolyon at the end of *Black Chalk*. While his writing has freed him from the automation by which his life was defined at the novel's beginning, Jolyon is left with nothing to reassure him at the novel's conclusion. He is free from Chad, and the Game, but faced with a life devoid of 'the solace of good forms'.

### ***The Rules of Attraction: Fragmented University; Fragmented Society***

As a member of the literary Brat Pack of the 1980s, Bret Easton Ellis' work has been seen to exemplify American youth culture of that period.<sup>82</sup> Spurred on by the controversy surrounding the publication of his novel *American Psycho* (1991), Ellis became associated with violence, the culture of celebrity, and a lack of morals.<sup>83</sup> Jean Baudrillard has occupied a similar cultural position. In their overview of his philosophical contribution, Ryan Bishop and John Phillips noted that, as 'occasional harbinger of postmodernism [...] Baudrillard becomes the reluctant poster child for the movement.'<sup>84</sup> The two have been read in tandem, with both being seen to encapsulate an American society bereft of meaning and depth. While Ellis' later novels particularly interrogate the influence of capitalism, the focus of Baudrillard's earlier Marxist analysis, *The Rules of Attraction* fully embodies Baudrillard's characterisation of American society in his later treatises. In Ellis' campus novel, the university is a microcosm of Baudrillard's contemporary world, dominated by institutional and political ambivalence.

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<sup>81</sup> Bill Readings defines 'event' as 'the fact or case that something happens, after which nothing will ever be the same again. The event disrupts any pre-existing referential frame within which it might be represented or understood.' (Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. xxiii).

<sup>82</sup> Of Ellis debut novel,, Jonathan Yardley wrote, "'Less Than Zero" is a tough, unpleasant book that reeks with the unmistakable odor of authenticity as it describes the self-indulgent, wasteful lives of the overprivileged children of Los Angeles. As fiction it leaves much to be desired; but as journalism -- as a slice of contemporary American life -- it commands a strong hold on our attention.' (Jonathan Yardley, 'Empty Affluence: A Grim Slice of the 'Good Life'', *The Washington Post*, 30<sup>th</sup> June 1987. Online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1986/06/30/empty-affluence-a-grim-slice-of-the-good-life/6e94289e-7cdf-445d-b64e-2adc0fc7e752/> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2020].

<sup>83</sup> See Roger Cohen, 'Bret Easton Ellis Answers Critics of 'American Psycho'' for a contemporary overview of these characterizations.

<sup>84</sup> Ryan Bishop and John Phillips, 'Baudrillard and the Evil Genius', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 24:5 (2007), pp. 135 - 145 (p. 139).

Furthermore, this zeitgeist is personified by the students: enclosed in their isolated college, they are alienated from all aspects of contemporary culture.

In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, Baudrillard declares that, in the current, communication-based society, there is 'only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication.'<sup>85</sup> This surface is exemplified by the narrative technique of Ellis' work: the novel is comprised of the internal monologues of its characters in a number of segments and the insistent revelation of the students' shallow thoughts reflects Baudrillard's work. The encapsulation of Baudrillard's philosophy, from the culture depicted in the novel, to its very narrative structure, creates a text which fundamentally undermines the profundity of meaning for which the university institution once stood and derides the experiences of the students in the novel.

While existing scholarship has highlighted Ellis' depiction of an inescapable capitalist society, this analysis serves to highlight the comparative detachment of the university in *The Rules of Attraction*. In an overview of criticism of *American Psycho*, Timothy C. Baker notes that 'it is far more common to see the novel not as a commentary on its times but as representative of them.'<sup>86</sup> Indeed, several studies have investigated this cohesive relationship between capitalism and Ellis' literary and narrative techniques. John Conley identifies the run-on sentence, interchangeability and the prevalence of proper names to illustrate the manner in which *Glamorama* encapsulates capitalist society.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Martin Weinrich's in-depth analysis of *American Psycho* highlights a plethora of linguistic techniques: the similar use of brand names and repetition, as well as discourse from travel and men's magazines.<sup>88</sup> Weinrich, in addition, draws a comparison between Ellis' narrative and Baudrillard's work:

Ellis's narrative strategy is to construct a textual "void around the real," to create a "meticulous but blind reality" (*Symbolic Exchange* 72) in which descriptions of the environment, human relations, and emotions disappear beyond the surface of an endless procession of completely ungrounded signifiers.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), p. 12.

<sup>86</sup> Timothy C. Baker, 'The (Neuro)-Aesthetics of Caricature: Representations of Reality in Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park*', *Poetics Today*, 30:3 (2009), pp. 471 - 515 (p. 486).

<sup>87</sup> John Conley, 'The Poverty of Bret Easton Ellis', *Arizona Quarterly*, 65:3 (2009), pp. 117 - 137.

<sup>88</sup> Martin Weinreich, "'Into the Void': The Hyperrealism of Simulation in Bret Easton Ellis's 'American Psycho.'" *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 49:1 (2004), pp. 65-78.

<sup>89</sup> Weinreich, 'Into the Void', p. 71.

Weinrich's reference to Baudrillard highlights the extent to which the crowded surface of *American Psycho's* narrative masks a lack of fundamental meaning in the novel. However, while noting this characterization of the text, and society, Weinrich also identifies the struggle of *American Psycho's* homicidal protagonist, Patrick Bateman:

It appears that Patrick Bateman murders in order to discover something authentic, something remotely meaningful which might be hidden beyond the surface composed entirely of images and signs – as if killing could introduce a feeling of profundity into his otherwise shallow existence.<sup>90</sup>

Bateman's 'struggle' as described by Weinrich, is similarly noted in Conley's analysis of *Glamorama*.<sup>91</sup> These studies, then, both highlight the fundamental significance of capitalism and its damaging consequences in Ellis' later novels.

In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, Baudrillard highlights the distinction between the consumer society anatomised in Ellis' later works, and the communication-based society which *The Rules of Attraction* more fully embodies:

The private universe was certainly alienating, insofar as it separated one from others, from the world in which it acted as a protective enclosure, as an imaginary protector. Yet it also contained the symbolic benefit of alienation (the fact that the other exists) and that otherness can be played out for better or for worse. Thus the consumer society was lived under the sign of alienation; it was a society of spectacle – but at least there was spectacle, and the spectacle, even if alienated, is never obscene. Obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when every-thing becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication.<sup>92</sup>

Weinrich and Conley's studies highlight the extent to which this alienation is played out 'for worse' in *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* – Patrick Bateman's struggle against self-alienation in Weinrich's work; rich against poor, in Conley's. However, in *The Rules of Attraction*, no such alienation is to be found. The lack of external referents, such as the commodified references of *American Psycho* and *Glamorama*, results in a text adrift, lacking the experience of the spectacle which Baudrillard describes. Weinrich argues that, while Ellis'

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<sup>90</sup> Weinreich, 'Into the Void', p. 72.

<sup>91</sup> Conley, 'The Poverty of Bret Easton Ellis', p. 118.

<sup>92</sup> Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, pp. 21-2.

early work 'demonstrated the tendency towards a concentration on the surface of things, this development reaches its apex in *American Psycho*.<sup>93</sup> However, as these analyses highlight, *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* depict worlds of possibilities and conflicts, however unattainable or unsuccessful they may be. The absence of struggle and opportunities, in *The Rules of Attraction*, more fully exemplifies the aimlessness of Baudrillard's communication-based society.

This meaninglessness is fundamentally associated with the institution of Camden College in Ellis' novel. The milieux of Ellis' later works, Wall Street and the modelling industry, overtly illustrate the intertwining of capitalism, and moral, cultural superficiality. Camden College, however, remains adrift, lacking any economic or social foundation, and the subversive drive of Ellis' later novels. This institutional isolation was observed by Baudrillard himself:

There is a science-fiction story in which a number of very rich people wake up one morning in their luxury villas in the mountains to find that they are encircled by a transparent and insuperable obstacle, a wall of glass that has appeared in the night. From the depths of their vitrified luxury, they can still just discern the outside world, the real universe from which they are cut off, which has suddenly become the ideal world. But it is too late. These rich people will die slowly in their aquarium like goldfish. Some of the university campuses here remind me of this.<sup>94</sup>

The position of the university in Baudrillard's analysis is mirrored in *The Rules of Attraction*. While the students remain the wealthy elite, they are immune from the cultural influence of capitalism and its conflicts. The worlds of *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* are 'the outside world [...] the ideal world', indeed, Martin Weinreich describes the world of Patrick Bateman as one wherein 'everything is possible [...] there exists nothing that could endanger this utopia.'<sup>95</sup> This sense of possibilities is rejected in *The Rules of Attraction* and the novel's nihilism is further tied to the institution of the college by the characterisation of university education throughout the novel. A piece of graffiti reminds students that 'Most Cab Drivers

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<sup>93</sup> Weinreich, 'Into the Void', p. 68.

<sup>94</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso Books, 2010), p. 45.

<sup>95</sup> Weinreich, 'Into the Void', p. 76.

Have Liberal Arts Degrees.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, one of the recurrent tropes of the novel is the characters changing their degree courses. Paul notes that he's 'switched majors so many times now that [he] didn't even care.'<sup>97</sup> Lauren asserts, 'I am going to change my major unless Victor [her boyfriend] calls' and, indeed, subsequently does so.<sup>98</sup> Sean recollects a time 'when I was a Lit major, before I became a Ceramics major, before I became a Social Science major'.<sup>99</sup> The ambivalence towards their educations emphasises the students' and college's social detachment and their devaluation in a capitalist society. This devaluation precludes the possibility for rebellion through the assimilation which Colby identifies in *American Psycho*. The consequent vacuum produces a campus novel which rejects the opportunity for meaningful social engagement.

The institutional isolation of the college is mirrored by the students' political ambivalence. The first prominent discussion of politics in the novel prefigures the more general attitude of the characters throughout the text:

SEAN 'It was the Kennedys, man...' Marc's tellin' me while he's shooting up in his room in Noyes. 'The Kennedys man, screwed it...up...Actually it was J...F...K...John F. Kennedy did it...He screwed up...all up, you see...' He licks his lips now, continues, 'There was this...our mothers were pregnant with us when we...I mean, he...was blown away in '64 and that whole incident...screwedthingsup...'<sup>100</sup>

Marc's speech is included in Georgina Colby's analysis of *The Rules of Attraction* in the monograph *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary*:

The identification of Marc with the trauma of 1963 is evident in his linguistic slippage that confuses the "we" of his, then unborn, generation as being blown away in Kennedy's assassination (which Marc mistakenly understands to have taken place in 1964). The rhetorical texture of Marc's speech signals trauma.<sup>101</sup>

While Marc seems to be experiencing disappointment at the events of the '60s, he is simultaneously taking heroin which causes his stuttered speech, undermines the sincerity of

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<sup>96</sup> Bret Easton Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction* (Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2008 [Kindle edition]), p. 34.

<sup>97</sup> Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 31.

<sup>98</sup> *The Rules of Attraction*, pp. 110; 127.

<sup>99</sup> Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 120.

<sup>100</sup> *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 24.

<sup>101</sup> Georgina Colby, *Bret Easton Ellis: Underwriting the Contemporary* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 30.

his emotion and the 'trauma' which Colby identifies. Furthermore, his misidentification of the year of Kennedy's assassination reveals the superficiality of his knowledge and engagement with the events themselves. While Colby suggests that '[m]elancholy is related to the loss of subjectivity in these first novels,' students regularly belittle political concerns, emphasising their emotional detachment.<sup>102</sup> When discussing new students at the college, Tim laments, 'Reagan's Eighties. Detrimental effect on underclassmen'.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, Sean remembers '[t]he hippie cried when Reagan won (the only other time I'd seen her cry was when the school dropped yoga classes'.<sup>104</sup> Baudrillard identified the cause of this attitude:

Our media spectacles long ago crossed the threshold of stupefaction. It is that of a vitrified exacerbation of the body, of a vitrified exacerbation of genitalia, of an empty scene where nothing takes place and which nonetheless fills our vision. It is also that of information or of the political in which nothing takes place and by which we are nonetheless saturated.<sup>105</sup>

The political references in Ellis' narrative exemplify the consequences of a communication-based society as defined by Baudrillard. The multitude of references reflects the saturation of contemporary society, while the students' subversive comments highlight the lack of sincere political concerns. The consequences of Reagan's policies, rather than inequality or poverty, are 'detrimental' students; sorrow felt following the 1980 election is compared to losing yoga classes. Despite the number of political references in the novel, their significance is undermined, a symptom of the 'stupefaction' Baudrillard describes, and which the students in the novel experience.

The narrators' cultural isolation mirrors and reinforces the institutional and political isolation of the university and its students. A number of musical references, in particular, populate the novel. Georgina Colby argues that, 'when read closely with full attention to the occurrence of the references that are not referring to pop culture but to the culture that came before, a plaintive novel appears that can be read as mourning the losses of literary and cultural tradition suffered by 1980s culture.'<sup>106</sup> However, like politics, the novel mocks the concept of culture carrying symbolic or cultural value, placing those opinions in farcical

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<sup>102</sup> Colby, *Underwriting the Contemporary*, p. 25.

<sup>103</sup> Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 44.

<sup>104</sup> *The Rules of Attraction*, 104.

<sup>105</sup> Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, p. 33.

<sup>106</sup> Colby, *Underwriting the Contemporary*, p. 31.

contexts. When recalling his relationship with ‘the hippie’, Sean declares: ‘Can’t you make distinctions?’ I asked her. ‘I mean, our sex is great, but how can everything, everyone be beautiful? Don’t you understand that that means no one is beautiful?’<sup>107</sup> Sean’s exasperation is provoked by his girlfriend’s indiscriminate enjoyment, explicitly aligned with the hippie movement of the 1960s and ‘70s. Furthermore, this frustration is humorously juxtaposed with his acknowledgement that their ‘sex is great’, mocking the use and relevance of systems of valuation. This technique is repeated in the novel when Sean and Lauren go to a party hosted by Lauren’s poetry professor. One of the guests, Trav, questions the value of contemporary culture:

‘But Vittorio, let me ask you, don’t you think that the admittedly Bohemian punk outlaw scribblings of these wasted post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-...hell, post-everything minstrels, is the product of a literary establishment bombasting a lost generation with worthless propaganda exploiting greed, blasé sexual attitudes and mind-corrupting, numbing jejunosity and that’s why works like *Just Another Asshole*, a searing, searing collection of quote-unquote underground writing, become potent fixtures on the minds of this clan of maladjusted, nihilistic, malcontent, self-serving...well, hell, miscarriages, or do you think it’s all...’ And now Trav stops, searches for the right word. ‘bogus?’<sup>108</sup>

Like Sean, Trav’s language undermines the position ideas he espouses. Despite his critique of contemporary society and attempts to distance himself, Trav is implicated in these movements through his use of colloquial language - ‘jejunosity’ and ‘bogus’.

Sean and Trav’s self-contradiction exemplify Ellis’ use of double-voicing in *The Rules of Attraction*. As Georgina Colby has noted, Bakhtin’s concept of double-voicing is fundamental to the conflict within Ellis’ narratives.<sup>109</sup> However, while Colby asserts that ‘it is double voicing which emerges as the key technique in Ellis’s work that effects an ongoing critique in commodity society’, in *The Rules of Attraction*, it serves to undermine the sincerity of the

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<sup>107</sup> *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 105.

<sup>108</sup> Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 224.

<sup>109</sup> In Bakhtin’s terms, double-voiced discourse ‘is directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward *another’s discourse*, toward *someone else’s speech*.’ (Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in Dostoevsky’ in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 181-269 (p. 185) (original italics)).



students: Sean utilises the systems of value he rejects; Trav adopts the very discourse he criticises.<sup>110</sup> This insincerity mirrors a significant point made by Baudrillard in *America*:

The generation that has come from the sixties and seventies, but has rid itself of all nostalgia for, all bad conscience about, and even any subconscious memory of those wild years [...] A generation neither fired by ambition nor fuelled by the energy of repression, but completely refocused upon themselves, in love with business not so much for profit or prestige as for its being a sort of performance, a technical feat.<sup>111</sup>

The absence of nostalgia which Baudrillard identifies, reflected in *The Rules of Attraction*, precludes the sense of mourning of Colby's discussion. Furthermore, Baudrillard identifies Marc's self-involved political amnesia and relates this cultural vacuity to a detachment from the financial rewards of capitalism, reflecting the isolation of college students from its economic influence. These comments are further supported by the function of the college itself: Camden is a Liberal Arts school, wherein students learn the 'performance' of modern society, revealed by the hypocritical double-voicing.

Just as institutional, political, and cultural significance is rejected throughout *The Rules of Attraction*, fundamental meaninglessness also characterises the personal experiences of the students. In a number of ways, the students' narratives prevent meaningful engagement. Firstly, the sheer number of narrators prevents familiarity with individual characters. The novel also creates temporal defamiliarization: while the majority of segments are told in the past tense, both Lauren and Sean narrate in the present, while Victor's trip to Europe is told in a rapid series of past participles.<sup>112</sup> In addition, some sections are transcribed as drama, a chapter is narrated in French, and the addressee of the narratives varies. These techniques contribute to the fragmented nature of the novel, as it resists consistent narrative position, form, and even language. This detachment has been discussed by Baudrillard in contemporary politics: '[c]ontemplation is impossible, images fragment perception into successive sequences and stimuli to which the only response is an instantaneous yes or no – reaction time is maximally reduced.'<sup>113</sup> As Baudrillard discusses,

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<sup>110</sup> Colby, 'Repressive desublimation', p. 319.

<sup>111</sup> Baudrillard, *America*, p. 120.

<sup>112</sup> Lauren's segment in the present tense is *The Rules of Attraction*, pp. 35-39; Sean's is pp. 7-10; Victor's segment in past participles is pp. 16-20

<sup>113</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: SAGE Publications, 1993), p. 63.

the textual fragmentation rejects the possibility of profound reflection on the characters' thoughts and behaviour.

As well as preventing engagement, the text rejects the possibility for progress, undermining the educational function of the college. The novel is divided into seemingly-arbitrarily, episodic segments, which frequently overlap, rejecting chronological development. The sense of stasis is reinforced by the use of repetition: the characters attend several costume parties, there are repeated references to the regular film screenings, and Sean uses the same phrases repeatedly: 'Rock'n'roll. Deal with it,' he mutters.<sup>114</sup> Martin Weinrich has noted the function of repetition in *American Psycho*, asserting that 'Ellis turns the function of repetition, which usually is a device of making sense, against itself in order to create a form of repetition that ultimately spirals into meaninglessness.'<sup>115</sup> The meaninglessness of university education also encapsulates the experiences of the students at college.

This vacuity is further reinforced by the treatment of the students' most fundamental concern – sex. *The Rules of Attraction* rejects the possibility for sex to signify emotional attachment or intimacy: encounters are brief, often uncomfortable, sometimes anonymous, and hurtful. The first sexual experience in the novel is Lauren's rape by a man she is unable to identify until the end of the novel, the significance of which is drained of meaning when Lauren subsequently recognises the boy and identifies him as 'the townie I lost my virginity to.'<sup>116</sup> Characters repeatedly use the phrase 'What's going on?' to suggest having sex.<sup>117</sup> This phrase extends the novel's meaninglessness to sex, preventing the development of a relationship, or personal connection. The dichotomy of superficial prevalence which characterises the novel's treatment of sex is further exemplified in Sean and Lauren's relationship. While he boasts that he would 'spend hours eating her', she clarifies that 'being eaten out for two hours straight is not my idea of a good time.'<sup>118</sup> These episodes support Baudrillard's characterisation of sex within communication networks: 'this promiscuity which

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<sup>114</sup> Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 156; costume parties are on pp. 170 and 256; characters mention movie night on pp. 44, 58, and 285; Sean repeats the phrases on pp. 10, 45, 46, 47, 125, 138, 216, 274 and 291. Paul notes this repetition on p. 107.

<sup>115</sup> Weinreich, 'Into the Void', p. 71.

<sup>116</sup> *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 317.

<sup>117</sup> Richard uses this phrases in *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 187; Clay, from L.A., doesn't understand the code on p. 207; a girl asks Sean on p. 283.

<sup>118</sup> *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 211; p. 213.

reigns over the communication networks is one of a superficial saturation, an endless harassment, an extermination of interstitial space.<sup>119</sup> This conclusion extends to the student's personal experiences in *The Rules of Attraction*: the text is crowded with a number of narrators and sexual experiences, all of which are fundamentally exhausted of meaning.

While the broader textual fragmentation typifies students' isolation from their community, this seclusion is further extended by the use of first-person narration in Ellis' novel. Gerard Genette defined the significance of the internal monologue:

Indeed, the very principle of this narrative mode implies in all strictness that the focal character never be described or even referred to from the outside, and that his thoughts or perceptions never be analysed objectively by the narrator.<sup>120</sup>

Ellis' novel subverts Genette's idea of internal focalization. Rather than rejecting the description of characters, the narrative structure insistently describes characters' actions from various perspectives. Furthermore, narrators regularly misname other characters, leaving the reader to infer identities from the events of the narratives.<sup>121</sup> This external-definition is particularly evident when relationships are formed between narrators. Firstly, Paul attempts to interpret Sean's behaviour during their relationship; later, Sean attempts the same understanding of Lauren.<sup>122</sup> During these sections, there are fewer chapters narrated by Sean and Lauren. Mark Storey has noted a similar trope in Ellis' *American Psycho*. For Storey, Patrick Bateman is 'a central identity created by external forces'; 'an identity created not from internal, subjective coherence but from an uneasy chorus of voices'.<sup>123</sup> In Ellis' later novel, Storey argues that, this alienation signifies a crisis of postmodern masculinity. However, in *The Rules of Attraction*, the students' narratives, in contrast to Genette's discussion of first person narrative, serve to undermine the potential for individual subjectivity and authority.

The oppressive and limiting consequences of the narratives in *The Rules of Attraction* illustrates the movement from 'stage' to 'screen' as discussed by Baudrillard: 'Our private sphere has ceased to be the stage where the drama of the subject at odds with his objects

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<sup>119</sup> Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, p. 24.

<sup>120</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 192.

<sup>121</sup> For name confusion, see *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 9; p. 10; p. 25; and p. 37.

<sup>122</sup> Paul reflects on Sean's inconsistencies in *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 107, Sean about Lauren, pp. 201-4 and pp. 210-11.

<sup>123</sup> Mark Storey, "'And As Things Fell Apart": The Crisis of Postmodern Masculinity in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Dennis Cooper's *Fisk*', *Critique*, 47:1 (2005), pp. 57 – 72 (p. 58; p. 61).

and with his image is played out: we no longer exist as playwrights or actors but as terminals of multiple networks.<sup>124</sup> Baudrillard's 'networks' reflect the intertwining of the narratives in *The Rules of Attraction* and the associated lack of ownership and subjectivity as inhabitants are transformed from 'actors' to 'networks'. The absences of Sean and Lauren, during their relationships, signifies their entrapment within the narratives of their romantic partners, until Lauren is silenced in a blank segment bearing her name.<sup>125</sup> This ensnarement, alongside the meaningless experiences of the students, evokes Baudrillard's analysis of the role of hostages during the Gulf War:

The hostage has taken the place of the warrior. He has become the principal actor, the simulacral protagonist, or rather, in his pure inaction, the protagonist of non-war. The warriors bury themselves in the desert leaving only hostages to occupy the stage, including all of us as information hostages on the world media stage. The hostage is a phantom actor, the extra who occupies the powerless stage of war.<sup>126</sup>

Baudrillard's analysis emphasises the role of the students in *The Rules of Attraction*, as well as the world they inhabit. The meaningless society in which the students live – characterised by the lack of social, political, and cultural significance - mirrors Baudrillard's characterisation of the Gulf War as a 'non-war'; a war lacking fundamental meaning for its television audience. Furthermore, the lack of the students' subjectivity, and autonomy in their personal relationships, emphasises their 'inaction', as hostages within the narrative.

While the majority of the students function within the defined network of their narratives and Camden College, the novel periodically gestures outside their closed community. Narratives from the perspective of Paul and Sean's relatives provide an evaluation of the students' lives from figures who are not members of their social group. Eve, Paul's mother, and Patrick, Sean's brother, highlight the artificiality of the students' lives at college. While Paul asserted that he liked the fact his parents were still married, his mother reveals they have been living apart and are divorcing.<sup>127</sup> Similarly, while Sean had purported to be on financial aid, his visit to his dying father reveals their wealth.<sup>128</sup> These forays beyond the college also suggest a different system of values: Paul is initially refused entry to a bar

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<sup>124</sup> Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, p. 16.

<sup>125</sup> Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 309.

<sup>126</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2006), p. 24.

<sup>127</sup> Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 32; p. 176.

<sup>128</sup> *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 27; Sean's wealth is first revealed in his narrative, beginning p. 266.

due to a dress code, and, despite Sean's reputation for being good-looking at Camden, Patrick notes that Sean's eyes 'exude hatefulness and a weakness of character that I find abhorrent.'<sup>129</sup> As well as the artificiality of their lives, Eve and Patrick's narratives highlight the students' inaccessibility: both are preoccupied with explaining the behaviour of their younger relatives.<sup>130</sup> These episodes highlight the distinction between the students' community and those outside of Camden, and such conflicts are fundamentally associated with physical detachment from the college. Lauren's relationship with Victor, her ex-boyfriend who has been travelling in Europe, is similarly characterised by misunderstandings. During Victor's time away from college, Lauren remains in love with him, despite receiving no contact.<sup>131</sup> While her feelings develop throughout the novel, Victor returns and concludes that Lauren is 'looney-tunes.'<sup>132</sup>

An alienated student who has a fixation on Sean personifies existence outside the students' community. The student identifies herself as Mary, although her segments are anonymous and demarcated in italics, highlighting her detachment from the rest of the students. Furthermore, Mary is socially isolated, as illustrated by an episode in a class when she writes a note to another student 'that Fergus has a sexy back and she wrote something and it said 'Yeah...But look at his face.' The simple dumb cruelty of it all!'<sup>133</sup> Mary rejects the principles which govern the students' community, lamenting its shallowness. These gestures outside the students' system of meaning anchor the principles themselves to the college community, and highlight its limitations. Existing outside the networked society, Baudrillard identifies 'empty, illegible, insoluble, arbitrary, fortuitous signs'.<sup>134</sup> These 'are pure signs in that they are neither discursive nor generate any exchange'; they resist the system's effort to envelop them within their systems of meaning.<sup>135</sup> In *The Rules of Attraction*, these signs are fundamentally located outside the students' community at Hampden, reinforcing the college's characterisation as a shallow, communication-based society, in Baudrillardian

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<sup>129</sup> *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 174; p. 272.

<sup>130</sup> Eve calls Paul 'a cipher' and is unable to remember details about his life; Patrick insistently questions Sean about his life, including his drug use and future career. (*The Rules of Attraction*, pp. 175-6; p. 273)

<sup>131</sup> Lauren addresses him in her narrative in *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 92. On p. 145, she says 'I lie there, thinking about Victor. A very common morning.'

<sup>132</sup> *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 263.

<sup>133</sup> *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 65.

<sup>134</sup> Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, p. 59.

<sup>135</sup> *The Ecstasy of Communication*, p. 60.

terms. Eve, Patrick, Victor and Mary are located outside the students' group, and they have no access to its principles. Furthermore, their influence is restricted, highlighting Baudrillard's assertion that these empty signs 'are neither discursive nor generate any exchange'.<sup>136</sup>

Baudrillard argues that the existence of empty signs outside networked systems of meaning constitutes a possible method of destabilization, however, this prospect is rejected in *The Rules of Attraction*, reaffirming the strength of the students' superficial existence at Camden. The revelation of incongruities in the text precedes their envelopment within the students' shallow system of meaning. Although Sean is revealed to be wealthy, he returns to Camden, to a violent confrontation with the drug dealer to whom he owes money.<sup>137</sup> Paul is briefly affected by his mother's confession, although he also swiftly returns to Camden, only 'idly wonder[ing] what Mom will say about this abrupt departure.'<sup>138</sup> The ramifications of Victor's rejection are also undermined: while Lauren is initially upset, her subsequent narrative details a sexual encounter with another student, and she continues her relationship with Sean.<sup>139</sup> Sean, Paul, and Lauren's swift return to Camden, and its expected behaviour, highlights the strength of the students' principles, defined by shallowness and rejecting any semblance of intense emotion.

The consequences of Mary's interaction with the students' community prove to be the most damaging. During the segment when she approaches Sean at a party, as with others, Mary refers to herself in the third person:

...she follows you to the light at the door and says...'Hello'...and never has a second hurt and ruptured, blistered so harshly because the music's too loud and you can't hear, don't even notice, and you take her hand instead and you are both leaving. You smiled, she thinks, at her. But by then she was hiding in the corner of the room, standing on the rolled-up carpet, the room a black-blue mass moving to the songs, her love still silent and undeclared and it was time to make a decision.<sup>140</sup>

Mary's attempt to introduce herself into Sean's life, and the students' community, prefigures her death by suicide. Her narrative illustrates that, while outside the system she was able to define her own existence, this is impossible after attempting contact. Once this has

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<sup>136</sup> *The Ecstasy of Communication*, p. 60.

<sup>137</sup> Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction*, pp. 310-314.

<sup>138</sup> *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 197.

<sup>139</sup> *The Rules of Attraction*, 265; 284.

<sup>140</sup> Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction*, p. 181.

happened, her insignificance, in terms of the system of meaning the students have established, is revealed. In this passage, her isolation is emphasised by her physical description – ‘in the corner of the room, standing on the rolled-up carpet’. While her feelings remain unsaid, her position is clear. For Baudrillard, the process of seduction offers a path to liberation from the enclosed network:

Saturated by the mode of production, we must return to the path of an aesthetic of disappearance. Seduction is party to this: it is that which deviates, that which turns us away from the path, that which makes the real return to the great game of simulacra, which makes things appear and disappear.<sup>141</sup>

*The Rules of Attraction* rejects this possibility. The students ignore these events, which hold little significance in their college community, continuing their lives regardless; they refuse to be distracted by the seductive emptiness which Baudrillard describes. This emersion prevents escape and emphasises the expanse of the shallow community of Camden College.

### **Conclusion: Contemporary Campus Novels and Postmodern Literature**

The campus novels discussed in this chapter challenge the stability offered by the narrative form and the university institution. They exhibit the struggle within, and for, discourse – as identified within what Linda Hutcheon terms ‘postmodern’ art, the contemporary campus novel ‘inscribes and only then subverts its mimetic engagement with the world.’<sup>142</sup> These novels challenge the artificial reassurance of grand narratives, be they of historical progress or individual subjectivity. Their narratives gesture beyond the fabric of linguistic signs which constitute the texts themselves, generating an energy which fissures in the conflicts between the novels’ language(s), form(s), and characterisations. These novels are, as Hutcheon further describes, the ‘site of the struggle of the emergence of something new’.<sup>143</sup>

The prevalence of such narrative techniques which can be confidently termed postmodern has two clear implications for the university institutions at which these novels are set. Firstly, as Hutcheon highlights, ‘these challenges characteristically operate in clearly paradoxical terms, knowing that to claim epistemological authority is to be caught up in what

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<sup>141</sup> *The Ecstasy of Communication*, p. 71.

<sup>142</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 20.

<sup>143</sup> *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 4.

they seek to displace.’<sup>144</sup> These novels seek to challenge the epistemological and intellectual authority of the university institution, while refusing to accept this authority for themselves. In a more historicized contextualization of postmodern impulses, Hutcheon ‘argue[s] that the increasing uniformization of mass culture is one of the totalizing forces that postmodernism exists to challenge’; the postmodern narratives of these campus novels highlight that this ‘uniformization’ has reached the university’s doors.<sup>145</sup> As Hutcheon implies, postmodernism need not be met with the resignation or derision which characterises many scholarly discussions.<sup>146</sup> Rather, ‘[h]istory is not made obsolete’ Hutcheon argues, ‘it is, however, being rethought – as a human construct.’<sup>147</sup> These narratives challenge the foundation of the university’s institutional authority, while remaining hesitant to abandon its function altogether. Indeed, by merely engaging with the novelistic form, these contemporary campus novels remain committed to its possibilities. Furthermore, as Hutcheon highlights, these considerations of epistemological stability and social institutions are interrogated from a humanistic perspective, ‘as a human construct.’ Indeed, while the possibility of meaning and the social function of the university is obsolete, yet salvageable, the experiences of students remain significant.

The paradoxical nature of postmodernist challenges to epistemological stability is mirrored in the experiences of students. While these novels do decentre the rational, Cartesian subject through their fragmented and complex narratives, this is of little benefit to the university students. Either trapped with the novels’ narratives - as in *If We Were Villains* or *The Rules of Attraction* – or liberated into the unknown – as in *Black Chalk* – none of these novels are able to conceptualise a productive future for their student-protagonists. Indeed, the conclusions of the novels depict students in particularly liminal spaces. *Rules of Attraction* with Sean on the road, the novel ends tantalisingly mid-sentence; in *If We Were Villains* there is the suggestion James is alive, despite reports of his death; Jolyon concludes *Black Chalk* with ‘a gentle itch for something new’ but a multitude of questions which ultimately form the novel’s final words.<sup>148</sup> These conclusions resist the postmodern treatment of subjectivity discussed by Linda Hutcheon – they embrace neither postmodern multiplicity nor

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<sup>144</sup> *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 7.

<sup>145</sup> *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 6.

<sup>146</sup> For an overview of these positions, see Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 5-8.

<sup>147</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 16.

<sup>148</sup> Yates, *Black Chalk*, p. 342.



destabilization.<sup>149</sup> Instead, with the social institutions of narrative, epistemological stability, and the university abandoned, students are isolated and adrift. And yet, for a commentator like Terry Eagleton, discussing modernist literature, this persistence of the individual subject signifies that ‘we will never abandon our radical political illusions’:

But if we are now posterior to such metaphysical humanism there is really nothing left to struggle against, other than those inherited illusions (law, ethics, class struggle, the Oedipus complex) which prevent us from seeing things as they are.

But the fact that modernism continues to struggle for meaning is exactly what makes it so interesting. For this struggle continually drives it towards classical styles of sense-making which are at once unacceptable and inescapable, traditional matrices of meaning which have become progressively empty, but which nevertheless continue to exert their implacable force.<sup>150</sup>

In this sense, the conclusions of these campus novels remain loyal to modernist ‘metaphysical humanism’, reflecting melancholically upon the experiences of individual students, adrift of the institutional support which the novels’ narratives themselves have destroyed. Furthermore, as Eagleton highlights, this preoccupation with individual subjectivity focuses novels’ attention towards ‘classical styles of sense-making which are at once unacceptable and inescapable’, in particular, in these novels, the university. It is the experiences of individual students, which can further illuminate the role of the university in contemporary society and its depiction in the contemporary campus novel.

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<sup>149</sup> See Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 158 – 177.

<sup>150</sup> Terry Eagleton, ‘Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism’ in *Against the Grain: Essay 1975 – 1985* (London and New York: Verso Books, 1988), pp. 89 – 98 (p. 137; p. 143).



### Chapter 3: The Contemporary Elite Campus Novel

Since the emergence of the campus fiction genre in the nineteenth century, the most prominent and popular novels have featured the experiences of white, male students at elite colleges. These novels featured college as a site of socialization and assimilation into national values. Correspondingly, definitive features of these novels include an anti-intellectualism which prioritised community values and the frequent deployment of American football as a sport wherein national egalitarianism was translated to the field. Indeed, as Travis M. Foster has highlighted, such novels were crucial during the period following the Civil War, when fostering a sense of unity was of national importance.<sup>1</sup> These novels conceptualised a particular role for the university institution, students, and their relationships to wider society. Universities were institutional representatives of national values and sites of seamless socialization; students were depicted as preparing for their roles as future national leaders; a cohesive, critical public was assumed and created through the education of democratically-engaged citizens.

These novels engage with the particularly pragmatic strain of liberal education which contemporaneously emerged in elite American colleges. Bruce Kimball has argued that there is no 'distinctively American view of American liberal education', an absence which Frank F. Wong attributes to the universalism at the core of the paradigm, as well as the Euro-centric social and philosophical context from which it emerged.<sup>2</sup> However, the nineteenth century saw a reconsideration of the classical curricula inherited from Europe. Charles Eliot (1834 - 1926), the longest-serving President of Harvard, encapsulated the tension between American pragmatism and liberal idealism. Writing in 1869, Eliot's critique of both classical and 'scientific' education in 'The New Education' reveal the dualistic nature of the emerging pragmatic liberal education. Eliot's essay begins with a parent's lament that he is unable to find a suitable education for his son, 'one that will prepare him, better than I was prepared,

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<sup>1</sup> See Tavis M. Foster, 'The Campus Novel and the Nation of Peers'.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 205; Frank F. Wong, 'The Search for an American Liberal Education' in Nicholas H. Farnham and Adam Yarmolinsky (ed.) *Rethinking Liberal Education* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 63-76.

to follow my business or any other active calling.’<sup>3</sup> Classical curricula offer no such preparation, while the emerging polytechnic schools were, Eliot argued, poorly administered and offered an education which was ‘partial’ and resulted in men who are ‘inadequately trained.’<sup>4</sup> In conceptualising his new educational program, Eliot thus insisted upon ‘a liberal and practical education’, wherein subjects were broadened and a role in society was central. Eliot was not alone in emphasising the significance of social engagement within American liberal education. Public service was central to Benjamin Franklin’s establishment of the University of Pennsylvania in 1780, with fellow collegian and national President Woodrow Wilson similarly emphasising the social function of higher education.<sup>5</sup> While these various theorisations prioritise intellectualism, personal development and social engagement to varying degrees, they share the fundamental beliefs which the elite tradition of campus novels reinforced.

Such values have been variously undermined since. Following the First World War, campus novels featuring elite students particularly engaged with the fragmentation of the public sphere which was such a concern of the period. Novels such as *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Plastic Age* (1924) maintain their engagement with the education of white, male elites, but in these novels, elite ideals are at odds with a broader public, its shifting values and increasing commodification. The personal development of protagonists in these novels, previously ensured by socialization, is similarly threatened. This social fragmentation and the consequent challenges for education was a central motivation for John Dewey, whose progressive, experiential pedagogy attempted to re-engage students with their communities. Liberal education was further challenged during the mid-century culture wars. The potential for meaning is rejected altogether in Don DeLillo’s *End Zone* (1972), wherein the university is enveloped within the epistemological and social instability which dominated

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<sup>3</sup> Charles W. Eliot, ‘The New Education’, *The Statesman*, February 1869. Online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1869/02/the-new-education/309049/#5> [accessed: 7<sup>th</sup> February 2021].

<sup>4</sup> Eliot, ‘The New Education’

<sup>5</sup> See Michael S. Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014 [Apple Books]), Ch. 3, pp. 98-103 for an overview of Franklin’s objections; Woodrow Wilson, ‘Princeton in the Nation’s Service’, in Arthur S. Link (ed.) *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, vol. 10 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 1896-8.

the culture wars and postmodernism.<sup>6</sup> DeLillo's novel, too, abandons the broader chronology which defines the *bildungsroman*, suggesting that personal development is no longer a central feature of college education. While these novels signal a shift from the earliest campus novels, several tropes persist. In particular, the prevalence of college sports and military service maintain the relationship between universities and broader national concerns.

The campus novels of this study depict the ways in which the liberal education of elites is undermined within the contemporary American higher education sector. In *Learning to Flourish: A Philosophical Exploration of Liberal Education*, Daniel R. DeNicola identifies a range of contemporary challenges to the liberal education model which challenges the role of universities, students and society established during the nineteenth century. In higher education institutions, DeNicola notes the trend of 'hyper-specialization' in academic disciplines.<sup>7</sup> Such a trend contradicts the claim of universities to be representatives of national values and undermines its socializing function – higher education is increasingly defined by narrow intellectual concerns which preclude interdisciplinary communication and engagement with the world outside the academy. DeNicola also articulates concerns regarding 'a loss of the personal, the communal' in higher education institutions.<sup>8</sup> Larger class sizes and an increasingly international student body detaches education from the personal development and community engagement which is so central to liberal education paradigms. Lastly, DeNicola discusses the deterioration of the public sphere as a result of anti-intellectual tendencies in the broader public:

There is no basis for dialogue, no curiosity about other viewpoints; the will of others is not to be persuaded by the truth or by argument, but by non-rational means. Ignorance is not a plight, not an embarrassment or a source of shame; ignorance is normal wear, even worn proudly, a source of amusement and even celebration.<sup>9</sup>

DeNicola's concerns align with the framework of the neoliberal university outlined in the introduction to this project. Academic specialization signifies the exertion of institutional

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<sup>6</sup> See Thomas LeClair, 'Deconstructing the Logos: Don DeLillo's *End Zone*', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 33:1 (1987), pp. 105-123.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel R. DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish: A Philosophical Exploration of Liberal Education* (London: Continuum Books, 2012), p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish*, p. 234.

<sup>9</sup> DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish*, p. 237.

authority which simultaneously undermines the relevance of universities in wider society; the movement away from pedagogical concerns emphasises the vacuum at the heart of higher education which results in the creation of the entrepreneurial subject; the anti-intellectualism DeNicola notes results in a fragmented public sphere which precludes democratic engagement and criticality.

This chapter discusses three contemporary campus novels which particularly engage with these themes through the experiences of elite students. Notably, while elite education was previously only available to white men, some of the novels here prominently feature the experiences of female and African American students. However, elite higher education institutions remain patriarchal institutions defined by whiteness, as the following discussion will show. Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* (2011) engages with the ramifications of academic specialization. The experiences of three students – Leonard, Mitchell and Madeleine – are particularly defined by the various disciplines they study at university; these disciplines, furthermore, inflect the ways in which these students are alienated from their communities after college. Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding* (2011) depicts the way in which an impersonal approach to education precludes students' personal development and social engagement. In particular, Harbach's novel interrogates the implications of the teleological objective of liberal education paradigms. Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons* (2004) contextualises the Dupont College role within a fragmented society defined by a lack of critical engagement. Each of these novels depicts the current challenges to elite, liberal education models within current university institutions.

### ***The Marriage Plot: Academic Specialization and Individual Isolation***

In Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot*, students' academic specialisation inhibits the development of their personal subjectivity, while also resulting in their alienation from broader social concerns. Eugenides' work depicts the college experiences and subsequent lives of three students – Madeleine, Leonard and Mitchell – each of whom is particularly defined by their engagement with a specific academic discipline. The students' experiences emphasise the extent to which each specialization defines their identities and actions. In *The Marriage Plot*, this specialization emphasises the redundancy of the university institution in contemporary society. Mitchell, Leonard and Madeleine embody challenges and

characterisations of, in particular, the nineteenth century, evoking a period of widespread academic institutionalization. In this way, *The Marriage Plot* depicts the extent to which academic specialization constitutes an exertion of institutional power by defining students' identities and behaviour, while also undermining the relevance of university by detaching students from contemporary experience.

The establishment of diverse, antagonistic disciplines is fundamentally connected to the university institution. This relationship can be appreciated through consideration of the emergence of the division between the humanities and sciences. As Rens Bod's history of the humanities has shown, disciplinary division was alien to intellectuals of antiquity and throughout much of human history.<sup>10</sup> While the emergence of a clear distinction is impossible to locate with precision, Stephen Jay Gould begins his discussion of the conflict during the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century.<sup>11</sup> This was a time, Gould argues, when scientific methods and objectives gained increasing mastery in universities. This dominance prompted Wilhelm Dilthey's influential distinction between the humanistic drive towards understanding and the contrasting explanatory focus of the natural sciences in the late-nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Dilthey's distinction was explicitly related to the university in two key ways: his work was a direct response to the increasing dominance of scientific practices, while the principles he outlined were to provide the foundation for further intellectual enquiry, in universities. Indeed, Gould further asserts that 'our taxonomies of human disciplines arose for largely arbitrary and contingent reasons of past social norms and university practices'.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the examples of 'hyper-specialization' on the 'contemporary scene' offered by Daniel R. DeNicola are recognisable aspects of university life: 'educational compartmentalization, academic tribalism, and the cult of the major.'<sup>14</sup> In these ways, academic specialization can be directly attributable to the institutionalization of education, particularly in universities.

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<sup>10</sup> Bod, *A New History of the Humanities*.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *The Hedgehog, The Fox, and the Magister's Pox: Mending the Gap Between Science and the Humanities* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 9-66.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of Dilthey's life and works, see Andrus Tool, 'Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911)' in Helen Jenney et al. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Process Philosophy and Organisation Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Online: <<https://www-oxfordhandbooks-com.gold.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199669356.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199669356-e-009>> [accessed: 8th February 2021].

<sup>13</sup> Gould, *The Hedgehog, The Fox, and the Magister's Pox*, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish*, p. 227.

While academic specialization is not inherently problematic, DeNicola's notation of 'hyper-specialization' suggests the process has spiralled out of control. DeNicola's discussion of specialization in *Learning to Flourish* begins by detailing the benefits of focused intellectual enquiry:

Specialized studies and research methods evolve to pursue a particular niche of knowledge; new forms of inquiry give us advantageous perspectives on old issues as well. It is also true that an intellectual division of labor arises to understand complex issues. Specialization in the pursuit of knowledge should allow us to advance our understanding in ways that are otherwise unattainable—and that it has done so is, I think, beyond doubt. It also creates a more elaborate, intricate, reticulated arrangement of scholarship, increasing the dependence of each specialty on all the others.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, DeNicola argues, academic specialization in a communal context can create an 'epistemic ecology', an ecosystem comprised of specialists whose inter-related work allows deeper consideration and spurs new avenues of intellectual enquiry. In the contemporary university, however, academic disciplinaryity has resulted in 'hermetically-sealed compartmentalization [...] the chances for intellectual cross-fertilization and synthesis are reduced.'<sup>16</sup> DeNicola's discussion illuminates the mechanics by which the extension of institutional authority, resulting in hyper-specialization, impedes the university's ultimate goal – intellectual enquiry – while also confining its practitioners. This is the relationship between higher education, students, and society which is depicted in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot*. In this work, students are associated with a specific discipline which impedes their own personal development and alienates them from wider society.

In *The Marriage Plot*, Leonard and Mitchell are explicitly aligned with particular academic approaches. While divided between three perspectives, the novel establishes a clear binary between two male students, Leonard Bankhead and Mitchell Grammaticus. Leonard is a charismatic student who is often seen holding court around campus and whose 'sexual successes' cause him to develop a 'Lothario reputation'.<sup>17</sup> While completing a double

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<sup>15</sup> DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish*, p. 226.

<sup>16</sup> DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish*, p. 227.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011 [Apple Books Edition]), p. 160.



major in Biology and Philosophy, Leonard prefers the scientific approach, his interest in philosophy stemming from the influence of linguistics in the narrative turn:

Leonard said. "Literally. Philosophy's all about theory of language right now. It's all linguistics. So I figured I'd check it out."

"Aren't you a biology major, too?"

"That's what I really am," Leonard said. "The philosophy's just a sideline."<sup>18</sup>

However, Leonard is unimpressed by the deconstruction which dominates the semiotics class in which he meets Madeleine, insisting on a mimetic approach to literary criticism. Indeed, Leonard Bankhead is socially-grounded and detail-oriented, with Marshall Boswell highlighting that 'Leonard's surname suggests that he, to his detriment, puts too much value on the quality of his mind'.<sup>19</sup>

Mitchell's surname, Grammaticus, is similarly indicative. Derived from the role of grammarian in Ancient Greece, Grammaticus suggests Mitchell's own humanistic interests, social isolation and elitism. Also a successful student, Mitchell switches from English Literature to Theology which he believes will encourage his social engagement:

[Mitchell] was trying to diagnose the predicament he felt himself to be in. And not just his predicament, either, but that of everyone he knew. [...] He wanted to know why he was here, and how to live. It was the perfect way to end your college career. Education had finally led Mitchell out into life.<sup>20</sup>

However, Mitchell's lofty ambitions have the opposite impact, causing his social alienation. At college, Mitchell is isolated and feels personally adrift. College initially promises Mitchell the opportunity 'to wash the Midwest off himself', particularly the politics of his parents.<sup>21</sup> In order to do so, he submits a photo of 'a lean-faced Lutheran minister' to the student directory, hoping 'to erase his bodily self and replace it with a mark of his wit.'<sup>22</sup> It is ephemerality, however, which characterises his entire college experience. By graduation, Mitchell imagines himself as a figure from a text: his parents have become 'figures from myth', attending graduation 'to witness his hero's journey'.<sup>23</sup> It is when Mitchell discovers

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<sup>18</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, p. 510.

<sup>20</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 167.

<sup>21</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 244.

<sup>22</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 160

<sup>23</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 204

Leonard has begun a relationship with Madeleine that the two men become rivals. Mitchell views Madeleine and Leonard's relationship as a 'fresh defeat'; he 'didn't see why girls couldn't see through Bankhead.'<sup>24</sup> Similarly, when Leonard discovers Mitchell's affections for Madeleine, he 'had sized Grammaticus up according to an animal scale [...] and given himself the clear advantage.'<sup>25</sup>

Leonard and Mitchell are each associated with a particular academic discipline which serves to define their identities. Both students exemplify disciplinary characteristics attributed by particularly defined delineations between the sciences and humanities. In their divergent relationships with their college community – Leonard's exposition and Mitchell's isolated intellectualism – these students embody the distinction between explanation and understanding outlined by Wilhelm Dilthey. In C.P. Snow's controversial characterisation of 'the two cultures', these qualities are expanded upon, with Snow accusing 'literary men' of 'spending far too much energy on Alexandrine intricacies, occasionally letting fly in fits of aggressive pique quite beyond its means, too much on the defensive to show any generous imagination to the forces which must inevitably reshape it' while 'the scientific culture is expansive, not restrictive, confident at the roots, the more confident after its bout of Oppenheimerian self-criticism, certain that history is on its side, impatient, intolerant, creative rather than critical, good-natured and brash.'<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the conflict between Leonard and Mitchell which the novel establishes was central to Snow's critique. *The Marriage Plot* establishes a clear divide between these two embodiments of academic disciplines. This 'split into two polar groups' recurs throughout 'The Two Cultures', with Snow deploying geographical metaphors – Burlington House to Chelsea; Greenwich Village and MIT – and an intellectual gap evoked by the famous lament that literary men 'could [not] describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics.'<sup>27</sup> Snow particularly blames education systems for the widening gulf he identifies, an institutional failure which Lionel Trilling similarly identified in American higher education institutions.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 214; p. 212.

<sup>25</sup> Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, p. 588.

<sup>26</sup> C.P. Snow, 'The Two Cultures', *The New Statesman* (2<sup>nd</sup> January 2013). Online: < <https://www.newstatesman.com/cultural-capital/2013/01/c-p-snow-two-cultures>> [accessed: 5<sup>th</sup> January 2021].

<sup>27</sup> C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 3; p. 2; p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> See *The Two Cultures*, pp. 17 – 18; Lionel Trilling, 'A Comment on the Leavis-Snow Controversy', *Commentary Magazine*, June 1962. Online: < <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/lionel->

Leonard and Mitchell's disciplinary affiliations, and the extent to which they define their identities, reveals the exertion of the university's institutional power. By illustrating established characterisations of scientific and humanities disciplines, Eugenides' novel emphasises the extent to which American higher education institutions have resisted change. Rather than the epistemic ecologies for which DeNicola advocates, or a movement towards increasing interdisciplinarity, *The Marriage Plot* strictly delineates between disciplines and attributes to them characteristics which are practically ahistorical, having emerged and re-emerged for two hundred years. In this way, Leonard and Mitchell's university education serves to detach them from the historically-contingent concerns of contemporary society. As well as this social detachment, academic specialization results in self-alienation. As institutional representatives, a position which itself reduces the students' personal agency, disciplinary delineation has further damaging effects on individual self-awareness. Stefan Collini argues that 'we inhabit overlapping identities, to exaggerate the power and importance of these disciplinary affiliations [is] to the neglect of other, often deeper, ties and allegiances.'<sup>29</sup> Similarly, 'disciplinary affiliations' in *The Marriage Plot* signify a particularly restrictive form of identity: such specialization serves to isolate students from the interconnecting identities which form human experience. Thus, higher education as a site for personal development is rejected in Eugenides' novel. Rather, college is a site wherein students are exposed to institutional mechanics which confine their identities and define them according to specific academic approaches.

Mitchell's experiences following graduation reveal his inability to coalesce a defined academic approach with wider society. While on his journey through Europe and to India, Mitchell's reading material includes a range of theological texts and the canonical American authors Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Pynchon. Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* detaches him from his surroundings almost immediately, transporting him to Paris in the 1920s. However, his reading material causes conflict with his host, Claire, who considers Hemingway to be a misogynist. Mitchell is unable to answer, with Claire's argument rather inspiring a further wave of intellectual soul-searching:

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[trilling/science-literature-culture-a-comment-on-the-leavis-snow-controversy/](https://www.trilling/science-literature-culture-a-comment-on-the-leavis-snow-controversy/) [accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> February 2021].

<sup>29</sup> Stefan Collini, 'Introduction' in C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, pp. vii-lxxi (p. lvi).

Why, after all, had he bought *A Moveable Feast* in the first place? Why, knowing what he did about Claire, had he decided to whip it out of his backpack at this particular moment? Why, in fact, had the phrase whip it out just occurred to him?<sup>30</sup>

Mitchell's experiences in Calcutta further highlight the consequences of his humanistic approach. While volunteering in the hospital of Mother Theresa, Mitchell 'was scared of what their naked bodies might look like, of the diseases or wounds that might lie under their robes, and he was afraid of their bodily effluvia, of his hands touching their urine and excrement.'<sup>31</sup> When Mitchell and another volunteer finally bathe a patient, 'they began to treat the old man less like a person they were carrying and more like an object.'<sup>32</sup> It is only by objectifying patients that Mitchell is able to contribute to their care. Mitchell's desire for authenticity is further undermined upon his return to New York when his body odour, and refusal to wear deodorant, become a recurring concern among his friends.

Mitchell suffers from weaknesses frequently attributed to the humanities. Confounded by what could be termed social 'progress', Mitchell yearns for the 1920s, 'when it was O.K. to be American [before] certain once-canonical writers (always male, always white) had fallen into disrepute'.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Mitchell fails to appreciate the advances in gender and racial equality. Additionally, Mitchell's experiences in Calcutta emphasise the detachment of the humanities from human experiences, particularly of those living in poverty in under-resourced communities. In this way, Mitchell's approach is revealed to be elitist, and his academic approach has limited relevance in the world beyond the university campus. Detachment and elitism are two criticisms with which the humanities are frequently attacked. In an overview of contemporary criticisms of the fields, published in 2012, Stéfan Sinclair and Mark Turcato have noted these themes, defined as 'academic insularity' and 'elitism'.<sup>34</sup> However, just as the division between the sciences and humanities evokes centuries-old distinctions, so too are these criticisms age-old. Indeed, social detachment, nostalgia, elitism and paternalism were key elements of C.P. Snow's criticisms of the

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<sup>30</sup> Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, p. 240.

<sup>31</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 514.

<sup>32</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 535.

<sup>33</sup> Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, p. 239.

<sup>34</sup> Stéfan Sinclair, 'Confronting the Criticisms: A Survey of Attacks on the Humanities', *4Humanities* (9<sup>th</sup> October 2012). Online: <<https://4humanities.org/2012/10/confronting-the-criticisms/>> [accessed: 25<sup>th</sup> February 2021].

humanities in 1959.<sup>35</sup> Once again, Mitchell's experiences illustrate the extent to which academic specialization constitutes an exertion of institutional control which precludes Mitchell's engagement with wider society. Mitchell's alienation is particularly defined by his academic approach and his weaknesses are illustrations of critiques frequently launched at academic humanities scholarship. Furthermore, the fact that these difficulties mirror those attributed to the humanities in the post-war period highlight the university institution's inability to change.

Leonard's 'scientific' approach fares no better. Following graduation, Leonard takes up a postgraduate research position at the prominent Pilgrim Lake labs. Geographically, the lab is isolated from society: the closest town to Pilgrim Lake is a 'quaint village...[which] had been steadily emptying since Labor Day'; '[t]he world reduced itself, here, to basic constituents—sand, sea, sky—keeping trees and flower species to a minimum.'<sup>36</sup> This isolation is particularly clear when the isolated community is confronted with the wider public. While Madeleine and Leonard are at Pilgrim Lake, one of the senior researchers, Diane MacGregor, wins the Nobel Prize. However, MacGregor herself embodies the insularity of scientific research. A 'seventy-three-year-old recluse', MacGregor 'worked entirely alone, without sophisticated equipment'; at a press conference, MacGregor claims that discussing her research would put everyone to sleep.<sup>37</sup> Leonard also suffers from this inability to communicate his research when Madeleine's mother visits the lab. He attempts to explain that '[t]here's some evidence that budding yeast is analogous to the budding of cancer cells.'<sup>38</sup> However, while Phyllida is enthusiastic about 'a cure for cancer', Leonard clarifies that his work, rather, is 'testing one hypothesis...[and] [i]n my opinion, the hypothesis for this study is sort of way out there.'<sup>39</sup> Just as Leonard cautiously rejects the possibility of a cure for cancer, the application of a scientific method similarly fails to help manage his own depression. Leonard wants 'to find the sweet spot in the lower reaches of mania where side effects were nil and energy went through the roof'; while dividing his pills with a pill-cutter to monitor and reduce his dosages of lithium, '[t]he notion that he was carrying on significant

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<sup>35</sup> In particular, see Snow, *The Two Cultures*, p. 22; p. 41; p. 46; p. 48.

<sup>36</sup> Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, p. 321; p. 416.

<sup>37</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 294; p. 297.

<sup>38</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 314.

<sup>39</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 314; p. 315.

scientific work entered Leonard's head so smoothly that he didn't recognise its arrival.<sup>40</sup> However, Leonard's attempts at managing his medication are not successful, and he has a manic episode while in Monte Carlo.

Like Mitchell, Leonard faces challenges which can be specifically attributable to his academic specialization. Leonard's experiences illustrate the gap between academic science and lived experience. In particular, Leonard's difficulties reveal two divides – between science and the public, and between science and lived experiences. In 'A Genealogy of the Gap between Science and the Public', Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent presents an historical overview of the relationship between scientific endeavour and the public from antiquity to the present. In particular, Bensaude-Vincent notes a particular distinction which emerged in the twentieth century: '[i]t is only in the twentieth century that a depreciative image of the public emerged. Never before had the public been disqualified and deprived of its faculty of judgement to such an extent.'<sup>41</sup> This gap is not merely the result of the increased complexity resulting from scientific advancements, Bensaude-Vincent argues. Rather, the early twentieth century saw the spread of '[t]he new scientific spirit generated by the new physics [which] required a radical break with common-sense views of the world.'<sup>42</sup> During this period, an epistemological divide became ontological – members of the scientific community inhabit, from the twentieth century onward, a different world. Bensaude-Vincent's discussion particularly highlights the ways in which the scientific advancements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries served to confine practitioners within their own community while alienating them from wider society. Indeed, this is the difficulty Leonard faces. While at university he is able to communicate his ideas with other students; as a postgraduate researcher, however, he is incapable of such a task. In addition, as Leonard's capabilities increase, he gains confidence of his ability to control his depression; at this point, the limitations of the scientific method in addressing human experience become evident.

The third protagonist of *The Marriage Plot*, Madeleine, is persistently defined by her literary interests. The title of Eugenides' work places Madeleine's experiences within an established literary tradition and, as Marshall Boswell has noted, her language and

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<sup>40</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 461; p. 464.

<sup>41</sup> Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, 'A Genealogy of the Increasing Gap Between Science and the Public', *Public Understanding of Science*, 10 (2001), pp. 99-113 (p. 109); (original italics).

<sup>42</sup> Bensaude-Vincent, 'A Genealogy of the Increasing Gap Between Science and the Public', p. 107.

mannerisms align her with an established conception of Victorian femininity largely-defined in the period's literature and conduct books.<sup>43</sup> Within Eugenides' work, too, literature is influential upon Madeleine's life. *The Marriage Plot* opens with a survey of Madeleine's books, including childhood favourites, gifts from her parents, and proscribed texts for her college courses; these books are 'like a personality test' which reveal Madeleine to be 'Incurably Romantic'.<sup>44</sup> Madeleine's relationship with literature began in her childhood, when she particularly identified with the titular character in Ludwig Bemelman's series of novels, with whom she shares a name.

Reading is also a definitive component of Madeleine's relationship with Leonard. This relationship is initiated through Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*: after Madeleine's declaration of love, Leonard 'reached into her bag and pulled out *A Lover's Discourse*' directing her attention to a passage: '[o]nce the first avowal has been made, "I love you" has no meaning whatever'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the very principles Barthes outlines come to define their relationship. Like Barthes' work itself, Madeleine and Leonard's relationship is 'the action of running here and there, comings and goings': when Madeleine feels more confident following a literature conference, Leonard clings to her desperately; with their relationship under strain due to the influence of Madeleine's mother, Leonard proposes.<sup>46</sup> It is on their honeymoon that Leonard experiences a manic episode which essentially ends their marriage. At the end of their relationship, Madeleine has relinquished her romantic tendencies in favour of Barthes' linguistic cynicism: '[e]ven "I love you" seemed inadequate. She'd said this to Leonard so many times in situations like this that she was worried it was losing its power'.<sup>47</sup> Anna Głąb's discussion of Eugenides' novel highlights the extent to which Madeleine becomes embroiled in the literary principles which define her relationship with Leonard. Głąb argues that Madeleine herself is reduced to a text: '[t]o [Leonard], the text of Madeleine is inflected by his own mental illness, manic depression, and the narratives it enforces on life and love'.<sup>48</sup> Głąb continues, emphasising the impact of this relationship on

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<sup>43</sup> See Marshall Boswell, 'The Rival Lover: David Foster Wallace and The Anxiety of Influence in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 62:3 (2016), pp. 499 – 518.

<sup>44</sup> Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, p. 116.

<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 640.

<sup>48</sup> Anna Głąb, 'The Other as Text: The Ethics of Love in Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot*', *REN*, 68:4 (2016), pp. 266 - 282 (pp. 267-8).

Madeleine's identity: '[w]e are dealing here with typical relational identity, which does not constitute an autonomous whole but is a labile system, defined by its orientation to others.'<sup>49</sup> As Głąb highlights, Madeleine is drawn into a relationship with Leonard which overwhelms her identity – reduced to a text herself, Madeleine becomes 'a labile system', a description which similarly characterises Barthes' theorisation of language.

Like Leonard and Mitchell, Madeleine's approach to literature alienates her from her community. At college, Madeleine's literary interests place her at odds with her college class. Unlike her classmates, who 'wanted the reader to be the main thing', 'Madeleine was perfectly happy with the idea of genius. She wanted a book to take her places she couldn't get to herself.'<sup>50</sup> Her classmate Thurston, influenced by Jacques Derrida, particularly contradicts her approach by arguing that '[b]ooks aren't about 'real life'. Books are about other books.'<sup>51</sup> After college, Madeleine's relationship with Leonard alienates her from the academic community. Madeleine discovers Leonard's hospitalization on the day of her graduation and she forsakes this recognition of her academic achievements in favour of visiting him and reaffirming their relationship. Having failed to secure a place on a graduate program, Madeleine accompanies Leonard to his postgraduate research position at Pilgrim Lake Labs. Subsequently, at a Victorian Studies conference, Madeleine forms a particularly strong relationship with two other attendees, Anne and Meg, who 'didn't once ask if she had a boyfriend. They just wanted to talk about literature.'<sup>52</sup> Following the conference, Madeleine 'trie[s] to become a Victorianist' by publishing an article based on her dissertation, re-applying to Graduate Schools and studying for the GRE test.<sup>53</sup> 'With none of this, however—with neither the writing nor the reading—did she make much headway, for the simple irrefutable reason that her duty to Leonard came first.'<sup>54</sup>

The manner by which Madeleine is alienated from her community is particularly defined by her relationship with literature. Alienated from her peers' postmodernist literary scholarship and the politicized approach of the Victorian Studies conference, Madeleine is an embodiment of the Victorian literary tradition she so admires. In particular, Madeleine's

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<sup>49</sup>Głąb, 'The Other as Text', p. 276.

<sup>50</sup> Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, p. 72.

<sup>51</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, pp. 50-1.

<sup>52</sup> Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, p. 303.

<sup>53</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 306.

<sup>54</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 406



experiences illustrate the fate of women in a patriarchal literary canon outlined by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal work of feminist literary criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*.<sup>55</sup> Tracing a tradition of literary works, Gilbert and Gubar identify a number of recurring tropes, such as the angelic and demonic woman, which served to restrict female agency. In particular, the angelic woman trope – prevalent in conduct books – detaches women from the public sphere resulting in the erasure of personal subjectivity. Confined to the domestic sphere and isolated from academic study, Madeleine's experiences mirror those outlined by Gilbert and Gubar. Like Mitchell and Leonard, Madeleine's experiences highlight the effect of academic specialization – she is defined and confined by a centuries-old literary tradition. Furthermore, Madeleine's experiences also emphasise how academia remains a particularly patriarchal institution – the literary tradition is not only outdated, but male-dominated.

The concluding sections of Eugenides' work depict methods of escape from such social alienation. At the end of their marriage, it is Leonard who breaks the power of Barthes' theory. During a party hosted by a college acquaintance, Leonard and Mitchell have a conversation which Marshall Boswell argues 'dramatizes one of Barthes's figures from *A Lover's Discourse* titled "Connivance".<sup>56</sup> In this section, Barthes depicts a scene wherein a lover discusses a loved one with a rival, causing a new bond to be formed.<sup>57</sup> However, as Boswell notes, Leonard and Mitchell's conversation contradicts Barthes' articulation: '[t]ellingly, in a direct contradiction of Barthes's figure, the two do not discuss Madeleine at all; rather, they discuss religion, Mitchell's subject.'<sup>58</sup> Mitchell, Boswell further argues, 'functions as both Leonard's rival and his spiritual corrective; against Leonard's purely biological sense of self—and self-destruction—Mitchell affirms the importance of the soul and the spirit as the repository for our most important feelings.'<sup>59</sup> Thus, Mitchell challenges the principles by which Leonard has been living his life, defined by the academic principles learned at college. This conversation is followed by Leonard's re-assertion of the communicative power of language. Leonard asks Madeleine: '[d]o you know what they do in Islam when they want a divorce? The husband repeats three times, 'I divorce thee, I divorce

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<sup>55</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

<sup>56</sup> Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, p. 513.

<sup>57</sup> See Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, pp. 65-6.

<sup>58</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 513.

<sup>59</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 511.

thee, I divorce thee.’ And that’s it.’<sup>60</sup> Following the disastrous party, this is the method by which Leonard ends their marriage. Leonard evokes a tradition outside Euro-centric postmodernism and reasserts the power of language particularly defined within Islam. By doing so, Leonard is liberated from his marriage, from *A Lover’s Discourse*, and abandons society in favour of a Thoreauesque cabin in the woods.

Mitchell achieves similar liberation at the end of *The Marriage Plot*. Throughout the novel, Mitchell is torn between his academic, theological ambitions and his desire for human connection. After volunteering in Calcutta, he realises the importance of community and his two interests are coalesced in his attendance at Quaker meetings: ‘[j]ust about every American social movement you could think of had been supported and often spearheaded by the Quakers, from abolition, to women’s rights, to temperance (O.K., one mistake), to civil rights, to environmentalism.’<sup>61</sup> However, Madeleine remains the focus of his affections and he accompanies her to her parents’ home following the dissolution of her marriage. After having sex, however, Mitchell realises that Madeleine is a mirage – ‘she seem[s] to be so odourless, and vaguely alien.’<sup>62</sup> Thus, Madeleine signifies the continued significance of Mitchell’s abstracting tendencies. However, in the novel’s final pages Mitchell is liberated from Madeleine’s hold over him: he realises that ‘[Madeleine] was his ideal, but an early conception of it, and he would get over it in time. [...] He was feeling a lot better about himself, as if he might do some good in the world.’<sup>63</sup> Thus, Mitchell is able to overcome the social detachment which his theological pursuits inspired, and re-engage with his community.

Remaining loyal to her academic pursuits, Madeleine’s fate is far from clear at the end of *The Marriage Plot*. Following the dissolution of her marriage, Madeleine intends to continue studying literature at Columbia Graduate School. Her module selection includes the eighteenth-century novel and the ‘poststructuralist perspective’, choices recognisable from her undergraduate degree.<sup>64</sup> While these courses suggest a continuation of the literary principles with which Madeleine has been embroiled throughout the novel, ‘Madeleine’s arrival at Columbia, it turned out, would coincide with the first class of women being

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<sup>60</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 565.

<sup>61</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 643.

<sup>62</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, pp. 672-3.

<sup>63</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 677.

<sup>64</sup> Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*, p. 642.

admitted to the university as undergraduates, and she took this as a good omen.<sup>65</sup> Madeleine's return to university is placed in a broader social context, suggesting an escape from the alienation of her previous studies. While preparing to depart for Columbia, Madeleine's article is published in *The Janeite Review*, however, 'a printing error had transposed two pages of the essay', symbolically representing the difficulties Madeleine may face.<sup>66</sup> Her final appearance, in conversation with Mitchell, is similarly ambiguous:

[Mitchell said,] "From the books you read for your thesis, and for your article—the Austen and the James and everything—was there any novel where the heroine gets married to the wrong guy and then realizes it, and then the other suitor shows up, some guy who's always been in love with her, and then they get together, but finally the second suitor realizes that the last thing the woman needs is to get married again, that she's got more important things to do with her life? And so finally the guy doesn't propose at all, even though he still loves her? Is there any book that ends like that?"

"No," Madeleine said. "I don't think there's one like that."

"But do you think that would be good? As an ending?"

[...]

"And Madeleine kept squinting, as though Mitchell was already far away, until finally, smiling gratefully, she answered, "Yes."<sup>67</sup>

While Madeleine seems to be liberating herself from the 'relational identity' which characterised her relationship with Leonard, her life continues to be defined in literary terms, however much she hopes to deviate from the defined canon. Furthermore, it is Mitchell who offers this solution to her, Mitchell who is 'already far away' within their conversation. Madeleine's future, while uncertain, eschews the explicitly social nature of Leonard and Mitchell's emancipation. The conclusion of *The Marriage Plot* suggests that social alienation is a definitive feature of academia. Both Leonard and Mitchell achieve freedom by placing themselves into a broader social context – Leonard by reasserting the social power of language; Mitchell by 'do[ing] some good in the world.'

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<sup>65</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, pp. 670-1.

<sup>66</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, p. 894.

<sup>67</sup> *The Marriage Plot*, pp. 677-8.

### ***The Art of Fielding: Human Flourishing as Self-Alienation***

Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding* problematizes the human flourishing which is at the heart of liberal education. Westish College is an institution which is defined by liberal conceptions of education. For students Henry, Mike and Owen, education is defined by three distinct objectives: Henry attempts to achieve an abstracted form of a human ideal; Mike's education is defined by the needs of the college community; Owen pursues individualistic intellectual activities. These students engage with three paradigms of human flourishing which remain central to liberal education – those expounded by Aristotle, Plato and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While these theorists differ in key respects, they share an ultimately teleological view of flourishing as the goal of education. *The Art of Fielding* problematizes these conceptions in two key ways. Firstly, Harbach's novel emphasises the extent to which these paradigms introduce a normative element into educational provision, confining students' personal agency. Secondly, *The Art of Fielding* emphasises the extent to which such teleological perspectives alienate students from their wider communities. The experiences of elite students in *The Art of Fielding* engage with the experiences of students everywhere in contemporary American higher education: students must aim to achieve a defined norm, a standard which prevents their engagement with wider society.

Paradigms of self-actualization define the objective of personal development through education. In a discussion of self-actualization in liberal education models, Daniel R. DeNicola emphasises that human flourishing requires a definition of 'a normative individuality', however, the norm itself varies according to various conceptualisations.<sup>68</sup> In particular, DeNicola delineates between three different perspectives:

[S]ome theories in this paradigm are directed only at the self-actualized human being; such a generic account may look to an account of human nature, to distinctively human capacities, or to indices of human wellbeing and flourishing to determine what should be developed in the learner. Other theories give an account of actualized types of human beings, drawing upon gender differences or social mores or roles for normative qualities. Still others focus on individual development and look to the unique potential and perceived promise of the individual student.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> DeNicola, *Learning to Flourish*, p. 83.

<sup>69</sup> *Learning to Flourish*, p. 84.

These three positions are exemplified by the educational paradigms articulated by Aristotle, Plato, and Rousseau. Aristotle emphasises the role of education in the achievement of a generalizable human ideal; as the broader focus of *The Republic* might suggest, Plato aligns personal development with the performance of particular social functions; Jean-Jacques Rousseau offers an approach which centralises students' individual characters, requiring their detachment from society.

The primacy of personal development in liberal education models presupposes the desirability of such teleological conceptions of education, however, this assumption has been challenged. DeNicola's work itself, when noting the importance of 'normative individuality', gestures towards the extent to which these three conceptions of human flourishing are imposed upon students.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, as Anthony O'Hear and Marc Sidwell note, the notion of human flourishing itself 'is not student-centred'.<sup>71</sup> These observations emphasise the extent to which the ideals to be achieved are imposed upon students, denying their agency. In the work of Jane Roland Martin, personal development is presented as a path which leads to both personal and social alienation. While Martin particularly critiques the approaches of Plato and Rousseau, she argues that such alienation results from the assumption 'that a well developed mind is governed by reason, that [a] rational mind is defined as the acquisition of knowledge and understanding', a view which 'is generally accepted [as] the object of liberal education'.<sup>72</sup> This assumption, Martin argues, results in two significant 'splits':

Because we equate educated persons with educated minds and interpret the concept of mind narrowly, a split between reason and emotion is also built into our ideal. But this is not all. Valuing rationality for its contributions to self-control and personal autonomy, we embrace an ideal that cuts the self off from others.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, Martin not only critiques the ideals articulated by Plato, Aristotle, and Rousseau, but also the conception of education as a journey towards unity or personal wholeness. While Martin's work has focused on the experiences of women, *The Art of Fielding* highlights that this experience is a defining feature of contemporary American higher education for white,

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<sup>70</sup> *Learning to Flourish*, p. 83.

<sup>71</sup> *Learning to Flourish*, p. 19.

<sup>72</sup> Jane Roland Martin, 'Redefining the Educated Person: Rethinking the Significance of Gender', *Educational Researcher*, 15:6 (1986), pp. 6-10 (p. 7).

<sup>73</sup> Martin, 'Redefining the Educated Person', p. 7.

male elites.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Harbach's novel engages with the paradigms offered by Plato, Aristotle and Rousseau, revealing the manner in which these pedagogies define oppressive norms which lead to the division of the self and the alienation of individuals from others.

In *The Art of Fielding*, students' achievement of a universal ideal is contextualised within a college community which is devoid of social tensions. Throughout the novel, racial tensions are persistently avoided – racial conflicts in the colleges' baseball team are elided; Owen's mother 'breezily' touches her hair and casually refers to the possible termination of her employment as a result of her hairstyle - the novel avoids discussion of the politicization of Black women's hair, particularly on television.<sup>75</sup> Differences in class are also eased of tension when Pella, the Dean's daughter, arrives at Westish and begins working in the college canteen. Pella is a dedicated employee and values the chef's superior knowledge; when she asks for a last-minute provision of food with no payment, the chef offers no complaints. This social harmony has been noted by Anis Shivani in 'Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*: College Baseball as an Allegory for American National Greatness'. For Shivani, Westish College serves as 'a Platonic ideal of a college (or any social community) an abstraction to behold and admire' in which the avoidance of social tensions serves to obscure their causes.<sup>76</sup> This idealization, Shivani argues, extends to the students themselves:

Harbach's novel idealises the sphere of discursive production, the making of knowledge. The first step is to idealise the producers of knowledge, both students and teachers, making the enterprise immune to criticism. The discourse produces the subject, but the subject equally produces the discourse, hence power happily becomes an unidentifiable unknown, stripped of danger and externality. What is

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<sup>74</sup> Martin's works include: *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women, and Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and *Coming of Age in Academe: Rekindling Women's Hopes and Reforming the Academy*. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>75</sup> Chad Harbach, *The Art of Fielding* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011 [Kindle Edition]), p. 191. For a history of the politicization of Black hair in America, see Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2014). For recent controversies surround Black women's hair in television journalism, see Christina Santi, 'Black News Anchor Fired After Wearing 'Unprofessional' Natural Hair', *Ebony* (16<sup>th</sup> January 2019), online: <https://www.ebony.com/culture/black-news-anchor-fired-unprofessional-natural-hair/> [accessed: 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

<sup>76</sup> Shivani, 'Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*', p. 45.

being idealised is powerlessness – not the absence of power, but its prolific diffusion.<sup>77</sup>

Shivani's discussion particularly highlights the relationship between students' experiences, Westish College and wider society. In Shivani's articulation, the idealisation of students' subjectivity is one aspect of a broader social detachment of Harbach's work. This divorce, in turn, precludes the students' engagement with broader social mechanics.

Like *The Art of Fielding*, Plato, Aristotle and Rousseau presented their humanistic ideals in the broader context of utopian societies. In an overview of utopian visions, Robert Appelbaum defines Plato's *The Republic* (375) as the start of a tradition to which Rousseau is also a prominent contributor, in both *Emile* (1762) and *The Social Contract* (1762).<sup>78</sup> Aristotle's position in the utopian canon is ambiguous, particularly due to his empiricist approach, however, if utopian visions can be defined as '[p]rojection of ideal states or alternative worlds, ordered for the benefit of all and where there exist no social ills', as it is in *Philip's Encyclopaedia*, Aristotle's *Politics* meets these requirements.<sup>79</sup> This utopianism implicates the human ideals presented by Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau and *The Art of Fielding*. When Frederic Jameson claims 'the city itself as a fundamental form of the Utopian image', the significance of the relationship between the individual, community, and the State is implicated.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the enclosed college campus replicates the closure, which Jameson equates to 'totality', a significant feature of utopian visions.<sup>81</sup> These totalities require the divorce of utopias from wider society. In 'The Concept of Utopia', Fátima Viera links this spatial disconnection to temporal disconnection:

In fact, at the onset of literary utopianism, we can but find static, ahistorical utopias. Such utopias reject their past (faced as anti-utopian), offer a frozen image of the

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<sup>77</sup> 'Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*', p. 50.

<sup>78</sup> Robert Appelbaum, 'Utopia and Utopianism' in Andrew Hadfield (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of English Prose 1500-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Online: <10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199580682.013.0017> [accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> February 2021].

<sup>79</sup> N.A., 'Utopianism' in *Philip's Encyclopedia*. (London: Philip's, 2008). Online: <<https://search-credoreference-com.gold.idm.oclc.org/content/entry/philipency/utopianism/0?institutionId=1872>> [accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> February 2021]. See Michael Jackson, 'Designed by Theorists: Aristotle on Utopia', *Utopian Studies*, 12:2 (2001), pp. 1-12 for discussion of Aristotle's uneasy position in utopian studies, and an argument for his inclusion.

<sup>80</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso Books, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, p. 5.

present, and eliminate the idea of a future from their horizon: there is no progress after the ideal society has been established. There is a reason for this situation: the imagined society is put forward as a model to be followed, and models are frozen images that don't allow for historical change after they have been instituted.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, the enclosed totality of Westish College can be juxtaposed with the historicised utopian vision which Viera particularly identifies in Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). The utopian setting of *The Art of Fielding* implicates the development of students' subjectivity: students are fundamentally reliant upon the college institution in which they contribute to the idealised community; however, this connection severs students' relationship to wider society – they are figures which are incongruous with the community outside of Westish's walls.

At Westish, Henry Skrimshander attempts to achieve a particularly abstract conception of the human ideal. At the beginning of the novel, Henry is playing baseball in rural South Dakota. Henry is a gifted player, however, his talents are not valued by his wider community – his father doesn't understand his love of the game and would prefer Henry to choose a practical avenue, such as bookkeeping or metal work. College baseball scouts are uninterested, despite his talent, due to his relatively-meagre size. However, after seeing Henry play baseball, Mike Schwartz views him as an ethereal being and Mike views him as a 'genius'.<sup>83</sup> Henry developed as a shortstop in large part due to the influence of a book written by Aparicio Rodriguez, with which Harbach's novel shares its name. Rodriguez's is the only book Henry owns, a book which he has 'more or less memorized' in his quest to become the ultimate shortstop.<sup>84</sup> This achievement would be marked by beating Rodriguez' record for the number of error-free games, a goal Henry strives towards in the novel's opening sections. This quest accompanies the detachment of Henry from physical concerns. At Westish, the barriers his body previously constituted are swiftly overcome. Insecure about his own body when compared to Mike's muscularity, Henry imagines he will find 'twelve hundred Mike Schwartzes, huge and mythic and grave' at Westish however, these concerns prove

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<sup>82</sup> Fátima Viera, 'The Concept of Utopia' in Gregory Claeys (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 3-27 (p. 9).

<sup>83</sup> Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, p. 6.

<sup>84</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 15.



unfounded.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, any initial difficulties Henry may have encountered are briefly addressed in the novel's opening chapters, before Henry builds a close community among his peers on the baseball field. Neither Henry's physique nor inexperience with weights prove a problem with the other players: 'among his teammates he flourished.'<sup>86</sup> At Westish, it is only Henry's ability as a shortstop which is significant and guarantees his place in the community.

However, *The Art of Fielding* depicts Henry's inability to productively engage with, or achieve, his human ideal. During the game in which he would overtake Aparicio's record Henry makes an error and hits Owen with an 'errant throw.'<sup>87</sup> Traumatized, Henry falls into a deep depression from which he is only saved by, significantly, knocking himself out in the team's final game of the season. Justin D. Edwards has highlighted the significance of Henry's experiences:

Henry's subsequent paralysis and inability to play reflect his now debilitating relationship with Aparicio. The shadow of the "original" shortstop envelops Henry and converts him into a mere copy of the "real" record-breaking player whom Henry can now neither pursue nor supersede.<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, at the end of the novel, Henry rejects an offer to join his dream baseball team, St. Louis Cardinals, in favour of continuing at Westish. In order to convince Mike, Henry agrees to sacrifice his own personal interests, as Mike says: 'Whatever happens with your wing, whatever happens with your head, it doesn't matter. Whatever's best for the team is best for you.'<sup>89</sup> At the end of *The Art of Fielding*, Henry has abandoned his quest to achieve an idealised form of humanity in favour of a stable and secure community at Westish.

Henry's arrival and objective at Westish mirrors the teleological objective of education particularly outlined by Aristotle. For Aristotle, the principle objective of education is the achievement of the 'good' or 'noble' life:

[...] everyone who has the power to live according to his own choice should set up for himself some object for a noble life [...] with a view to which he will govern all his

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<sup>85</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 15.

<sup>86</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 48.

<sup>87</sup> Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, p. 79. Henry hits Owen with a throw on p. 69.

<sup>88</sup> Justin D. Edwards, 'Reading the Signs: Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*, Baseball and the Graphic Imagination', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59:5 (2018), pp. 509-18 (p. 512).

<sup>89</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 509.

conduct, since not to have one's life organized with reference to some end is a mark of great folly.<sup>90</sup>

As Aristotle suggests, here the noble life is the ultimate goal of education because it is the quality which can determine all actions. While other actions and personal qualities may be desirable, these are only desirable to the extent that they contribute towards living a noble life. Aristotle establishes a particularly hierarchical perspective in his educational theory – the noble life is the ultimate *telos* of education; other actions are, as D. S. Hutchinson suggests, 'lower objectives.'<sup>91</sup> Aristotle's discussion has clear implications for Henry's experiences at Westish. For Henry, Aparicio Rodriguez embodies the ideal of a good or noble life; an external ideal is established for which Henry must strive. However, Henry is not able to achieve this ultimate ideal, rendering his life less worthy according to Aristotle's schema.

Henry's experiences also illustrate how Aristotlean idealism leads to self-alienation. As Hutchinson further highlights, Aristotle emphasised the split between the body and the mind which was important for the achievement of human ideals:

Like every other creature in the world, man has a particular nature, which is to be a creature directed by a rational soul. [...] Living well means living one's life under the guidance of the virtues of the soul. Since success is a perfect and self-sufficient objective, it must include the whole of life and all the most important virtues. Success in life, the best possible good for man, is therefore living one's whole life in a rational way, under the guidance of the best virtues of the rational soul.<sup>92</sup>

It is this focus on rational development for which Jane Roland Martin criticizes Aristotle's conception of the human ideal: 'a split between reason and emotion built into our definitions of excellence too, for we take the aim of a liberal education to be the development not of mind as a whole, but of rational mind.'<sup>93</sup> For Martin, this split is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, the weight placed on the rational mind values solitary contemplation rather than social action. Furthermore, Martin argues, when placed in a broader context, primacy is bestowed upon characteristics commonly attributed to men, excluding women from

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<sup>90</sup> Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011 [Apple Books Edition]), p. 95

<sup>91</sup> D. S. Hutchison, 'Ethics' in Jonathan Barnes (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 195-232 (p. 201).

<sup>92</sup> Hutchison, 'Ethics', p. 202.

<sup>93</sup> Jane Roland Martin, 'Becoming Educated: A Journey of Alienation or Integration?', *The Journal of Education*, 167:3 (1985), pp. 71-84 (p. 73).

educational paradigms. Martin's observations emphasise the extent to which Aristotle's idealistic conception is divorced from society. This fissure is illustrated in *The Art of Fielding*. In Harbach's work, Henry must choose between rationality and action – in both Rodriguez's work and in his time at Westish, intellectual activity - the achievement of Aristotle's ideals - is juxtaposed with the social and physical realm. At the novel's conclusion, Henry chooses communality and sacrifices rationality.

While Henry's experiences undermine the conception of an abstracted human ideal, Mike Schwartz's experiences problematize socially-grounded conceptions of human flourishing. For Mike, Westish is juxtaposed with an unstable and dangerous adolescence. Mike's mother died from cancer when he was 14 years old. Following her death, Mike abandons school to work in a foundry. However, his high school football coach confronts Mike about his truancy, and convinces him to return to school. At Westish, Mike becomes an embodiment of the colleges' values of 'sacrifice, passion, desire, attention to detail, the need to strive like a champion every day.'<sup>94</sup> As well as achieving these personal values, Mike is an important member of the Westish community. He is the captain of the football and baseball teams; recruits members for these teams; and performs this leadership role outside of the stadium by caring for Pella and Henry's sister when she visits campus. These personal qualities coexist with Mike's intellectual interests. The same skills which are valuable in football and baseball underscore Mike's dedication to his studies. As captain of the sports teams, Mike operates democratically, 'because the clash of imperfect ideas was the only way for anyone, including himself, to learn and improve. That was the lesson of the Greeks; that was the lesson of Coach Liczic'.<sup>95</sup> As well as his sporting achievements, Mike embodies the blend of intellectualism and leadership skills. Thus, Mike exemplifies a particularly broad conception of human flourishing, encompassing both physical and intellectual achievements while aligning these achievements with social requirements.

Mike Schwartz's experiences ultimately reveal the alienation of the college from wider society. Pella realises that 'to Mike [Westish] was everything, his home and family, the place into which he'd poured every bit of himself'.<sup>96</sup> Mike embodies Westish's liberal education, and his aims to overcome his disadvantaged upbringing to attend Law School and

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<sup>94</sup> Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, p. 11.

<sup>95</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 102.

<sup>96</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 195

eventually ‘becoming governor’ align with the egalitarian objectives of the liberal tradition.<sup>97</sup> However, Schwartz’s applications to ‘top-notch’ Law Schools are rejected, contradicting Christopher Findeisen’s assertion that Schwartz has learned skills which ‘potential employers consider undeniably valuable off the field of athletic competition’.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, Schwartz himself reflects that ‘to motivate people, manipulate people, move them around; this was his only skill.’<sup>99</sup> At the end of the novel, he is offered a coaching position at Westish, ‘doing what [he’s] been doing for the past four years. Except instead of paying for the privilege, [he’d] be getting paid.’<sup>100</sup> Mike’s fate at the end of the novel reinforces the juxtaposition between Westish and wider society. While Mike becomes an embodiment of Westish’s values and is a significant member of the college community, these skills are not valued outside Westish.

Mike Schwartz particularly embodies the figure of the guardian which Plato presents as an archetypal ideal in *The Republic*. Plato clearly outlines the qualities which are important for guardians in Book II. These include ‘acute senses, speed in pursuit of what they detect, and strength as well’.<sup>101</sup> These physical characteristics are clearly required for the protection of the Just State, however, Plato also emphasises certain intellectual qualities ‘to stop them being aggressive towards one another and the rest of the citizens.’<sup>102</sup> Thus, in order to distinguish between the right and wrong action, the friend and the enemy, guardians must ‘be also by temperament a lover of wisdom, a philosopher.’<sup>103</sup> To summarize, Plato offers that ‘the person who is going to be a good and true guardian of our city be a lover of wisdom, spirited, swift and strong’.<sup>104</sup> Plato’s discussion highlights the extent to which social determinism defines specific qualities which are desirable in individuals. It is the role of the guardians which defines the qualities to be instilled, and drawn out, through education. Indeed, throughout Book II and III, Plato’s Socrates designs a particular curriculum designed to create citizens who will be able to fulfil the guardians’ role. This approach, in itself, limits students’ personal agency and Jane Roland Martin emphasises the impacts of Plato’s

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<sup>97</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 116.

<sup>98</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 95; Christopher Findeisen, “‘The One Place Where Money Makes No Difference’: The Campus Novel from *Stover at Yale* to *The Art of Fielding*”, *American Literature*, 88:1 (2016), pp. 67–91 (p. 78).

<sup>99</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 408.

<sup>100</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 425.

<sup>101</sup> Plato, *The Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 58

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, p. 59.

<sup>104</sup> *The Republic*, p. 60.

utilitarian approach: '[i]n Plato's Just State, where, because of their rational powers, the specially educated few will rule the many, a young man's image of himself as "only a body doing a job" is the desired one.'<sup>105</sup>

However, Mike is denied the fulfilment that even a social role would offer. Despite his embodiment of an established ideal which still holds authority in American higher education, Mike is unable to find a job. Mike's experiences highlight the extent to which the demands of wider society explicitly contradict the values of Westish College. This deviation has been noted throughout contemporary scholarship on liberal education; indeed, it has prompted such scholarship which particularly emphasises the continued value of liberal education in contemporary society. In *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*, Michael S. Roth 'argues that the demand that we replace broad contextual education meant to lead to lifelong learning with targeted vocational undergraduate instruction is a critical mistake', a mistake which prompted Roth's own reconsideration of liberal education.<sup>106</sup> In *Not for Profit*, Martha Nussbaum articulates similar lamentations:

Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements.<sup>107</sup>

It is not only academics who have noticed this conflict. Mike's experiences also illustrate the complaints of students during the wave of protests in 2009: '*[t]he crisis of the university today is the crisis of the reproduction of the working class, the crisis of a period in which capital no longer needs us as workers.*'<sup>108</sup> These commentaries emphasise the extent to which Mike's achievement of idealistic qualities serves to detach him from his community. *The Art of Fielding* represents Westish as a bastion of liberal values within a broader context of a society in which they are no longer valued; Mike's embodiment of those ideals alienate him from the community outside Westish.

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<sup>105</sup> Jane Roland Martin, 'Becoming Educated', p. 74.

<sup>106</sup> Michael S. Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 15.

<sup>107</sup> Roth, *Beyond the University*, p. 2.

<sup>108</sup> Clare Solomon and Tania Palmieri ed. *Springtime: The New Student Rebellions* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 156 (original italics).

For Henry and Mike, education is a transformative experience, for Owen Dunne, however, attendance at Westish College is presented as part of a journey towards self-actualization. Unlike Henry and Mike, Owen has a particularly intellectual disposition. When his mother Genevieve visits Westish, she reveals that Owen was reading Walt Whitman at the age of twelve and Owen himself discloses that an academic treatise written by Guert Affenlight, the Dean of Westish, was particularly influential upon his pubescent years at the age of fourteen. Indeed, Owen's intellectualism is particularly innate – when reflecting upon Owen's application for the Maria Westish Scholarship, Affenlight concedes that Owen didn't have the highest test scores, but he was impressed by the breadth of his reading and 'the elegance of the young man's essays'.<sup>109</sup> Upon his arrival at Westish, Owen is already 'self-assured and patient', experiencing none of the uncertainties or conflicts which particularly characterise Henry's arrival at college.<sup>110</sup> These qualities further characterise Owen's engagement with the Westish community. When Owen presents himself at the tryouts for the baseball team, he forthrightly asks the coach if he has a problem with a gay man on the team. Introducing himself to Henry, Owen blithely refers to himself as '[Henry's] gay mulatto roommate' - the novel fails to address the complex history of the term and its offensive connotations.<sup>111</sup> On a personal level, too, Owen accepts a position of authority. Becoming aware that Henry is insecure at Westish, Owen takes him to buy some clothes; when developing a romantic relationship with Guert Affenlight – the Dean's first homosexual relationship – Owen is similarly compassionate and considerate. In particular, Owen's time at

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<sup>109</sup> Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, p. 77.

<sup>110</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 79.

<sup>111</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 18. 'Mulatto' is defined as 'a person who has one parent who is black and one who is white' in R.E. Allen ed. *The Penguin English Dictionary* (London: Penguin Books, 2007) online:

<<https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/penguineng/mulatto/0?institutionId=1872>> [Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020]. A contentious term, 'mulatto' evokes the widespread sexual assault of enslaved Black women, discriminatory miscegenation laws, and colorism within Black communities. For an overview of the history of the term and discriminatory cultural representations see David Pilgrim, 'The Tragic Mulatto Myth', *Ferris State University* (n.d.), online: <<https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mulatto/>> [accessed: 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020]. For more contemporary controversies, see Lindsay Catherine Harris, 'Mulatto: It's Not a Cool Word', *The Atlantic* (4<sup>th</sup> March 2016), online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/471885/mulatto-its-not-a-cool-word/> [accessed: 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020] and Taylor Telford, 'IBM apologizes for using ethnic labels like 'yellow' and 'mulatto' in job application', *The Washington Post* (26<sup>th</sup> February 2019), online: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/02/26/ibm-apologizes-using-ethnic-labels-like-yellow-mulatto-job-application/> [accessed: 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020].

Westish are ones wherein his natural talents and qualities enable him to form relationships in the student community based on mutual understanding.

Despite his ability to form social bonds, Owen's education is represented as the path away from his community. Due to his intellectual interests, Owen is nicknamed Buddha by the other members of the baseball team, a moniker which establishes Owen's inhabitation of a higher plane. Further contrasting the experiences of Henry and Mike, Owen has left Westish at the end of the novel, taking up a scholarship in Japan. Owen's detachment from the community at Westish is mirrored in the novel's language. Owen's skin is referenced sparingly throughout the novel, only being described as 'the color of weak coffee' upon his introduction.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, Owen is frequently symbolized by the objects in his room:

Even in Owen's absence, [the dormroom] Phumber 405 suggested his whole existence so palpably that Henry, as he sat alone and bewildered on his bed, was often struck by the eerie thought that Owen was present and he himself was not.<sup>113</sup>

While much attention is paid to Henry's physical development and Mike's physical imperiousness, it is vague, aestheticized language that is frequently used to describe Owen: he is 'lovely', 'beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, in the way that a shattered dynastic vase might be beautiful,' 'vulnerable and [once again] lovely'; Guert Affenlight considers Owen his 'saintly lover'.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, for Guert Affenlight, Owen is detached from biology itself: Owen is 'one who seemed too well formed to have sprung from sperm and egg and that whole imperfect error-prone process'.<sup>115</sup> Such physical detachment particularly requires the erasure of Owen's race, emphasised by Guert's realisation upon meeting Owen's mother: 'Owen's black, Affenlight thought. He'd known this, of course, but seeing his mother made it plain.'<sup>116</sup> In this way, Owen's educational journey is concluded by his own social and physical detachment.

Owen's journey to self-actualization in *The Art of Fielding* is evocative of the educational paradigm outlined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In particular, Owen's experiences represent his education as a seamless continuation of his natural talents. Contrasting with the work of Plato and Aristotle, Rousseau's 'ideal' emanates from the student, rather than

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<sup>112</sup> Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, p. 17.

<sup>113</sup> Harbach, *The Art of Fielding*, p. 22.

<sup>114</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 77; p. 120; p. 122; p. 228.

<sup>115</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 167.

<sup>116</sup> *The Art of Fielding*, p. 167.

externally. However, Rousseau's work also problematizes this student-centred ideal. Owen's intellectual achievements illustrate the ideal of the natural man articulated by Rousseau, as Denise Schaeffer has summarised:

The "perfection" of our form as we leave the hands of the author is itself an abstraction, an ideal—and disembodied—state of perfect freedom, altered by confinement in a human body and further altered by the unnatural confinement to which that body is subjected over the course of a human life.<sup>117</sup>

Like Aristotle and Plato, Rousseau presents a distinct split between the human ideal and corporeality. Prominently depicted by Owen's experiences, however, is the extent to which the achievement of this human ideal requires the sublimation of his race. In *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*, David Goldberg explicitly relates this process with the expansion of neoliberalism. In a society dominated by market logic, Goldberg argues, racial diversity is '[subject] to well-established controls long set in place, bounded by racial presumptions now more or less implicit – sublimated, rendered explicitly raceless – about merit, excellence, and beauty taken as unquestioned givens.'<sup>118</sup> This sublimation is exemplified in Owen's otherworldly detachment throughout the novel, and the language with which he is described. Furthermore, Goldberg highlights, any so called diversity predicated on such racial sublimation functions to 'mimic or emulate the standards and habits of whiteness, of Euro- or Anglo-mimesis racially preconceived.'<sup>119</sup> The Rousseauesque form of Owen's education is particularly implicated. It is Owen's academic interests that constitute a particularly strong bond with the Guert Affenlight, in the form of Affenlight's book which influenced Owen's adolescence, their shared recitation of poetry and frequent discussions. The aestheticization of Owen throughout *The Art of Fielding* evokes a particularly normative human ideal; however, while Mike and Henry's whiteness proves no obstacle to their personal development, Owen's requires the exclusion of his blackness.

Owen's experiences also illustrate the extent to which Rousseau's pedagogy problematizes public engagement. Owen relationships with both Henry and Guert Affenlight illustrate the particularly significant role Rousseau attributed to pity - Owen establishes

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<sup>117</sup> Denise Schaeffer, *Rousseau on Education, Freedom and Justice* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2014), p. 29.

<sup>118</sup> Goldberg, 342

<sup>119</sup> Goldberg, (342)



relationships based on an empathetic understanding of their experiences. As Nicholas Dent highlights, Rousseau emphasises ‘the role of pity or compassion in establishing a bond between people and creating a footing for them in one another’s lives which will not be corrupting and have ill effects.’<sup>120</sup> However, such ill effects are felt by Owen; his transition from an immature *amour-propre* to the communal *amour-de-soi* requires the abandonment of his racial identity in order to be assimilated into a normatively white community.<sup>121</sup> In Rousseau’s work, a dialectical form of social engagement similarly characterises Emile’s contributions to wider society following the completion of his education. In Book V, Emile’s tutor – Jean-Jacques – articulates two key features of Emile’s relationship to wider society. Firstly, ‘[laws] give him the courage to be just even among wicked men. It is not true that they have not made him free. They have taught him to reign over himself.’<sup>122</sup> This individualism is reinforced by Rousseau’s conceptualisation of Emile’s role in wider society. For Emile and Sophie, Jean-Jacques imagines a life of seclusion in the country; Emile ‘[has] not taken on the sad job of telling the truth to men’ but should focus on cultivating friendships and being a good example for his community.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, for Jean-Jacques, such communalism is particularly contrasted with service to the state.<sup>124</sup> In contrast to the educational program Rousseau outlined for future citizens, Emile is detached from his community at the end of Rousseau’s work.<sup>125</sup> This is Owen’s fate in *The Art of Fielding*. Detached from the experiences of the Black community due to the sublimation of his racial identity, and removed from his peers due to his intellectualism, Owen remains isolated from the community at Westish, and beyond.

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<sup>120</sup> Nicholas Dent, *Rousseau* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 102.

<sup>121</sup> *Amour-propre* causes individuals to over-value others’ opinions of them, leading to a relational sense of self. *Amour-de-soi* is a recognition each individual’s value, and allows adolescents to take their rightful position in an egalitarian society, wherein each member’s value is recognised. (See N.J.H. Dent and T. O’Hagan, ‘Rousseau on Amour-Propre’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes, 72 (1998), pp. 57-75 for a detailed discussion).

<sup>122</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 473.

<sup>123</sup> Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 474.

<sup>124</sup> Rousseau, *Emile*, pp. 474-5.

<sup>125</sup> Rousseau outlined his conception of education for citizenship in *Discourse on Political Economy* (1758) and *Considerations on the Government of Poland* (1772). See Schaeffer, *Rousseau on Education*, pp. 174-96 for discussion.

### ***I am Charlotte Simmons: The Elite University and Massified Society***

Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons* begins with a fictionalised reference entry about Victor Ransome Starling, '[a] twenty-eight-year-old assistant professor of psychology at Dupont University'.<sup>126</sup> The introduction outlines Starling's early work, wherein sections of cats' brains were removed which 'caused animals to veer helplessly from one inappropriate affect to another'.<sup>127</sup> While this consequence was well-known, Starling's most significant discovery was the effect of the cats' behaviour on the control group, who start displaying similar 'hypermanic' behaviour.<sup>128</sup> Thus:

Starling had discovered that a strong social or —cultural atmosphere, even as abnormal as this one, could in time overwhelm the genetically determined responses of perfectly normal, healthy animals. Fourteen years later, Starling became the twentieth member of the Dupont faculty awarded the Nobel Prize.<sup>129</sup>

This summary of Starling's work introduces the key themes of Wolfe's novel – social conditioning undermining intellectual pursuits and human autonomy. Indeed, the novel highlights the extent to which the Dupont community endorses behaviour which precludes public engagement. In this way, *I am Charlotte Simmons* critiques the role of higher education by depicting the role of Dupont College in dismantling a functioning public sphere, precluding the public engagement which is so central to liberal education.

Central to liberal conceptions of education is the existence of a public space wherein students' individual opinions and ruminations upon social concerns can be voiced – the public sphere. In 'Is Civic Discourse Still Alive?', David D. Cooper provides a useful definition of the characteristics of a functioning public sphere. Structurally, Cooper emphasises the distinction between the public sphere and the realm of 'civil behaviour'.<sup>130</sup> While individual and collective action is a part of everyday life, the public sphere is specifically 'the marketplace of civic discourses', and the characteristics which Cooper goes on to define are those which encourage democratic conversations. In particular, Cooper identifies three features – strength, flexibility, and scale. The public sphere must be strong enough to persist

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<sup>126</sup> Tom Wolfe, *I am Charlotte Simmons* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004 [Kindle Edition]), p. 5.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> David D. Cooper, *Learning in the Plural: Essays on the Humanities and Public Life* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), p. 116.

despite the likely dissent and conflicting opinions which it must contain; flexible enough to accommodate new participants, modes of communication and the emergence of new issues; despite its explicitly public function, 'the framework [of the public sphere] needs enough human scale and respect for vernacular to sustain democracy as local, intimate, and interpersonal.'<sup>131</sup> The public sphere constitutes a liminal space between the individual and the social, at once allowing and guaranteeing the personal contributions to public issues for which liberal education strives.

The interrogative with which Cooper titles the above essay is suggestive of contemporary challenges to the integrity of the public sphere which undermine the future contributions of students. In 'Society in Transition', Paolo Freire highlights the way in which the public sphere is undermined:

But unfortunately, what happens to a greater or lesser degree in the various "worlds" into which the world is divided is that the ordinary person is crushed, diminished, converted into a spectator, maneuvered by myths which powerful social forces have created. These myths turn against him; they destroy and annihilate him.<sup>132</sup>

Freire's articulation reveals the way in which the characteristics outlined by Cooper are under threat. Freire highlights the extent to which the public sphere has become ossified – flexible values have become myths – which prevent individuals' productive engagement. Rather than strong, the values upheld within the public sphere have become oppressive. Freire also notes a contradictory scale – the public sphere is determined by 'social forces', precluding individual contributions. Indeed, Freire resists the term 'public sphere', instead referring to 'a "massified" society of adjusted and domesticated men.'<sup>133</sup> Myra Bergman Ramos has defined the process by which this society is created: '[a] "massified" society is one in which the people, after entering the historical process, have been manipulated by the elite into an unthinking, manageable agglomeration. This process is termed "massification."<sup>134</sup> Ramos' articulation illuminates the changing nature of elite higher education institutions in contemporary America. Rather than the creation of a future dominant elite, Wolfe's Dupont College constitutes the institutionalisation of elite power, a power, furthermore, which aims

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<sup>131</sup> Cooper, *Learning in the Plural*, p. 115.

<sup>132</sup> Paolo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (London and New York: Continuum Books, 2005), p. 5.

<sup>133</sup> Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, p. 7.

<sup>134</sup> *Education for Critical Consciousness*, p. 26.

to mould students into 'an unthinking, manageable agglomeration.' Consideration of *I am Charlotte Simmons* within the framework of Freire's work reveals how Wolfe's Dupont College itself perpetuates established, oppressive 'myths'; myths which, in turn, prevent students' critical engagement.

Charlotte's experiences emphasise the extent to which Dupont's community mirrors wider society. Hailing from a '[p]rimeval' town in North Carolina, Charlotte's initial appearance in the novel is at her graduation ceremony.<sup>135</sup> In Sparta, Charlotte is particularly 'humiliated and shamed' by her father's aggressive masculinity, her peers' sexual promiscuity, and her family's living conditions.<sup>136</sup> These concerns alienate Charlotte from her hometown society, however, she reassures herself that Dupont College will offer opportunities for self-fulfilment and the community she lacks in Sparta.<sup>137</sup> Unfortunately, she discovers that Dupont's community is defined by the very same values she was attempting to escape. Following her arrival, Charlotte remains particularly insecure about her economic class – she worries that her clothes are not fashionable and is self-conscious about her accent.<sup>138</sup> Charlotte is also appalled by the 'wanton sex life' of her peers, particularly at a fraternity party where 'she could see there were couples everywhere on the floor, dancing that way, locked mons pubis to mons pubis. She couldn't believe her eyes! They were simulating...intercourse! Right out in the open!'<sup>139</sup> Subsequently, at a student barbeque, Charlotte witnesses the same forms of masculine aggression previously-embodied by her father. While Charlotte had hoped to escape the values of her hometown, she encounters the same behaviour at Dupont.

The brothers of the Saint Ray fraternity at Dupont embody a particularly established form of the American social elite. Many of the Saint Ray brothers are wealthy legacy students and their popularity is emphasised by their romantic desirability and raucous parties.<sup>140</sup> The

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<sup>135</sup> Tom Wolfe, *I am Charlotte Simmons* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004 [Kindle Edition]), p. 8.

<sup>136</sup> Wolfe, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 10.

<sup>137</sup> Wolfe, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 10; p. 9.

<sup>138</sup> For Charlotte's concern about her accent see, for example, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 38-40; p. 64; p. 83.

<sup>139</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 39; p. 54.

<sup>140</sup> Legacy students are those whose family members attended the same college. For discussion of contemporary controversies, see Daniel A. Gross, 'How elite US schools give preference to wealthy and white 'legacy' applicants', *The Guardian* (23<sup>rd</sup> January 2019). Online: <

colonial environment of the Saint Ray formal further establishes the fraternity as members of the elite class. The formal is held in a 'lush romantic setting': '[t]hrough the leaves of all the trees [Charlotte] could see a dusk lit up ever so romantically by candles on regular regatta tables with white tablecloths.'<sup>141</sup> The dinner is held 'in a private section attended by waiters dressed like Caribbean army colonels behind walls of hedgerows'.<sup>142</sup> Meanwhile, the fraternity members drink 'ARISTOCRAT VODKA' and decorate the hotel with the Christian iconography of their fraternity; 'Vance looked like a young British aristocrat'.<sup>143</sup> For fraternity brother Hoyt Thorpe, '[i]f America ever had to go to war again, fight with the country's fate on the line, not just in some "police action," there would be only one source of officers other than the military academies: frat boys.'<sup>144</sup> The Saint Ray fraternity embody the perpetuation of an established elite group. Legacy students particularly exemplify higher education's structural role in the perpetuation of social elites and Wolfe's novel also engages with the established tradition of the campus novel, wherein college students' future military service reinforces their position as social elites.

The experiences of Charles Bousquet at Dupont exemplify the extent to which the college community replicates mechanics of white supremacy. Charles is socially well-regarded and is also academically successful – he is believed to have a 3.5 GPA and mocks Vernon Congers for not knowing the capital of Pennsylvania.<sup>145</sup> However, Charles remains under pressure to maintain the stereotypical image of the student-athlete. He becomes angry and defensive when he is 'accused of not only getting good grades...but of trying to get them' and, although he chooses rap music for the locker room, he is seen leaving a classical music concert, implying this is the genre of music he prefers.<sup>146</sup> Indeed, Charles, who 'had grown up in a reasonably affluent suburb of Washington, D.C.', 'only spoke ghetto when he was being ironic.'<sup>147</sup> Charles' code-switching and adherence to social norms highlights the novel's inability to represent Black identity. Indeed, throughout Wolfe's novel, the

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<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jan/23/elite-schools-ivy-league-legacy-admissions-harvard-wealthier-whiter>> [accessed: 5<sup>th</sup> January 2021].

<sup>141</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 111.

<sup>142</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 111.

<sup>143</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 109; p. 112.

<sup>144</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 27.

<sup>145</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 31.

<sup>146</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 15.

<sup>147</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, pp. 31-2; p. 78.

experiences of Black characters are persistently marginalised. Predominantly focalized through the eyes of four white characters, this narrative perspective performs an exclusionary function. While Dupont College is 'practically surrounded by black slums', when Charlotte is walking through the area, 'the slum's much-feared bad boys...were not to be seen'.<sup>148</sup> When Jojo attempts to join the conversation of four Black basketball players he is 'frozen out' of their conversation meaning that it is not included in the novel.<sup>149</sup> A similar narrative exclusion is exemplified when Adam visits the players' dorm: '[Adam] could hear, coming from behind the door he was just passing, an old Tupac Shakur CD going full blast'; 'Adam kept on walking...From behind that door, this door, this door, that door, came the unmistakable cracking sound of opposing forces colliding in video games.'<sup>150</sup> Charles' experiences and the novel's narrative device emphasise the dominance of whiteness and the exclusion of Black characters at Dupont. The elite college replicates racist mechanics which similarly operate in wider society.<sup>151</sup>

*I am Charlotte Simmons* represents Dupont as a site wherein established values are re-enforced. Charlotte's arrival at Dupont emphasises the colleges' perpetuation of superficial and hedonistic values; Hoyt embodies an elite figure which is recognisable from historical, political and literary traditions; Charles' experiences emphasise Dupont's role in the perpetuation of white supremacy. Furthermore, the deployment of the university as a microcosm of wider society is evocative of the institution's function in the earliest campus novels. This atemporality is a key mechanic of elite social control in the work of Paulo Freire. For Freire, epochal shifts reveal society's most pressing concerns and issues; engagement with the passage of time and historical contingencies enable individuals' critical engagement with society, and subsequent social change. Freire outlines this process: '[the] interplay of men's relations with the world and with their fellows does not (except in cases of repressive power) permit societal or cultural immobility. As men create, re-create, and decide, historical epochs begin to take shape.'<sup>152</sup> The erasure of distinct historical epochs signals the presence of a 'repressive power'. In order to maintain control, elites aim to mask historically-

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<sup>148</sup> Wolfe, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 6; p. 159.

<sup>149</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 15; p. 16.

<sup>150</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 33.

<sup>151</sup> See pp. 193-203 for further discussion of the relationship between higher education and institutional racism.

<sup>152</sup> Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, p. 4.

contingent concerns: '[o]rdinary men do not perceive the tasks of the time; the latter are interpreted by an "elite" and presented in the forms of recipes, of prescriptions.'<sup>153</sup> In the light of Freire's work, Dupont indeed functions as an elite institution, however, rather than an institution which *produces* the future American elite, Wolfe's college represents the institutionalisation of elite control. Dupont is a college wherein students are alienated from social change and existing social myths are replicated.

The students' fates emphasise how Dupont's endorsed behaviour precludes critical engagement. Charlotte has been subsumed within Dupont's social order which precludes productive engagement with her community. Throughout the novel, Charlotte's struggle against Dupont's values are particularly personified by her mother: when she is banished from her dormroom while her roommate has sex, Charlotte's first thought is to call her mother; when Charlotte acquires a fake ID to go to a bar, she dramatizes a conversation with her imaginary mother - she sees '[a] grim Momma was eyeing her.'<sup>154</sup> After having sex with Hoyt, Charlotte despairs: '[h]ad she mocked God? Momma's God?'<sup>155</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons* depicts Charlotte's travails as a particularly Oedipal struggle with her hometown values. However, her mother's influence is weakened after Charlotte's disappointing exam results. While Charlotte invents justification for these disappointments, her mother 'hadn't believed a word of it. All she found out for sure was that her little prodigy was, for some no doubt vile reason, a little liar.'<sup>156</sup> At the end of the novel, Charlotte imagines a more antagonistic conversation:

So why do you keep waiting deep in the back of my head, Momma, during my every conscious moment—waiting for me to have that conversation? Even if I were to pretend it were real, my —soul, the way you think it is, what could I possibly say? All right, I'll say, —I am Charlotte Simmons. That should satisfy the —soul, since it's not there in the first place.<sup>157</sup>

The resolution of conflict between Charlotte and her mother, and Charlotte's consequent reflections, emphasise the extent to which her envelopment within Dupont's social order requires the abandonment of critical engagement. It is Charlotte's academic *failure* which

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<sup>153</sup> *Education for Critical Consciousness*, p. 5.

<sup>154</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 86.

<sup>155</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 122.

<sup>156</sup> Wolfe, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 160.

<sup>157</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 163.

concludes the Oedipal struggle and results in her social assimilation; at the end of the novel, Charlotte has become 'Jojo Johanssen's girlfriend' and abandoned her academic interests.<sup>158</sup> Charlotte's experiences particularly highlight how socialization requires the abandonment of criticality, emphasising the extent to which Dupont precludes Charlotte's social engagement.

Hoyt's fate reveals a contradiction between elite colleges and wider society. Hoyt has reached his position of collegiate social influence by 'manufacturing a pedigree.'<sup>159</sup> While he comes from a disadvantaged background, '[h]e looked so great, had such confidence, projected such an aura, had cultivated such a New York Honk, it never occurred to anyone to question his autobiography.'<sup>160</sup> Hoyt's deceit secures him admittance to the prestigious Saint Ray fraternity and he continues to deploy these manipulative methods when attempting to blackmail a prominent politician into awarding him a job at a prestigious financial firm. Hoyt's initial success reinforces his self-perception as a Nietzschean *übermensch*: 'a knight riding through throngs of students trapped by their own slave mentality'.<sup>161</sup> However, Hoyt is ultimately unable to overcome entrenched social codes and hierarchies. The public revelation of the governor's behavior causes the rescindment of the job offer; Hoyt is faced with an underwhelming academic record and a bleak future. Hoyt's fate is contrasted with two of his fraternity brothers. It is 'Ivy', a legacy brother, who reveals Hoyt's actions to the press and causes his downfall; another legacy student, Vance, remains assured of a job due to his familial connections. Hoyt's experiences emphasize the continued power of established class systems and the extent to which higher education fail to challenge these structures in the world beyond the college campus.

The exertion of white supremacy precludes the productive social engagement of Black characters in *I am Charlotte Simmons*. Black characters are persistently denied developed subjectivity throughout Wolfe's novel, instead serving to symbolise white characters' experiences. Just as the 'Caribbean army colonels' establish the Saint Ray fraternity as a colonial elite, 'the big black girl, Helene' in Charlotte's dorm signifies the public awareness of Charlotte's trauma and her diminishing social position.<sup>162</sup> At the end of the novel, a Black woman represents Charlotte's social ascent. Arriving at the basketball game,

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<sup>158</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 162; p. 163.

<sup>159</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 31.

<sup>160</sup> Wolfe, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 31.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> Wolfe, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 111; p. 123.



Charlotte meets 'Treyshawn Diggs's mom, Eugenia, who embodies the mythical mammy character, whose 'stereotypical attributes' Kimberly Wallace-Sanders identifies as 'her deeply sonorous and effortlessly soothing voice, her infinite patience, her raucous laugh, her self-deprecating wit, her implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and her devotion to whites'.<sup>163</sup> Operating metaphorically, these characters particularly exemplify how white supremacy creates mythical figures which deny Black people the ability to critically engage with their communities. In addition, Charles' academic, sporting or social achievements are absent from academic criticism of Wolfe's novel. Peter Berkowitz argues that Wolfe's novel is 'a dramatization of how our universities miseducate [...] the freest generation the world has ever seen'; Elizabeth Amato argues that 'Jojo becomes the model student-athlete'; several critics would agree with Mickey Craig and Jon Fennell's description of Dupont as characterized by 'insouciance toward matters intellectual and moral'.<sup>164</sup> These analyses illustrate the absence of Charles' experiences in considerations of Wolfe's novel – these conclusions are each undermined through consideration of Charles' experiences. Charles' silencing and the metaphorical treatment of Black characters throughout *I am Charlotte Simmons* emphasise the extent to which Dupont's white supremacy deny Black characters' productive public engagement.<sup>165</sup> Like Charlotte, Charles and other Black characters are assimilated into a community which prevents their criticality.

Dupont's values prevent Charlotte, Hoyt and Charles from engaging in the public service which is central to liberal education. Charles and Charlotte's experiences illustrate the conclusion of Freire's conception of 'massification'. Charles' experiences are absent from academic criticism of the novel and the novel's white racial frame reduces the agency of

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<sup>163</sup> Kimberley Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), p. 2.

<sup>164</sup> Peter Berkowitz, 'He is Charlotte Simmons', *Policy Review*, 129 (2005), pp. 78-86 (p. 85); Elizabeth Amato, 'Science and the (Lockean) Pursuit of Happiness in Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons*', *Perspectives on Political Science*, 40:3 (2011), pp. 132 – 139 (p. 138); Mickey Craig and Jon Fennell, 'Wolfe Howling, or The Metamorphosis of Charlotte Simmons', *Perspectives on Political Science*, Spring (2007), pp. 103 – 110 (p. 104). See also Diane Ravitch, 'Sex, Drugs and More Sex and Drugs', *Education Next*, 6:1 (2006), online: <https://www.educationnext.org/sex-drugs/> [accessed: 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020]; Erin Aspenlieder, 'Novel Readings: Reimagining the Value of the University', *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 6:2 (2015), Article 7; Barbara Scrupski, 'Why the Critics Hate Charlotte Simmons', *Academic Questions*, 18 (2005), pp. 87 – 91.

<sup>165</sup> See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, New York: Random House, 1993) for discussion of these literary devices and the resultant reinforcement of white supremacy throughout the American literary tradition.

Black characters to merely signifying the experiences of white characters.<sup>166</sup> For Charlotte, social assimilation requires the abandonment of her intellectual pursuits. Charles and Charlotte's experiences particularly evoke the pernicious role of education outlined by Freire:

Nothing threatened the correct development of popular emergence [in Brazil] more than an educational practice which failed to offer opportunities for the analysis and debate of problems, or for genuine participation; one which not only did not identify with the trend toward democratization but reinforced our lack of democratic experience.<sup>167</sup>

Dupont illustrates this role of education in *I am Charlotte Simmons*. Neither Charlotte nor Charles are able to critically assess their social milieus, nor productively contribute. Hoyt's journey is more complex. Having succeeded, to a degree, in overcoming barriers constituted by wealth or familial connections at the beginning of the novel, Hoyt's attempts are ultimately rejected. Freire defines this process as 'naïve transitivity'.<sup>168</sup> Illustrating Freire articulations, Hoyt has become enamoured with the 'fanciful explanations' offered by social elites – he has become indoctrinated by the values which the fraternity espouses. While Hoyt exhibits 'the developing capacity for dialogue', and constitutes a particular challenge to established social hierarchies, he is ultimately 'deflected by sectarian irrationality into fanaticism', further precluding critical engagement.<sup>169</sup> Hoyt, Charles and Charlotte's experiences emphasise the role played by higher education in reinforcing existing social values, and inequalities, while also precluding students' engagement with the public sphere.

Adam's experiences signal a method by which established social hierarchies can be overcome. As an intellectual and a member of the school newspaper, Adam embodies the academic interests by which Charlotte initially characterised Dupont's community. Alongside

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<sup>166</sup> In *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*, Joe R. Feagin defines the white racial frame:

This white racial frame is broad and complex, as we have seen. Over time white Americans have combined in it a beliefs aspect (racial stereotypes and ideologies), integrating cognitive elements (racial interpretations and narratives), visual and auditory elements (racialized images and language accents), a "feelings" aspect (racialized emotions), and an inclination to action (to discriminate). Moreover, over centuries of operation this dominant white framing has encompassed both a strong positive orientation to whites and whiteness (a pro-white subframe) and a strong negative orientation to racial "others" who are exploited and oppressed (anti-others subframes). (p. 10).

<sup>167</sup> Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, p. 32.

<sup>168</sup> Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, p. 14.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

his friends in the 'Millennial Mutants', Adam advocates for 'an aristo-meritocracy', wherein intellectual ability is rewarded with a dominant social position.<sup>170</sup> However, at the beginning of the novel, Adam inhabits the bottom of Dupont's social hierarchy. Due to his lack of financial resources, Adam must work two jobs – delivering pizzas and acting as a tutor for the basketball team. In a community dominated by 'macho' definitions of masculinity, Adam is excluded due to his intellectual interests and non-athletic physique. After writing an essay for Jojo for a philosophy class, Adam is caught up in a plagiarism scandal which threatens his academic future. However, Adam is able to overcome the challenges he faces at Dupont and concludes the novel with a hopeful future. Adam works on a journalistic exposé of Hoyt's arrangement with the governor. Awaiting his suspension due to plagiarism, Adam discovers that his article has become a success and he fields enquiries from mainstream media outlets. Subsequently, Adam begins contributing to CNN and is confident of a future in journalism. Following this success, Adam receives an email from Jerome Quat, the professor who has made accusations of plagiarism. Lauding Adam for his role in dismantling elitist social structures, Quat drops the plagiarism case and enables Adam's bright future.

Adam's experiences emphasise the extent to which public engagement requires the abandonment of academic values. Adam's meteoric rise contradicts Dupont's value system – Adam is able to dethrone Hoyt's social supremacy and challenge political authority through his exposé. Adam's experiences illustrate the ambiguity with which the expansion of mass media in Freire's work and Charles Wright Mills, whom Freire cites in 'Education versus Massification'.<sup>171</sup> In this essay, Freire gestures towards the role of the media in a massified society:

Excluded from the sphere of decisions being made by fewer and fewer people, man is maneuvered by the mass media to the point where he believes nothing he has not heard on the radio, seen on television, or read in the newspapers.<sup>172</sup>

Here, Freire identifies two key features of the role of the media in a mass society: the extent to which the media limits the number of people engaged in communication, while also perpetuating social myths which consolidate elite control. Following Wright Mills, Freire

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<sup>170</sup> *I am Charlotte Simmons*, p. 65.

<sup>171</sup> Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, p. 31. See C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 302-305 for discussion of the role of the media.

<sup>172</sup> *Education for Critical Consciousness*, pp. 30-1

highlights the extent to which mass media constitutes the centralisation of communication, precluding the individual social engagement required for a functioning public sphere. This centralisation allows the media to replicate and disseminate the social myths which orchestrate 'man' in Freire's conceptualisation. In the context of Freire and Wright Mills' discussion, Adam's success signals his absorption within an institution which is a crucial component of elite control within massified societies. Adam's ability to counteract Dupont's social hierarchy in fact requires his collaboration with the very structures which Dupont similarly maintains. The extent to which Adam's actions contradict critical engagement is emphasised by the dichotomy established between his media success and the plagiarism case - Jerome Quat's withdrawal emphasises the way in which academic integrity is sacrificed for the mere veneer of social resistance.

### **Conclusion: Elitism in the Public School Novel and Contemporary Campus Novel**

As a genre which is preoccupied with the educational experiences of a national elite, the public school novel is a literary genre through which the experiences of elite students in contemporary American campus novels can be discussed.<sup>173</sup> Like the genre's American campus novel counterparts, public school novels engage with the future of British elites in three key ways: the depiction of elite institutions; depictions of elite students; and a didactic role in the *creation* of future elites. Public school novels prominently depict Rugby, or fictionalised institutions which bear a striking resemblance to it, as an ideal educational institution. Furthermore, public school novels depict homogeneously upper-class characters. For working-class readers, George Orwell claimed that the public school novel 'is a perfectly deliberate incitement to wealth-fantasy'; conversely Jeffrey Richards claims that this genre 'instructs the wider community in the educational values and virtues embodied in the image'.<sup>174</sup> In either conceptualisation, public school novels clearly perpetuated an idealised, fixed image of the elite, public school boy. Richards' comment also alludes to the didactic nature of the public school novel. In *Public School Literature, Civic Education and the Politics of Male*

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<sup>173</sup> In contrast to American usage, the term 'public school' in England and Wales denotes a fee-paying school, and is particularly associated with a number of elite institutions, such as Rugby (discussed below), Eton and Westminster.

<sup>174</sup> George Orwell, 'Boys' Weeklies' in *Collected Essays of George Orwell vol. 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 466; Jeffrey Richards, *Happiest Days: The Public Schools in English Fiction* (Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 2.

*Adolescence*, Jenny Holt argues that public school novels 'act as manuals in citizenship, teaching principles that can later be applied to the outside world.'<sup>175</sup> Public school literature is a fundamentally elite genre; comparison with the contemporary American campus reveals how contemporary texts challenge the elite status of higher education institutions, the elite status of university students, and the role of elites in wider society.

Public school novels depict educational institutions as sites dominated by rationality and predominantly concerned with socialization. Jenny Holt has highlighted this connection in her study of the public school genre: '[e]ighteenth century thinkers preoccupied by the twin principles of reason and sensibility, for example, produced juvenile narratives that traced the individual's progress from irrational childhood to rational adulthood.'<sup>176</sup> For M.O. Grenby, this journey from irrationality to rationality is aligned with the socializing function of educational institutions:

[W]hat we might call socialisation, or, to borrow a term from psychoanalysis, individuation. This, according to Carl Jung, is the way in which the wholeness of the self is established by integrating the individual psyche and the collective unconscious of the community, or at least its collective identity.<sup>177</sup>

These two elements are detached in contemporary campus novels, approaching a near binary opposition. In *The Marriage Plot*, intellectualism explicitly alienates students from wider society; in *The Art of Fielding*, Owen's academic achievements, in particular, alienate him from his community; in *I am Charlotte Simmons*, socialization requires the abandonment of intellectual pursuits. In this way, these novels undermine the values which prominently imbued educational institutions with their elite authority in public school novels.

A similar challenge characterises the role of students in both genres. The public school novel emerged during a time when childhood was of particular concern in British society – children under 14 began to outnumber adults of a working age; child labour conditions in both industrial and rural areas horrified the public; and the extension of the

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<sup>175</sup> Jenny Holt, *Public School Literature, Civic Education and the Politics of Male Adolescence* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), p. 6.

<sup>176</sup> Holt, *Public School Literature*, p. 9.

<sup>177</sup> M.O. Grenby, *Children's Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 92-3.

franchise, all served to turn public attention toward childhood and education.<sup>178</sup> This concern developed, according to Jenny Holt, into the genre of the public school novel:

These readers, it was thought, needed to be educated in ideas of duty and obedience rather than initiative and ingenuity. This was so that, as newly enfranchised citizens, they would value conformity and social stability and adhere to the status quo.<sup>179</sup>

Holt's observation highlights the importance of children to the continuation of established social principles. Similarly, Jacqueline Rose has observed the significance of children as a stabilizing force.<sup>180</sup> Children's literature, according to Rose's analysis, 'places on the child's shoulder the responsibility for saving humankind from the degeneracy of modern society.'<sup>181</sup> Holt and Rose's analyses indicate a spatial and temporal element to education in public school novels which illuminates the experiences of elite students in contemporary American campus novels. Like public school novels, students in *The Marriage Plot*, *I am Charlotte Simmons* and *The Art of Fielding* are placed within established traditions of educational achievement – the two cultures or patriarchal literary traditions; various paradigms for human flourishing; the perpetuation of elite values – these students do indeed 'adhere to the status quo.' Furthermore, academic institutions in these novels are explicitly removed from society, emphasising their role as idealised spaces detached from a similar social instability which characterised the social context of the public school novel. However, in contemporary American campus novels, students are by no means imbued with the responsibility of future leadership. Rather, the social fragmentation which characterises wider societies in these novels precludes their full achievement of the citizenship ideals for which they strive.

Responding to the social upheaval from which they emerged, public school novels depict a sense of social stability which is undermined in contemporary American campus novels. This solidity is particularly represented in the aesthetic style of the public school novel. Befitting their function - to integrate their readers and impart a fixed set of principles - these novels attempted a particularly realistic form. Jacqueline Rose has highlighted the connection between this aesthetic and the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

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<sup>178</sup> See Hugh Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood* (London: BBC Books, 2006), p. 161.

<sup>179</sup> Holt, *Public School Literature*, p. 2.

<sup>180</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan. or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: MacMillan, 1985), p. 44.

<sup>181</sup> Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 43.

One effect of this is that children's fiction has tended to inherit a very specific aesthetic theory, in which showing is better than telling: the ideal work lets the characters and events speak for themselves. This is a 'realist' aesthetic which shares with Rousseau's theory of language the desire for a natural form of expression which seems to be produced automatically and without mediation out of that to which it refers.<sup>182</sup>

Adhering to Rousseau's educational principles, as Rose identifies them, supports the instructive function of these texts – Rose highlights that, furthermore, the 'realism' of the texts contributes to the construction of a believable world 'in which [the reader] is being asked to participate'.<sup>183</sup> George Orwell noted the success of this ambition, as readers of *Boys' Weeklies* believed the characters and stories to be real.<sup>184</sup> Like public school novels, the aesthetics of contemporary American campus novels signal their engagement with wider society. Anis Shivani argues that *The Art of Fielding* is dominated by the 'reality effect':

[...] the redundant 'realistic' detail enhancing narrative credibility. In a sense, Harbach's entire book is a reality effect, everything in it superfluous, beside the point, the redundancy being the central element rather than a side note, so that the effect is all, and the reality the occasional jarring note that creeps in, only to be flattened by the prose stylist.<sup>185</sup>

Harbach's aesthetic style is indicative of the pervasive idealism which characterises Westish College and detaches it from society. In *I am Charlotte Simmons*, the narrative device both controls and invades the narrative, reflecting the role of social institutions in the students' lives. The fragmented narrative of *The Marriage Plot* emphasises the social detachment and instability which characterises wider society in Eugenides' novel. While sharing several features and approaches with the public school novel, this comparison reveals the challenge to the authority of 'elite' universities and their students. In the contemporary American campus novel, previous elites are consistently undermined and represented as detached from a social context which is characterised by a lack of critical engagement. A similar mechanic characterises the experiences of women in higher education institutions –

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<sup>182</sup> Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 60.

<sup>183</sup> Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, p. 62.

<sup>184</sup> Orwell, 'Boys' Weeklies', p. 469.

<sup>185</sup> Shivani, 'Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*', p. 50.

contemporary novels deviate from the explicitly political objectives of previous forms, and undermine the relevance of higher education for women.



#### Chapter 4: The Contemporary Women's Campus Novel

Campus novels featuring white female protagonists, and largely written by women, have consistently engaged with broader concerns of the feminist movement and its implications for women's higher education. The increased college attendance of white, middle women was one of the contributing factors to the growth of the American campus novel in the nineteenth century, and female students have continued to embody social changes. The earliest campus novels featuring female protagonists prevalently reinforced restrictive feminine roles – these novels served a hegemonic function, reassuring their readers that higher education for women would not lead to agitation for female liberation. When assimilation was a primary concern, novels followed the form of the classical *bildungsroman*. In particular, isolated childhoods were juxtaposed with college attendance, while the development of female friendships was emphasised in plots.

Nineteenth-century campus novels featuring female protagonists engage with the dominant concerns of 'first wave' feminism. In America, this movement was 'launched' by the Seneca Falls Convention, held in 1848. The resultant 'Declaration of Sentiments', signed by 100 of the 300 attendees, outlines a number of concerns which are evident in the period's campus novels - the distinction between the public and private sphere, and so-called 'double standards' issue, in particular. The document prominently features excerpts from the declaration of independence, if only to highlight the extent to which the values guaranteed to all American citizens were not available women. The period's most prominent activists – Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton – spearheaded the contemporary campaign for women's suffrage, an act which would cement women's contribution to the laws which governed their behaviour and signalled their entry into the public sphere. In addition, the 'Declaration of Sentiments' lamented differences in education between men and women, echoing the criticisms of distinctions between male and female education which Mary Wollstonecraft had earlier critiqued in *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Critics of women's education further relied upon the division between the public and private sphere. Prominently, Edward Clarke, in *Sex in Education* (1873), argued that education would result in reduced birth rates. Women's entry into the public sphere and the role of education was a

prominent concern in the nineteenth century, a topic which is reflected in the plots and forms of the campus novels of the period.

In the 1970s, contemporaneously with the political movements and social upheavals they depict, a number of campus novels feature female characters returning to college after being married and having children. These 're-entry novels', including Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977) and Dorothy Bryant's *Ella Price's Journal* (1972), juxtapose university experiences with strikingly similar home lives and domestic relationships. The women in these novels struggle with defined social expectations of women, often restricted to the home and family responsibilities. These novels exemplify an emerging literary genre of the period, defined by Lisa Marie Hogeland as the consciousness-raising novel:

The "master plot" of the CR novel traces a similar trajectory [to the consciousness-raising process], as the protagonist moves from feeling somehow at odds with others' expectations of her, into confrontations with others and with institutions, and into a new and newly politicized understanding of herself and society.<sup>1</sup>

Hogeland's outline of the consciousness-raising novel highlights the relationship between these novels, and the process of consciousness-raising itself. By faithfully reflecting this process, *The Women's Room* and *Ella Pryce's Journal* maintain the pedagogical relationship between campus novels, and their audiences. Rather than reinforcing the cultural values of higher education, these novels enlighten readers about the experiences of women in the domestic sphere. While this relationship is maintained, these consciousness-raising campus novels are scathing regarding college's ability to offer liberation for women.

French and Bryant's novels exemplify the campus novel's continued engagement with broader feminist concerns. According to Anna Quindlen, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) incited 'a great wave of change in which women demanded equality and parity under the law and in the workplace.'<sup>2</sup> This 'wave' could be termed 'second wave' feminism, and Friedan's work was indeed symptomatic of many of the aims and methodologies of the movement.<sup>3</sup> *The Feminine Mystique* emerged out of a survey Friedan

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Marie Hogeland, 'Sexuality in the Consciousness-Raising Novel of the 1970s on JSTOR', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5.4 (1995), pp. 601–632 (603).

<sup>2</sup> Anna Quindlen, 'Introduction' in Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, pp. 11-17 (p. 13).

<sup>3</sup> The use of the wave metaphor to distinguish feminist movements has been the subject of critique. See Kathleen Laughlin, et al., 'Is It Time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Waves Metaphor',

conducted of her college classmates, particularly enquiring about their post-college roles and mental health. Their responses prompted Friedan to identify 'the problem that has no name' – the almost-universal difficulties faced by women in domestic roles: Friedan outlined many symptoms, including feelings of guilt for individual ambitions, and fear of the neuroses ascribed to women who desired freedom from the family home.<sup>4</sup> As Sue Thornham has highlighted in an overview of the period: '[i]n bringing to public visibility the widespread frustration felt by her contemporaries, Friedan is a key contributor to the emphasis on consciousness-raising within second wave feminism.'<sup>5</sup> As Thornham highlights, consciousness-raising was a defining feature of 'second wave' feminism, defined in the *Radical Feminism* anthology as a process by which women's difficulties 'are recognized as a result not of an individual's idiosyncratic history and behavior, but of the system of sex-role stereotyping. That is, they are political, not personal, questions.'<sup>6</sup> These issues define the prominent concerns of *The Women's Room* and *Ella Price's Journal*, maintaining the university and campus novel's significance in feminist discourse.

'Second wave' consciousness-raising, technological advancements, globalization, and postmodern challenges to unified conceptions of identity have all led to a proliferation of contemporary feminisms which are interrogated in contemporary campus novels.<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Walker, whose declaration 'I am the Third Wave' articulated a movement away from 'second wave' feminist concerns, summarised the motivations for the transition:

For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories. [...] This way of ordering the world is especially difficult for a generation that has grown up

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*Feminist Formations*, 22:1 (2010), pp. 76 – 135 for an overview of criticisms, and more detailed accounts. To acknowledge this difficulty, 'second wave' will be placed in inverted commas.

<sup>4</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> Sue Thornham, 'Second Wave Feminism', in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. by Sarah Gamble (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 29–42 (p. 35).

<sup>6</sup> 'Consciousness-Raising' in Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine and Anita Rapone ed. *Radical Feminism*, pp. 280-281 (p. 280).

<sup>7</sup> Shelley Budgeon particularly identifies these causes in *Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

transgender, bisexual, interracial, and knowing and loving people who are racist, sexist, and otherwise afflicted.<sup>8</sup>

Here, Walker identifies the rigidity of the 'second wave' and the diversification of contemporary identities as incitements for the varied movements categorised as 'third wave', or contemporary, feminism.<sup>9</sup> While the rigidity of 'second wave' feminism is perhaps overstated by Walker, an increasing awareness of individual experiences, and the deconstruction of a universal 'feminine', is central to much of contemporary feminist theorisation and activism.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the universalisation of women's experiences has been critiqued from a number of perspectives, resulting in a proliferation of theoretical frameworks. The idealisation of femininity, so often the subject of 'second wave' feminist critiques, has come under further attacks, as this embodiment has become commodified and weaponised against women by capitalist economies. Anti-essentialist gender theorisations have sought to erase 'woman', and gender, altogether; other scholars have criticised this perspective, instead directing attention towards social institutions and shared experiences.

Contemporary campus novels featuring white, female protagonists engage with the contemporary higher education sector in a particularly gendered manner. In these novels, the recognisable features of the neoliberal university are present – simultaneous exertion and erosion of institutional authority; education leading to individualism; social fragmentation – however, these novels particularly engage with the implications of these mechanics for women – in their individual lives, the possibilities for collective action, the potential for female subjectivity. Pamela Dean's *Tam Lin* (1991) contextualises Blackstock College within a broader structure of institutionalised patriarchal control with Janet's literary

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<sup>8</sup> Alice Walker, 'Being Real: An Introduction,' in Leslie Heywood ed. *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism, vol. 2, Primary Documents*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), pp. 19–23. (p. 22)

<sup>9</sup> The label 'third wave' attracts the same criticisms as 'second wave', discussed above, pp. 162–3. For the remainder of this chapter, I will use contemporary feminisms, in the plural, to indicate the range of theorisations and activism which are particularly historicized, and relevant to contemporary society.

<sup>10</sup> R. Claire Snyder has particularly criticised 'third wave' feminist literature for the prevalent 'revisionist history' which characterises 'second wave' feminism as anti-sex, and 'a misconception to believe that second-wave feminism was composed of all white, middle-class women'. (R. Claire Snyder, 'What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay', *Signs* (34:1, 2009, pp. 176-196 (p. 179; p. 180)). In particular, Snyder points to the contributions of Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Audre Lorde to 'second wave' feminism, while also providing a foundation for many 'third wave' feminist awakenings (Snyder, 'What Is Third-Wave Feminism?' p. 180).

studies, in particular, constituting a patriarchal tradition which denies female agency. Simultaneously, however, the tropes from fantasy literature serve to undermine the university's intellectual authority, while maintaining the institution's male dominance. Amanda Brown's *Legally Blonde* (2001) depicts a college education which results in a particularly individualistic, commodified subject. Indeed, the character Elle Woods embodies a form of femininity which not only signals the continuation of established methods of patriarchal control, but also precludes collective feminist action by alienating her from other women. Joyce Carol Oates' *I'll Take You There* (2002) interrogates the ramifications of social fragmentation in the life of its anonymous, student narrator. Oates' novel is concerned with the consequences of the destabilization of gender identity and the consequent withdrawal from the public sphere which characterises life during neoliberalism.

#### ***Tam Lin: Blackstock College and Institutional Patriarchy***

Pamela Dean's *Tam Lin* depicts the entire college experience of its protagonist Janet, her friends Tina and Molly, and her romantic relationships with Nick and Thomas. The majority of Dean's novel is primarily concerned with Janet's intellectual pursuits – both Janet and most of her friends are engrossed in literary studies which determine their beliefs, values, and behaviour. In Dean's novel, literary studies are established as a mechanism of male dominance, contextualising Blackstock College, and English literature within a broader patriarchal structure. However, the novel also challenges the dominance of such a patriarchal order through the fantastic elements which appear throughout the text. *Tam Lin* illustrates the institutional characterisation of the neoliberal university. However, neither in the representation of the university nor in the novel's fantasy elements does higher education have any true value for women. At the end of Dean's novel, both Blackstock's patriarchal order and its fantastic forces are overcome by Janet's individual action, however, she remains excluded from the intellectual sphere which remains a domain controlled by men.

*Tam Lin* contextualizes Blackstock College within a broader social structure of patriarchal control. In *Sexual Politics* (1970), Kate Millett's 'main interest was to restate and reestablish the face of historical patriarchy [...], a socially conditioned belief system presenting itself as nature or necessity.'<sup>11</sup> Outlining a 'theory of the patriarchy', Millett

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<sup>11</sup> Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. xi.

identifies seven key mechanics by which patriarchal control operates: ideology; the family; class; economy and education; force; 'myth and religion'; and psychology, particularly women's internalization of patriarchal values.<sup>12</sup> Millett's work is particularly useful for the distinction asserted between forms of institutional control and what Millett defines as the 'cultural'. Ideology, 'myth and religion', class and psychology serve to validate and reinforce male dominance on a cultural level. Millett pays particular attention to the role of literature, as Patricia Ticineto Clough has noted: 'by the end of *Sexual Politics*, it seems that the literary text, more than reflect reality, organizes the scenes to stage what can count as reality.'<sup>13</sup> These values operate 'above' the institutional mechanics Millett identifies in the family, but also through the institutionalization of force in the legal system and the unpaid or lower-paid nature of many women's work.<sup>14</sup> 'Patriarchy's chief institution is the family', Millet argues, identifying two key mechanics by which the family structure contributes to patriarchal control.<sup>15</sup> Firstly, the family operates as 'a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole'; according to Millett, the family alienates women from wider society, who 'tend to be ruled through the family alone and have little or no formal relation to the state.'<sup>16</sup> The family 'effects control and conformity where political and other authority are insufficient.'<sup>17</sup> This structural position supports the family's primary function: according to Kate Millett, '[t]he chief contribution of the family in patriarchy is the socialization of the young [...] into patriarchal ideology's prescribed attitudes toward the categories of role, temperament, and status.'<sup>18</sup> In *Sexual Politics*, Millett identifies two 'levels' of patriarchal control – the values and ideas which are evident in culture, and the institutions which impose those norms on society.

In *Sexual Politics*, educational institutions inhabit a particular nexus between the institutional and cultural mechanics Millett identifies. As 'education and economy are so closely related in the advanced nations', Millett correlates educational provision with the

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<sup>12</sup> Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Patricia Ticineto Clough and Kate Millett, 'The Hybrid Criticism of Patriarchy: Rereading Kate Millett's "Sexual Politics"', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 35:3 (1994), pp. 473 – 486 (p. 482).

<sup>14</sup> See *Sexual Politics*, pp. 33-36; pp. 43-6; pp. 49-42.

<sup>15</sup> *Sexual Politics*, p. 33

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Sexual Politics*, p. 35.

mechanics by which economic disparity maintains male dominance.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the lack of government funding for institutions ‘segregated’ by gender, Millett particularly highlights the disparity in subjects which are offered to women and men.<sup>20</sup> ‘Universities,’ Millett argues, ‘once places of scholarship and the training of a few professionals, now also produce the personnel of a technocracy.’<sup>21</sup> However, this technical education is less available to women, resulting in the economic disparities which impede female independence. Millett further argues that the lack of technical education provision is due to universities’ acceptance and perpetuation of the cultural values of patriarchies:

As patriarchy enforces a temperamental imbalance of personality traits between the sexes, its educational institutions, segregated or co-educational, *accept a cultural programing toward the generally operative division between “masculine” and “feminine” subject matter*, assigning the humanities and certain social sciences (at least in their lower and marginal branches) to the female – and science and technology, the professions, business and engineering to the male.<sup>22</sup>

Millett’s identification of two distinct elements of patriarchal control, as well as the characterization of university institutions in *Sexual Politics* provides a useful framework for considering the role of Blackstock College in *Tam Lin*. In Dean’s work, Janet’s education offers a cultural justification for male dominance, and establishes a patriarchal network which enforces gender inequality. The simultaneous exertion and erosion of institutional authority can be discerned – as a patriarchal institution, Blackstock confines Janet; this confinement precludes her further intellectual activity, undermining the relevance of her college education.

*Tam Lin* particularly emphasizes the influence of academic study in the life of its protagonist, Janet. At the beginning of the novel, Janet is excited about the intellectual opportunities attendance at Blackstock College will afford. For Janet, ‘the thing [she] liked best to do in the world was read’; ‘her English class would reign in lonely splendor on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings.’<sup>23</sup> After completing her undergraduate degree,

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<sup>19</sup> *Sexual Politics*, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 42.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* (italics added)

<sup>23</sup> Pamela Dean, *Tam Lin* (New York: Tor Books, 1991 [Apple Books Edition]), p. 28; p. 75.

Janet intends to 'go to Graduate School and read some more.'<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as well as constituting her main interest, Janet's intellectualism forms the foundation of her most significant relationships. Literature is central to her romantic relationship with Nick: Janet is first motivated to speak with Nick after hearing him sing Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'; the feeling is mutual, as Nick is particularly enamoured by Janet's recitation of Keats.<sup>25</sup> These literary values determine Janet's friendships with the whole group of Classics students: Molly reflects that 'all [Janet's] friends talk like books'; upon their introduction, Thomas invites Janet to a play and presumes she shares her father's literary research interests.<sup>26</sup>

As well as determining their social activities, the students regularly quote literary texts, highlighting the extent to which literary precursors determine their speech.<sup>27</sup> Considerations and discussions of various literary texts dominate segments of the novel as the students bond over their interest in literature: they attend productions of *Hamlet* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, for example, with descriptions of the former stretching to twelve pages of the novel.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the dominance of literature in *Tam Lin* is particularly emphasised through comparison with the novel's ballad intertext. In the novel's 456 pages, the fantasy elements which preoccupy the ballad only fully reveal themselves on page 430 - fantasy elements are eschewed in favour of Janet's academic pursuits. In an analysis of various adaptations of the Tam Lin ballad, Martha P. Hixon argues that Dean 'allowed the realistic narrative of Janet's college years [...] to take over the plot.'<sup>29</sup> In *Tam Lin*, the boundary between literature and social structure is blurred. The principles which Janet studies at Blackstock extend their influence outside of the classroom, defining her relationships, social activities, speech, and even the focus of the novel itself. However, rather than encouraging Janet's academic ambitions, Janet's literary interests in fact reduce her capabilities for intellectual critique.

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<sup>24</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 30.

<sup>25</sup> Dean, *Tam Lin*, p. 97; pp. 197-8.

<sup>26</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 205; p. 201.

<sup>27</sup> The characters quote literature throughout the novel. See, for example, pp. 68, 101, 105, 195, and 264

<sup>28</sup> *Tam Lin*, pp. 243-255

<sup>29</sup> Martha P. Hixon, 'Tam Lin, Fair Janet, and the Sexual Revolution: Traditional Ballads, Fairy Tales, and Twentieth-Century Children's Literature', *Marvels & Tales*, 18.1 (2004), pp. 67-92. (p. 85).



*Tam Lin's* social structure is an ultimately patriarchal network which denies Janet's own intellectual and personal agency. Janet's literary interests are defined by her father, Professor Carter. An academic at Blackstock, Janet's father exerts a lot of influence over her education. At the beginning of the novel, it is Professor Carter who selects the courses Janet will study during her Freshman year; if she is 'very, very good', she will be able to study the Romantic poets with her father in her second year.<sup>30</sup> A conversation with Nick reveals the extent to which Janet's own knowledge is entwined with her father's:

"Oh, come on. My father's a professor of English; of course I know Hamlet."

"You didn't know Milton the other day," said Nick.

"Well, but Daddy's a romantic; he loves Shakespeare, especially because Keats seems so much like him; but he can't stand Milton." Having rattled this off, she felt herself going extremely hot in the face...<sup>31</sup>

As this discussion further indicates, Janet's literary interests are predominantly confined to a particularly patriarchal literary canon – the novel is dominated by Shakespeare and other male poets.

*Tam Lin* establishes canonical literature as a system which is established and shared by men, and enables the movement of women from the realm of the father into the realm of a heterosexual romantic partner; literary knowledge forms the foundation of Blackstock's organizational structure of kinship. As in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, this structure of kinship is reinforced by the exchange of a woman, Janet.<sup>32</sup> The depiction of such a social structure, mediated through Blackstock's literary culture, not only results in the denial of Janet's personal, and intellectual, agency. Levi-Strauss' structure of kinship particularly details the prioritisation of culture over biology. For Levi-Strauss, the incest taboo which established the exchange of women as the foundation of kinship structures signifies, as Abraham Rosman and Paula G. Rubel have highlighted, 'the transformation from nature to culture'.<sup>33</sup> Gayle Rubin extends this point further, arguing that '[a] kinship system is an

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<sup>30</sup> Dean, *Tam Lin*, p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 186.

<sup>32</sup> See Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Social Structure' in *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 277 – 323.

<sup>33</sup> Abraham Rosman and Paula G. Rubel, 'Structure and Exchange' in Boris Wiseman ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Lévi-Strauss* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 59 – 80 (p. 76).

imposition of social ends upon a part of the natural world.<sup>34</sup> *Tam Lin* emphasises the university's role within a specific culture, which confines women's agency: Blackstock College socializes women into its community's patriarchal values. However, while Janet's academic interests envelop her within a specific culture, Blackstock's institutional, and intellectual, authority is simultaneously undermined.

*Tam Lin's* fantastical elements emphasise the detachment of Blackstock from wider society. In particular, the novel highlights the confounding of the passage of time. It is revealed that Nick and Robin 'are some of Shakespeare's actors', living eternally after being enchanted by the demonic Professor Medeous.<sup>35</sup> Thomas explains, 'they're all old, and you know...Robin remembers Shakespeare, at least a little.'<sup>36</sup> Janet's experiences in the novel are also explicitly prefigured by fantastical apparitions: Dean's addition of the ghosts, 'who had no part in the original outline' constitute the precursors to Janet's experiences.<sup>37</sup> One of the novel's subplots is the story of Victoria Thompson, the ghost of Fourth Ericson dormitory in which Janet lives. Janet investigates Victoria's death, discovering, in the Thompson collection of the library, that 'Victoria Thompson killed herself because she was pregnant.'<sup>38</sup> This experience is repeated by Margaret Roxborough who 'killed herself on Hallowe'en in 1967. She had been two months pregnant and had known it.'<sup>39</sup> These experiences recur in the contemporary events of Dean's novel: upon discovering her own pregnancy, Janet wonders 'Good God, Victoria Thompson. Is that it? Am I doomed to relive her tragedy, because I lived in her dorm?'<sup>40</sup> These supernatural elements by which Blackstock is defined are juxtaposed with social change – the ghostly apparitions lived in a time when abortions were unavailable and sexual norms strict. While the ghosts undermine Blackstock's social authority, they evoke an oppressed female experience.

Janet's experiences with birth control, and her subsequent pregnancy, emphasise the role of the novel's supernatural elements. Tina and Molly decide to take the newly-available

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<sup>34</sup> Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex' in Karen V. Hansen and Ilene J. Philipson (ed.) *Women, Class, and the Feminist Imagination: Socialist-Feminist Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), pp. 74-113 (p. 87).

<sup>35</sup> Dean, *Tam Lin*, p. 686

<sup>36</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 762.

<sup>37</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 731.

<sup>38</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 480.

<sup>39</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 718.

<sup>40</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 713.

contraceptive pill, however, these travails are explicitly mundane. Planned Parenthood is described as 'like an assembly line at a factory,' from which Tina and Molly return 'looking a little white and subdued.'<sup>41</sup> After taking the pill, they 'spent the entire night in the bathroom, being sick, and walked around hollow-eyed from lack of sleep all next day, refusing to walk in the woods in the most beautiful weather imaginable.'<sup>42</sup> Janet, however, experiences no such side effects from 'a herbal remedy' which Nick delivers in 'a little white box stuck shut with a blob of red wax' which proves an effective contraceptive nonetheless.<sup>43</sup> It is Nick's magical offering which offers a more pleasant experience, compared to the painful depiction of modern contraceptive options. Subsequently, fantasy enjoys further primacy over the scientific advancements of contraception. Despite taking the contraceptive pill, Janet becomes pregnant with Thomas' child. After Thomas reveals the extent of Professor Medeous' magical powers, Janet concludes that the failure of the pill is caused by supernatural elements in the college:

I was on the pill. Do you expect me to believe you didn't know Chester Hall would—would counteract it? Chester Hall, that's got lavender growing around it all summer when you can't grow lavender in Minnesota this far north; Chester Hall that's got yarrow blooming next to it in October when yarrow stops blooming in September.<sup>44</sup>

This conflict particularly highlights the anti-intellectualism of the novel's fantastic elements. Not only does Nick's offering provide a more pleasant experience, but Medeous' spell explicitly counteracts the scientific offering.

This entwinement of the novel's fantastic elements and anti-intellectualism is personified by Professor Medeous. The Head of the Classics department, Medeous is introduced as an intimidating figure, a genius whom 'you suffer [...] or you flee into exile.'<sup>45</sup> Medeous constitutes a challenge to Blackstock's patriarchal order. While 'Classics and Music had been fighting it out for sole possession of Chester Hall since 1954', Medeous achieves victory and gains total ownership by the end of the novel.<sup>46</sup> Medeous also clashes with Janet's father and the Classics students – embodiments of the patriarchal order.

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<sup>41</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 292.

<sup>42</sup> Dean, *Tam Lin*, p. 293.

<sup>43</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 314.

<sup>44</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 736.

<sup>45</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 144.

<sup>46</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 45.

Furthermore, Nick suggests that Medeous frequently engages in extra-marital affairs with professors, undermining the college's heteronormative structure of kinship. At the end of the novel, it is confirmed that Professor Medeous is the 'Queen of Elfland', a demonic figure who has bewitched the Classics students.<sup>47</sup> The revelation confirms Medeous' subversive challenge to Blackstock's cultural order. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's analysis, 'the monster-woman [...] embodies intransigent female autonomy'; within a patriarchal literary tradition, these characters symbolise 'the dangerous effect of misdirected and undigested learning'.<sup>48</sup> The appearance of the demonic woman not only signifies that women's education is dangerous, but also emphasises Blackstock's role as the institutional representation of the patriarchal order: it is within such a patriarchal context that women's education is particularly subversive.

The juxtaposition of fantasy elements with Blackstock College in itself undermines the intellectual authority of the university. In other appearances in fantasy literature such as Ursula Le Guin's *The Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), the Miskatonic University of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulu Mythos stories, or Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*, discussed previously, universities have served to initiate characters into mythical worlds. As the setting for classes, research, and often magical libraries, these educational institutions represent worlds of rationalized fantasy. Defined in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* as worlds wherein 'fantasy elements are given a rationale which provides them with internal consistency and coherence', it is the university which provides these rationales.<sup>49</sup> Contrasting with these worlds which reinforce the supremacy of rationality is the sub-genre 'fantasies of history', with which *Tam Lin* shares many features.<sup>50</sup> In these works, fantasy elements co-exist with historical events, often featuring attempted coups by fantastical rulers. Fantasies of history are revisionist fiction, wherein conspiracy theories are revealed and accepted historical narratives are undermined. The inclusion of these features in *Tam Lin* emphasizes the novel's challenge to dominant intellectual modes. Fantasy elements explicitly undermine the research and explanations offered by the university and its academics, instead offering fantastic justification. However,

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<sup>47</sup> Dean, *Tam Lin*, p. 739

<sup>48</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 28; p. 30.

<sup>49</sup> Clute and Grant (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, p. 801.

<sup>50</sup> See 'Fantasies of History', *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, pp. 334-5

*Tam Lin* does not succumb to epistemological nihilism. Instead, the conclusion of Dean's novel gestures towards opportunities for intellectual renewal.

During the novel's final section, *Tam Lin* engages with methods of destabilizing the anti-intellectual environment established through the novel's initial 400 pages. At the end of the novel, Professor Medeous casts a spell resulting in Janet's pregnancy. While ruminating on whether to keep the baby, Janet discovers a list of actors' names in her Shakespeare volume – the names of her friends are among them. Confronting Thomas, he reveals the truth about the classics students and Professor Medeous. In order to maintain Medeous' power, the father of a pregnant Blackstock student is to be sacrificed. While the enchanted Classics students 'have all these theories on how one escapes [...] the only method anybody has ever seen actually work was to have a pregnant woman come and drag the intended victim off his horse on Hallowe'en'.<sup>51</sup> Following this revelation, Janet has a conversation with Molly to discuss her options. Highlighting the availability of funds following *Roe v. Wade*, Molly suggests that Janet save Thomas, and then have an abortion:

"I don't guess you could think of it as a life for a life?"

"No, it's not that. I don't know what I think about abortion; but I can't take advantage of being pregnant and then just go merrily off and not be pregnant anymore. Those that dance must pay the fiddler."

"You read too much."<sup>52</sup>

Further explaining her decision to save Thomas, Janet reflects that '[w]hatever else fairy tales might be good for, they taught you to keep your promises.'<sup>53</sup> Janet's discovery, in one of her textbooks, of Medeous' spell reasserts intellectual authority over the novel's rebellious fantastical elements. Furthermore, by saving Thomas, Janet breaks the cycle which would align her with the tragic fates of the Ericson Ghosts. Janet and Thomas' relationship, with which the novel concludes, is typical of instaurative fantasy works, which centre upon intellectual renewal.<sup>54</sup> In its conclusion, *Tam Lin* gestures towards the reassertion of intellectual authority at Blackstock College. However, Janet's individual fate contradicts this liberating impulse.

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<sup>51</sup> Dean, *Tam Lin*, p. 735.

<sup>52</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 709.

<sup>53</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 698.

<sup>54</sup> See 'Instaurative Fantasy' in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, pp. 500-502.

The reassertion of intellectual authority at Blackstock College does not result in the restoration of Janet's intellectual ambitions. At the end of the novel, Janet has been 'bullied into the female role' and her plans for the future are jeopardised.<sup>55</sup> The incompatibility of motherhood with education is emphasised, as Janet will likely interrupt her undergraduate studies during her pregnancy and sacrifice her desire to attend Graduate School.<sup>56</sup> At the end of Dean's novel, the literary values by which Janet lives mean that she will no longer pursue further education. Janet's future is juxtaposed with Thomas' – after Janet has saved his life, Thomas is '[n]ot as hopeless as [he] was earlier [that] evening.'<sup>57</sup> Now free from Medeous' spell, Thomas can finally leave Blackstock and join the workforce despite the looming recession; he 'understand[s] babies are expensive'.<sup>58</sup> Blackstock's literary principles maintain their role in maintaining male supremacy and confine Janet to the domestic sphere. This stasis is reflected in Martha P. Hixon's comparison of Dean's novel with the original ballad, 'Tam Lin':

Despite her inclusion of the sexual freedom that Janet is exploring in the novel, Dean does not ultimately focus on rebellion against restrictive communal standards of behaviour [...] In this respect, she incorporates the romantic idealization of the earlier editorializations of the Tam Lin ballad that imply that the ballad's message is that life in this world is only possible when love is brave enough to endure severe testing.<sup>59</sup>

As Hixon notes, the conclusion of *Tam Lin* suggests a particularly conservative fate for Janet. *Tam Lin* fails to offer a regenerative role for academia, rather emphasising its unchanging, conservative impulses.

### ***Legally Blonde: University Education and the Female Entrepreneurial Subject***

As a novel which depicts its protagonist succeeding at a prestigious law school, Amanda Brown's *Legally Blonde* might suggest ways in which college attendance can encourage public participation. However, Stanford, in Brown's novel, rather endorses values of individualism and elitism which prevent social engagement. Perhaps more so than any other contemporary

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<sup>55</sup> Dean, *Tam Lin*, p. 983.

<sup>56</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 455. While Janet's future is uncertain but she is uncomfortable with her parents caring for the child while she attends Graduate School. (*Tam Lin*, pp. 953-5).

<sup>57</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 769.

<sup>58</sup> *Tam Lin*, p. 768.

<sup>59</sup> Hixon, 'Tam Lin, Fair Janet, and the Sexual Revolution', pp. 85-6.

American campus novel, *Legally Blonde* depicts colleges' role in the creation of the entrepreneurial subject: Elle Woods is a wealthy and glamorous sorority girl whose favourite activities are shopping and beauty treatments. In *Legally Blonde*, these values are welcomed and valued at Stanford, which endorses and rewards Elle's interests. However, these same values inhibit Elle's social engagement. The novel highlights the extent to which Elle's individualistic education precludes her engagement with, or challenge of, existing social structures. Furthermore, *Legally Blonde* highlights the extent to which Elle's priorities impede communication with other women and explicitly rely on the exploitation of women's labour. *Legally Blonde* emphasises the role of American colleges in the perpetuation of existing structures of gender inequality, rather than encouraging students to fully engage with social and political life.

*Legally Blonde* particularly engages with two key ways in which women's entry into the public sphere has resulted in an individualism which masks the continuation of patriarchal control. In particular, Amanda Brown's work engages with the operation of a beauty ideal - discussed at length by Angela McRobbie – and methods of economic control as outlined by Hester Eisenstein. Angela McRobbie has analysed the functionings of beauty ideals in a range of contexts throughout her work. In 'Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times', McRobbie summarises a position supported by her entire body of work:

This article argues that at a point in time when feminism (in a variety of its forms) has re-entered political culture and civil society, there is, as though to hold this threat of new feminism at bay, an amplification of control of women, mostly by corporeal means, so as to ensure the maintenance of existing power relations. However the importance of ensuring male dominance is carefully disguised through the dispositif which takes the form of feminine self-regulation. The 'perfect' emerges as a horizon of expectation, through which young women are persuaded to seek self-definition. Feminism, at the same time, is made compatible with an individualising project and is also made to fit with the idea of competition.<sup>60</sup>

McRobbie particularly emphasises how 'corporeality has in effect become a defining feature of post-industrial society' for both women and men – as industrialized labour has become

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<sup>60</sup> Angela McRobbie, 'Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30:83, pp. 3-20 (p. 3).

replaced with a booming service sector, physical deterioration has been replaced by the requirement for 'toned and worked out bodies [...] which require high levels of investment in the self, in grooming and appearances.'<sup>61</sup> This increased corporeality impacts the experiences of both men and women, however, McRobbie places this new demand in the context of calls for gender equality. For women, '[t]he perfect [...] comes to stand for the relationship between successful domesticity and successful sexuality'; 'the idea of 'the perfect' emerges as a highly hetero-normative vector of competition for young women today'.<sup>62</sup> In this way, '[t]he perfect relies, however, most fully on restoring traditional femininity, which means that female competition is inscribed within specific horizons of value relating to husbands, work partners and boyfriends, family and home, motherhood and maternity.'<sup>63</sup> McRobbie's analysis highlights the way in which beauty ideals are particularly individualistic while also precluding engagement with existing exclusionary mechanics. 'The perfect' normalises the most individualistic sphere - women's bodies - while also encouraging competition; this competition is carried out in spheres which signal women's success in realms defined as feminine. The achievement of a beauty ideal is particularly prominent in *Legally Blonde* and contributes to Elle's success at university; in this way, Brown's Stanford University encourages a particularly individualistic vision of success which reinforces exclusionary forms of femininity.

In 'A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization', Hester Eisenstein's economic analysis reveals a similar relationship between 'second wave' feminist achievements and neoliberal economic policies which reinforce gender inequality. As Eisenstein summarises:

The profound "restructuring" of the U.S. and world economy since the 1970s parallels the rise of the women's movement during the same period, and reveals some ideological and practical uses of this movement for capitalist interests at home and abroad. In particular, the decline of the family wage and the abolition of welfare "as we know it" in the United States<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> McRobbie, 'Notes on the Perfect', p. 6.

<sup>62</sup> 'Notes on the Perfect', p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> 'Notes on the Perfect', p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> Hester Eisenstein, 'A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization', *Science & Society*, 69:3 (2005), pp. 487-518 (p. 487).



In the United States, Eisenstein identifies two key ramifications of the relative economic independence which became a focus of 'second wave' feminism. Firstly, Eisenstein argues that women's entry into the workforce enabled the lowering of wages:

[...] the inclusion of married women in the workforce, including the mothers of young children, was of assistance to capital in keeping wages stagnant, and in abandoning the concept of a wage that would cover the expenses of wife and children, a goal that was struggled for during the 19<sup>th</sup> century by patriarchal unions.<sup>65</sup>

While this wage stagnation is a universal feature of neoliberalism, Eisenstein further notes the notable disparity between the 'mainly male [...] managerial class' and "'low-wage, high-turnover, part-time jobs" [...] going primarily to women.'<sup>66</sup> Secondly, Eisenstein notes that women's entry into the workforce contributed to the abolition of welfare provisions which were particularly significant for women. As the name of the 'Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act' makes clear, welfare reform 'removed the idea of welfare as an entitlement to any poor single mother needing assistance with taking care of her children; and most importantly, instituted workfare as a requirement.'<sup>67</sup> Like McRobbie, Eisenstein's analysis highlights the extent to which women's entry into the public sphere – the workforce in this analysis – contributed to structural changes which maintained male dominance – economic power. *Legally Blonde* depicts a university which endorses and imparts these values in Elle's life. Again, a university education in Brown's novel constitutes an endorsement of values which encourage individualism and preclude engagement with broader social structures of patriarchal control.

Elle Woods enjoys organising parties, cosmetics, and celebrity gossip. While the film critic Roger Ebert suggests that Elle is 'using her encyclopedic knowledge of fashion and grooming to *disguise* her penetrating intelligence', Brown's novel, and its film adaptation, rather serve to emphasise the value of such knowledge.<sup>68</sup> The novel's initial chapter introduces these interests – Elle's conversation with her 'bickering sorority sisters Margot

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<sup>65</sup> Eisenstein, 'A Dangerous Liaison?', p. 501.

<sup>66</sup> 'A Dangerous Liaison?', p. 499.

<sup>67</sup> 'A Dangerous Liaison?', p. 501.

<sup>68</sup> Roger Ebert, 'Review: Legally Blonde', *RogerEbert.com* (13<sup>th</sup> July 2001). Online: <<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/legally-blonde-2001#:~:text=%22Legally%20Blonde%22%20is%20a%20featherweight,your%20affection%20for%20Reese%20Witherspoon.&text=Witherspoon%20plays%20Elle%20Woods%2C%20named,means%20%22she%22%20in%20French>> [accessed: 5<sup>th</sup> January 2021]. (italics added).

and Serena’, ranges from the success of their respective cosmetic surgeries; the prospect of Elle’s marriage proposal; astrology; the ‘*In Style Weddings* curse’; and Elle’s concern that, in the future, her dress might look ‘dated and stupid’.<sup>69</sup> While her boyfriend Warner breaks up with Elle because ‘she will never be serious enough to be [his] wife or the mother of [his] children’, Elle’s attendance at Stanford Law School reveals the value of her interests.<sup>70</sup> After taking the LSAT exams, Elle reflects that ‘the extra section, ‘Logic Games’ allowed her to use what she considered to be among her greatest strengths: abstract organization. Ever since high school Elle had been a wiz at seating arrangements for parties’.<sup>71</sup> At Stanford, she receives tutoring in Property Law from a fellow student Sarah, in exchange for advice on her fitness routine.<sup>72</sup> Elle’s ‘encyclopedic knowledge of fashion and grooming’ is also fundamental to her success in the murder trial during cross-examination of Chutney, the victim’s daughter. While Chutney asserts that she was in the shower and didn’t hear the gunshot, Elle reveals her falsehood:

Elle walked casually toward the court gallery, smiling at Philippe. ‘Chutney, veteran of twenty-odd perms, graduate of total hair management’ – she spun to face the witness – ‘it is absolutely *elementary*, absolutely the *first rule* of hair care, that you can’t wash your hair for *twenty-four hours* after a perm.’<sup>73</sup>

*Legally Blonde* emphasises the extent to which Elle’s cultural interests are particularly valued at Stanford, and also enable her accomplishments in the real world.

Elle’s success is also particularly attributed to her social capital. Elle’s most valuable contributions to her law firm are particularly entwined with her elite status – her friendship with the victim’s interior designer allows her to gain valuable information and she forms a strong bond with her client Brooke due to their shared membership of a college sorority. As well as emphasising continuity between her upbringing and college experiences, *Legally Blonde* illustrates Sydney Calkin’s observation, that ‘gender equality policy discourse is so closely tied to the advancement of a neoliberal economic policy agenda characterized by

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<sup>69</sup> Amanda Brown, *Legally Blonde* (London: Sphere, 2007), p. 1; p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, *Legally Blonde*, p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> *Legally Blonde*, p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> *Legally Blonde*, p. 207; p. 204.

<sup>73</sup> *Legally Blonde*, p. 262.

market fundamentalism, deregulation and corporate-led development.<sup>74</sup> After their victory in the murder trial, Elle celebrates with Brooke, whose ‘credit card flashed as gold as the microbrewed lagers they drank’.<sup>75</sup> After college, Elle hopes to launch her own business, working at the ‘Blonde Legal Defense Fund’ or ‘getting the Barbie trademark and designing an entire jewelry line in her honor.’<sup>76</sup> The novel also illustrates a technique Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai identify as ‘a chick-lit mainstay’: ‘to sprinkle the text with classed references to luxury commodities and cosmopolitan places’.<sup>77</sup> Like Elle’s cultural interests, her elite status constitutes a bridge between her adolescence and collegiate achievements.

Furthermore, Elle’s success ultimately fails to challenge broader male dominance. The narrative arc of *Legally Blonde* subverts the established plot of ‘second wave’ feminist campus novels. Then, female students attended university as a path out of suffocating domestic lives. Conversely, in Brown’s novel, Elle attends university in order to *prove* her suitability for marriage. Elle’s experiences at Stanford fail to challenge heteronormative presumptions. Elle’s academic success is particularly due to the anonymous study aids provided by a student who is motivated to help her because ‘every true romantic needs his Guinevere’.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, her professional success signifies her movement from the domestic sphere to the professional domain of her employer, Christopher, who feels paternalistically ‘proud’ of her achievements.<sup>79</sup> Not only is Elle preoccupied with dating throughout the novel, but so too are her sorority sisters, peers at Law School, and, even, her client Brooke, who is ‘in search of single white male’, during her trial for murder.<sup>80</sup> While Elle is able to transition into the professional sphere, heteronormative presumptions and male-dominance persist.

*Legally Blonde* emphasises the extent to which success at college relies upon the perpetuation of existing social structures, rather than encouraging their critique. Elle’s

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<sup>74</sup> Sydney Calkin, ‘Feminism, Interrupted? Gender and Development in the Era of “Smart Economics”’, *Progress in Development Studies*; London, 15.4 (2015), 295–307 (p. 296).

<sup>75</sup> Brown, *Legally Blonde*, p. 270.

<sup>76</sup> *Legally Blonde*, pp. 270-1.

<sup>77</sup> Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai, ‘Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras Chick-Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism’, *Meridians*, 8.2 (2008), 1–31 (p. 10). (Brands mentioned include magazines *Allure* and *Glamour* (*Legally Blonde*, p. 26; p. 21); make-up brands MAC and Kiehl’s (*Legally Blonde*, p. 31; p. 272); and a ‘Wolff tanning bed’ (*Legally Blonde*, p. 100).

<sup>78</sup> *Legally Blonde*, p. 207

<sup>79</sup> *Legally Blonde*, p. 266.

<sup>80</sup> *Legally Blonde*, p. 252.

interests are prominent in analysis of ‘chick flicks’ of the 1990s and early 2000s, films which Susan Ferriss and Mallory Young associate with the label, ‘postfeminism’:

Chick flicks illustrate, reflect, and present all of the cultural characteristics associated with the chick postfeminist aesthetic: a return to femininity, the primacy of romantic attachments, girlpower, a focus on female pleasure and pleasures, and the value of consumer culture and girly goods, including designer clothes, expensive and impractical footwear, and trendy accessories.<sup>81</sup>

Stanford particularly endorses these values in *Legally Blonde*. While Elle’s success may signal her liberation, Ferriss and Young’s analysis highlights the extent to which Elle remains confined within established social structures. In particular, ‘postfeminism’ signals a return to established definitions of femininity challenged during second wave feminism; ‘the primacy of romantic attachments’ emphasising the continuation of heteronormativity; ‘the value of consumer culture’ signalling women’s absorption within an established capitalist framework. While *Legally Blonde* depicts Elle’s entry into the public sphere, established social structures persist undisturbed.

These social structures, in turn, particularly alienate Elle from other women. In *Legally Blonde*, Elle’s advocacy for a defined form of femininity isolates her from ‘second wave’ feminism. Frequently distracted by fashion magazines in her classes, Elle finds a Criminal Law course to be a particular intellectual challenge. The class is delivered by ‘Kiki Slaughter-Haus’ a professor who ‘spouted a stale stream of Gloria Steinam-era feminism’.<sup>82</sup> Elle’s dismissal of feminism is further extended to students: responding to the assertion that the word subpoena ‘has no place in an emancipated society’:

Professor Erie raised his voice with exasperation. He finally asked a question *that Elle liked*. ‘When does this nonsense stop?’ It was getting to the point where men at Stanford couldn’t speak an unobjectionable word.<sup>83</sup>

The contrast between Elle’s conception of beauty and second wave feminism is particularly emphasised when Elle sees a call for women to burn their bras: ‘she remembered the bra-burning party she’d given Serena after her augmentation’ during which ‘all of the guests

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<sup>81</sup> Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, ‘Chick Flicks and Chick Culture’, *Post Script; Commerce*, 27.1 (2007), 32-49 (p. 35).

<sup>82</sup> Brown, *Legally Blonde*, p. 40.

<sup>83</sup> *Legally Blonde*, p. 63 (italics added).

brought lingerie for the guest of honor in her new cup size.<sup>84</sup> Here, *Legally Blonde* emphasises the extent to which Elle's defined conceptualisation of femininity alienates her from 'second wave' feminism at Stanford.

The perpetuation of heteronormativity performs a particularly normative function in *Legally Blonde*. Upon arriving at Stanford, Elle feuds with Sarah, Warner's new girlfriend, the 'serious' woman he proclaimed to desire. Sarah attended Prep School with Warner and, in the few short months since Elle and Warner's relationship ended, Warner and Sarah have become engaged. Sarah seems to present no challenge to Warner's elitist value-system and is seamlessly integrated into his life.<sup>85</sup> However, this integration soon falters. Warner receives bad results in their first assessments, while Sarah's grades are excellent – a subversion of the intellectual hierarchy which threatens their relationship.<sup>86</sup> In response, Sarah begins to subscribe to Elle's gendered performance: she begins an exercise routine which Warner modelled on Elle's; in the novel's final scene, Sarah arrives at Elle's apartment with newly-dyed hair, and Elle declares her a 'true blonde'.<sup>87</sup> For Sarah, Elle embodies a form of femininity which is required for heteronormative relationships and which leaves patriarchal dominance unchallenged.

The consequences of capitalist exploitation are experienced by Elle's manicurist, Josette. Elle and Josette particularly bond over Elle's romantic travails, however, the two remain alienated. In a notable contrast with the novel's film adaptation, Josette is provided with little characterisation, agency, or desires of her own.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, Josette's 'Frenchified' accent and offer of 'tacky' nail designs emphasise the impossibility of her achieving any material signifier of culture or agency.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, Josette is excluded from Stanford - the professional sphere which has offered Elle so much success – and is instead confined to the beauty parlour where she works. According to Jennifer Scanlon's analysis, the beauty parlour

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<sup>84</sup> *Legally Blonde*, p. 33.

<sup>85</sup> These values are particularly embodied by Warner's grandmother: "Mark my words, that...that woman will never, *never* call herself a Huntingdon," she would often tell her friends when they gathered at her beach club in Newport.' (Brown, *Legally Blonde*, p. 29)

<sup>86</sup> *Legally Blonde*, pp. 183-7.

<sup>87</sup> *Legally Blonde*, p. 204

<sup>88</sup> In the film, Elle helps Josette retrieve her dog from an ex-partner; a shared interest in animal rights provides a bridge between the two characters. However, this sub-plot is absent from the novel, in which Josette merely listens to Elle's lamenting about Warner, in particular, and provides support throughout the novel. (*Legally Blonde* directed by Robert Luketic, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2001).

<sup>89</sup> Brown, *Legally Blonde*, p. 44; p. 45.

itself signifies the challenges faced by women in contemporary society.<sup>90</sup> For Scanlon, a beauty parlour is an ‘all-female space [where women] beautify themselves in accordance with the rules of their cultures’, however, ‘[s]elf-empowerment does not necessarily translate into solidarity, as beauty rituals can encourage competition and make of women their own harshest critics.’<sup>91</sup> Inhabiting the beauty parlour, Josette signifies perpetuation of established cultural norms - heteronormativity and a defined beauty ideal – while the relationship between Josette and Elle emphasises the consequences of these values for female friendships. Not only do these norms create competition, as Scanlon identifies, but they also require the exploitation of Josette’s labour.

*Legally Blonde* particularly highlights the way in which the behaviour encouraged at Stanford prevents meaningful collective action. In *Legally Blonde*, Stanford exemplifies a tendency which Nancy Fraser identifies in the academic sector: ‘to overextend the critique of culture, while downplaying the critique of the economy’.<sup>92</sup> Fraser argues that this cultural focus undermines feminist activism, particularly by ‘decoupl[ing]’ cultural critique from the capitalist critique which unified ‘second wave’ feminism.<sup>93</sup> While Fraser highlights the extent to which the prioritisation of culture fragmented political activism, *Legally Blonde* also highlights the extent to which such ‘feminine’ culture requires the exploitation of women, by women, further inhibiting collective feminist action. Sarah and Josette’s experiences, and Elle’s complicity, emphasise the ‘perverse, subterranean elective affinity’ between ‘feminine’ culture, its weaponisation by neoliberalism and consequent ‘socioeconomic injustice’.<sup>94</sup>

The depiction of structures of inequality in *Legally Blonde* gestures towards opportunities for reconfiguration. Nancy Fraser highlights the ‘[current] constraints on women’s lives that do not take the form of personalized subjection, but arise from structural or systemic processes in which the actions of many people are abstractly or impersonally mediated.’<sup>95</sup> As *Legally Blonde* illustrates, the individualised form of Elle’s liberation is

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<sup>90</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, ‘“If My Husband Calls I’m Not Here”: The Beauty Parlor As Real and Representational Female Space’, *Feminist Studies*, 33.2 (2007), pp. 308–34.

<sup>91</sup> Scanlon, ‘“If My Husband Calls I’m Not Here”’, p. 318.

<sup>92</sup> Nancy Fraser, ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, *New Left Review*, 56 (2009), pp. 97 – 117. (p. 108).

<sup>93</sup> Fraser, ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, p. 109.

<sup>94</sup> Fraser, ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, p. 108; Nancy Fraser, *Adding Insult to Injury: Nancy Fraser Debates her Critics* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2008), p. 14.

<sup>95</sup> Fraser, ‘Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History’, p. 115.

insufficient for addressing broader social mechanics of inequality. Instead, Fraser argues: attention and critique must be directed towards capitalism more broadly; non-economic conceptions of value must be defined; 'a new organization of political power,' must be conceptualised, 'one that subordinates bureaucratic managerialism to citizen empowerment.'<sup>96</sup> Notably, these principles contrast with the values which define Stanford in *Legally Blonde*. As an institution which is particularly representative of economic individualism, *Legally Blonde*'s Stanford inhabits a text which makes the argument for its own downfall.

### ***I'll Take You There: Social Fragmentation and the Destabilization of Female Identity***

Joyce Carol Oates' *I'll Take You There* depicts the psychological instability and social alienation resulting from the failure to productively engage with the present. Oates' novel is told in the first-person by an anonymous narrator who wins a scholarship to Syracuse University. Academically-gifted, yet insecure, the narrator struggles to develop friendships and faces financial hardship during her studies. Reflecting the novel's setting in the 1960s – a period of social upheaval in America – the narrative perspective and personal struggles of the narrator rejects socially-determined definitions of female identity. However, Oates' novel emphasises the extent to which this withdrawal results in the erasure of individual subjectivity, concluding that social engagement is a necessity for a meaningful sense of individual identity. In this way, Oates' novel can be read as offering a critique of gender theorisations which attribute gender identity to social institutions, enabling their destabilization. While this could be viewed as a liberating objective, *I'll Take You There* suggests that such social destabilization results in the destabilization of women living in those very societies.

Challenges to essentialist views of gender identity are prominently attributed to Judith Butler's seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). In this pioneering theorisation of gender identity, Butler is particularly influenced by Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinarity – the way in which discourse defines and controls

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<sup>96</sup> Fraser, 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', p. 116.

individuals, their bodies, and subjectivity. However, as Kim Atkins highlights, '[Butler] goes further than Foucault in [their] account of gender as "performative."' <sup>97</sup>

This concept describes the mechanisms by which particular subjectivities are formed through the submission of bodies to discursive practices. Through [their] concept of performativity, Butler brings to light the repetition involved in the ways in which disciplinary power is lived by and habituated into the individual's life. By identifying the repetitive and reiterative process of inscription of social norms in the body, Butler emphasises the discontinuous nature of identity. <sup>98</sup>

Atkins' summary highlights two distinct features of Butler's theory which illuminate the impact of social fragmentation on the narrator in *I'll Take You There*. First of all, the process of repetition highlights the impact of various social institutions on the narrator. Moving between various contexts, the narrator's identity is indeed revealed to be 'a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations' which Butler identifies; the diverse performances of gender in Oates' novel emphasise the 'contingency' of gendered identity, as the narrator's performance of her gender changes according to the various contexts the novel describes. <sup>99</sup> Secondly, 'Butler emphasises the discontinuous nature of identity' which threatens the 'coherence' of subjectivity altogether:

Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. <sup>100</sup>

Butler's theorisation, here, introduces two axes along which gendered identity can be analysed – the relationship between the 'cultural matrix' and the performance of gender identity, and the split between these identity and individuals' subjectivity. These two axes, as well as their contradictions, are illustrated in *I'll Take You There* through the narrator's performance of various gendered identities, their role in the determination of individual

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<sup>97</sup> Kim Atkins, *Self and Subjectivity* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), p. 252.

<sup>98</sup> Atkins, *Self and Subjectivity*, p. 252.

<sup>99</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and Oxon, 2010), p. 187.

<sup>100</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23.



subjectivity and the psychological instability resulting from the various 'contingent' identities which she is called upon to perform.

While Butler's work offers mechanics of emancipation from oppressive gendered identities, any such strategy is rejected in *I'll Take You There*. As Atkins further summarizes: '[t]he discontinuity of acts [which constitute gender identity] means that between reiterations there are moments of indeterminacy. This allows identity to be interrupted and disrupted at any moment.'<sup>101</sup> Indeed, Butler argues:

When the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force. That regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe.<sup>102</sup>

Butler's celebrated discussion of drag emerges in this context, as '[Butler] would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity.'<sup>103</sup> For Butler, drag 'reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence.'<sup>104</sup> Drag is significant in Butler's theorisations for two distinct reasons: drag performance reveals the emancipatory possibilities of a split between gender performance and personal subjectivity while also offering a representational mode which challenges the naturalisation of gender identity. These emancipatory possibilities are rejected throughout *I'll Take You There*. Rather, the narrator of Oates' novel is overcome by the instability resultant from the abandonment of social constructions of identity and unable to engage with her community. Here, *I'll Take You There* engages with higher education's role in a broader, fragmented social context which precludes personal engagement. The university institution is one of the many social institutions which define the narrator's gendered identity, split her personal subjectivity, and preclude her contribution to society.

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<sup>101</sup> Atkins, *Self and Subjectivity*, p. 255.

<sup>102</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 185.

<sup>103</sup> *Gender Trouble*, p. 186.

<sup>104</sup> *Gender Trouble*, p. 187.

In *I'll Take You There*, university is situated within a broader social context defined by instability. The majority of Oates' novel depicts the narrator's attempts to fulfil the roles of sorority sister, girlfriend, and daughter. During each period, the narrator re-invents her identity. After joining a sorority, she becomes 'an initiate, a sister of Kappa Gamma Pi' and attempts to embody a particular form of femininity defined by make-up, clothes, and social engagements.<sup>105</sup> When she meets Vernor, her boyfriend, she changes her clothes and asks herself '[w]ho am I except the one whose sole identity is that she can love you?'<sup>106</sup> Visiting her father, she becomes '[m]y father's daughter.'<sup>107</sup> In each role, the narrator also changes her name. While remaining anonymous throughout the novel, she is assigned different names: her sorority house-mother calls her Mary Alice; Vernor calls her Anellia.<sup>108</sup> However, the narrator's embodiment of socially-defined roles precludes the establishment of her own identity - '[t]he personalities [she] assembled never lasted long. Like quilts carelessly sewn together, [she] periodically fell apart.'<sup>109</sup>

The relationship between the narrator's identity and her position in society is evident from her childhood. Growing up on a family farm, the narrator experiences a lonely and isolated adolescence. The narrator is particularly affected by her mother's death. She describes her childhood as '[b]lank amnesiac patches of snow' and blurs the distinction between her own identity and her mother - 'it was easy to confuse [her mother's name,] "Ida" with "I"'.<sup>110</sup> The narrator's existence is defined by her mother's absence. Following the narrator's birth, there are no photographs of her mother: her disappearance from collective memory aligns with the narrator's appearance. Although the cause of her mother's illness is not confirmed, her father, brothers and grandparents blame the narrator: '[t]hey hated me for having been born; having been born, I caused our mother's death'.<sup>111</sup> The narrator is ostracized from her family – hated by her brothers; ignored by her grandparents and her father who finds it painful to look at her. Her relationship with her father particularly

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<sup>105</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, *I'll Take You There* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>106</sup> Oates, *I'll Take You There*, p. 119.

<sup>107</sup> *I'll Take You There*, p. 254.

<sup>108</sup> *I'll Take You There*, p. 21; p. 152; p. 27 The name Anellia is significant in itself: "Anellia'—she-who-is-not." (*I'll Take You There*, p. 198).

<sup>109</sup> *I'll Take You There*, p. 129.

<sup>110</sup> *I'll Take You There*, p. 19.

<sup>111</sup> *I'll Take You There*, p. 19. The narrator's grandmother suggests her mother died from cancer on p. 19.

highlights the extent to which the narrator's social isolation results in the erasure of her identity: her father 'would seem to forget [her] name; never would he call [her] by name; "you" would have to do'.<sup>112</sup> The narrator's experience in her family causes the psychological instability prevalently depicted in the novel, while maintaining the relationship between the narrator's social experiences and personal identity. In her family, her experiences are characterised by the loss of her mother; loss and alienation determine the narrator's individual subjectivity. Furthermore, the narrator's alignment with her mother explicitly causes her social isolation.

The narrator's university classes constitute another mode by which her subjectivity is fragmented. College, the narrator believes, offers the opportunity for personal transformation and the narrator is particularly influenced by her studies in metaphysical philosophy. Reading Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, the narrator begins to dissociate from herself. When asking a question in a philosophy class, her 'hand was raised like a puppet's jerked on a string. [She] was not one to speak in a large class, this could not be [her].'<sup>113</sup> Her question remains unanswered, delayed until later in the course. The narrator's experiences are similar in a subsequent class:

The girl laughed nervously. Wiped at her eyes. No one wished to look at her. Instead of addressing the class in his customary manner, while answering an individual's question, the professor stood silent regarding the girl with somber eyes; at last he said he'd speak with her after class. You could see how he'd slipped the class list out of his manila folder to glance rapidly through it; he meant to ascertain the girl's name, for in the discomfort of the moment he'd forgotten her name.<sup>114</sup>

Once again, the narrator's question remains unanswered and she is excluded from the discursive community; when the narrator approaches the professor after the class 'he'd actually ceased to be aware of her.'<sup>115</sup> While the narrator had believed that academic study would provide liberation, her studies in fact contribute to her continued psychological fragmentation. The philosophy she studies encourage her detachment from a stable sense of identity while she is also isolated from her classes. The narrator is unable to assert herself,

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<sup>112</sup> *I'll Take You There*, p. 20.

<sup>113</sup> György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel* (Brecon: Merlin Press, 1963), p. 60.

<sup>114</sup> Oates, *I'll Take You There*, p. 74.

<sup>115</sup> *I'll Take You There*, p. 75.

nor engage productively with her studies. Rather, she becomes an embodiment of the metaphysical philosophy she reads.

The extent to which the narrator's personal instability precludes social engagement is also reflected throughout the novel's narrative devices. External focalization of a narrative can be suggestive of another character or the stability of an omniscient narrator.<sup>116</sup> However, as the above passage exemplifies, shifts to external focalization in *I'll Take You There* reflect the narrator's dissociation.<sup>117</sup> At times, the novel's linguistic structure further reflects the narrator's psychological instability, with repeated use of the first-person pronoun reflecting the narrator's volatile emotional state and the ultimate erasure of her identity.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, the novel abandons a consistent chronology – flashbacks litter the book, evoked by the narrator's own thoughts and feelings exemplifying how the novel's narrative structure is also defined by the narrator's subjectivity. In these ways, the novel's narrative device is self-referential: social guarantors of meaning are subverted into reflections of the narrator's psychological instability.

The pervasiveness of the narrator's psychology impedes the social form of the novel itself. In *The Theory of the Novel*, György Lukács argues that the novel is the ultimate form for the representation of life. Classical poetic forms, such as the epic, constituted the dominance of form over the contradictions which determine lived experience. However, for Lukács, the novel contradicts this approach, as Rüdiger Campe highlights:

Exactly because the modern novel has fallen from the state of preconceived reconciliation that is built in the classical genres, it is now the true expression of life being in need of form and form being imposed on life. The literary form of the novel,

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<sup>116</sup> Gerard Genette discusses the various implications of internal and external focalization in *Narrative Discourse*, pp. 190 – 210.

<sup>117</sup> See *I'll Take You There*, p. 60; p. 142 for further examples of the narrator's disassociation.

<sup>118</sup> For example, in this passage:

I'd peered too deeply into his soul for him to forgive me; I'd gone too far; he had loved me or had almost loved me or (I would tell myself) had begun to allow himself to consider that he might, in his way, love me; or that he might have begun to allow himself to consider that he might allow me to love him without irony; and I'd destroyed that, I'd destroyed my own meager hope of happiness, I'd destroyed the purity of my own love for him; I'd destroyed Anellia, who was such a fool. (*I'll Take You There*, p. 235).

even if a deficient form in poetical terms, is for that very reason the political and sociological form[.]<sup>119</sup>

Indeed, Lukács defines ‘a fluctuating yet firm balance between becoming and being’ to be a defining feature of the novel, a feature which confirms its social engagement.<sup>120</sup> ‘[I]n the created reality of the novel’ Lukács suggests, ‘all that becomes visible is the distance separating the systematisation from concrete life: a systematisation which emphasises the conventionality of the objective world and the interiority of the subjective one.’<sup>121</sup> In *I’ll Take You There*, this ‘distance’ has been erased, resulting in the dissolution of tension between subjective and objective realities which Lukács argues is definitive of the realist novel form.<sup>122</sup> In Oates’ novel, the narrator is trapped in a permanent state of ‘being’ and the novel is dominated by this unstable, subjective perspective.

In *I’ll Take You There*, the university is aligned with broader social institutions from which the narrator is alienated due to her unstable identity. Contribution to the university requires the performance of the defined gender roles, such as the sorority sisters, with which the narrator does not conform. However, the narrator’s difficulties also illustrate critiques of anti-essentialist and ‘post-modernist’ conceptions of identity. For Nikol Alexander-Floyd and many others, destabilization of identity prevents the analysis of socially-constructed inequality.<sup>123</sup> Alexander-Floyd argues that the ‘postmodern approach [which] problematizes identity’ such as in Oates’ novel, ‘de-legitimizes the study of racism, sexism, and the structural bases of inequality and activism’.<sup>124</sup> For Alison Assiter, ‘anti-realist’ challenges to linguistic stability undermine the possibility for collective action, wherein a shared understanding is fundamental:

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<sup>119</sup> Rüdiger Campe, ‘Form and Life in the Theory of the Novel’, *Constellations*, 18:1 (2011), pp. 53-66 (p. 62).

<sup>120</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 73. Lukács deploys the Hegelian definitions of becoming and being; see Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 51 – 64 for discussion of these concepts.

<sup>121</sup> Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 70.

<sup>122</sup> *The Theory of the Novel*, p. 70-72.

<sup>123</sup> Social engagement is central to Patricia Hill Collins chapter ‘Toward a Politics of Empowerment’ in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and The Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000) pp. 273 – 290 and bell hooks, ‘Educating Women: A Feminist Agenda’ in *Feminist Theory: From Margins to Centre* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

<sup>124</sup> Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd, ‘Radical Black Feminism and the Fight for Social and Epistemic Justice’, *National Political Science Review; New Brunswick*, 17.1 (2015), 63–73 (p. 65).

An epistemic community, I suggest, then, will be a group of individuals who share certain fundamental interests, values and beliefs in common, for example, that sexism is wrong, that racism is wrong, and who work on consequences of these presuppositions.<sup>125</sup>

In Oates' novel, the university is not only a space which enforces fictionalised and alienating conceptions of identity, but one which also prevents political activism: the narrator is abandoned, unstable, and unable to impact her community or enact social change.

### **Conclusion: The Contemporary Campus Novel and Feminist Literature**

The experiences of white women in contemporary campus novels evoke two traditions both of which deny higher education's role in achieving equality for women. These novels prominently feature women's experiences in the domestic sphere, denying the objectives of 'second wave' feminism and its associated literary forms. Rather, these novels feature elements which are recognisable from an explicitly patriarchal literary tradition. Just as *Tam Lin's* Professor Medeous illustrates the trope of the demonic woman, both Elle and Oates' narrator illustrate characteristics of the angelic woman who, according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'in the severity of her selflessness, in the extremity of her alienation from ordinary fleshly life,' has 'no story of her own.'<sup>126</sup> As Gilbert and Gubar highlight, this figure derived from a particularly restrictive literary form: 'from the eighteenth century on, conduct books for ladies had proliferated, enjoining young girls to submissiveness, modesty, selflessness'.<sup>127</sup> These novels are notable for maintaining the characteristics of the demonic and angelic woman despite their entry into the public sphere. Women are no longer confined in the domestic sphere, but they remain confined – by social norms, and a patriarchal literary tradition – in the public sphere.

These novels not only allude to a literary tradition which conceptualised limited roles for women, but they also explicitly reject the liberating possibilities of the 'second wave'. By re-affirming the significance of parents' influence, deriding female friendships, and re-

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<sup>125</sup> Alison Assiter, *Enlightened Women: Modernist Feminism in a Postmodern Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 61; p. 84. Assiter includes a critique of anti-realism in ch. 3, 'Realism and Anti-Realism', pp. 55 – 68.

<sup>126</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 24; p. 22.

<sup>127</sup> *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 23.

asserting a heteronormative family structure, these novels eschew the literary features which define the feminist *bildungsroman*. In her discussion of the form, Rita Felski notes ‘a splitting of inner and outer self, the heroine experiencing a powerful estrangement from the external appearance by which her social status as a woman in a patriarchal culture is largely determined.’<sup>128</sup> Felski argues that ‘[t]he key transformation of the text takes the protagonist from this stage of alienation, of sense of lack, to a conscious affirmation of gendered identity.’<sup>129</sup> This narrative arc is absent from these contemporary campus novels. Instead, students conclude the novels embodying ‘[their] social status as a woman in a patriarchal culture’, a role which is prominently defined by ‘lack’. These novels also signify the rejection of ‘second wave’ feminist political aspirations with which the feminist *bildungsroman* has been prominently associated.<sup>130</sup>

Indeed, these campus novels reject the very calls articulated by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*. For Friedan, restrictive social norms alienated women from educational opportunities:

The key to the trap is, of course, education. The feminine mystique has made higher education for women seem suspect, unnecessary and even dangerous. But I think that education, and only education, has saved, and can continue to save, American women from the greater dangers of the feminine mystique.<sup>131</sup>

In terms similar to Felski’s articulation, Friedan argues that ‘[w]omen must be educated to a new integration of roles’:

The more they are encouraged to make that new life plan – integrating a serious, lifelong commitment to society with marriage and motherhood – the less conflicts

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<sup>128</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 130

<sup>129</sup> Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, p. 130

<sup>130</sup> In 1973, Ellen Morgan argued that the *bildungsroman* is ‘the most salient form for literature influenced by neo-feminism’ (‘Human Becoming: Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel’, in Susan Comillon, ed., *Images of Women in Fiction* (Ohio: Bowling Green Press, 1973) p. 183 - 205, (p. 185)). Lisa Maria Hogeland’s definition of the consciousness-raising novel mirrors the narrative arc of the feminist *bildungsroman* as outlined by Felski: ‘The “master plot” of the CR novel traces a similar trajectory [to the consciousness-raising process], as the protagonist moves from feeling somehow at odds with others’ expectations of her, into confrontations with others and with institutions, and into a new and newly politicized understanding of herself and society.’ (‘Sexuality in the Consciousness-Raising Novel of the 1970s’, p. 603.) See Lisa Maria Hogeland, *Feminism and Its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and the Women’s Liberation Movement* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998) for a detailed discussion of the genre.

<sup>131</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 343; p. 344.

and unnecessary frustrations they will feel as wives and mothers, and the less their daughters will make mistaken choices for lack of a full image of woman's identity.<sup>132</sup> However, even Friedan's relatively conservative objectives are denied in *Tam Lin*, *Legally Blonde*, and *I'll Take You There*: these novels depict a stark contrast between women's intellectual ambitions and their domestic roles, with education being explicitly sacrificed.<sup>133</sup> In these novels, 'higher education for women [is] suspect, unnecessary and even dangerous.' These novels reject the calls of 'second wave' feminism and depict higher education institutions as representatives of a patriarchal social order.

The academic achievements of women in these contemporary campus novels problematize students' experiences of the public sphere. In these novels, attendance and success at university requires continued observance of a number of gendered expectations – the commodified performance of femininity or acquiescence to strict gendered norms. Failure to adhere to these norms, as in *I'll Take You There*, results in a damaging instability which undermines social engagement. However, these novels nevertheless share a narrative arc which contradicts the restricted, domestic experiences previously delineated for women – Janet, Elle and Oates' anonymous narrator do succeed at college and conclude their novels in relative states of fulfilment.

In this way, these novels exhibit the contradiction at the heart of the 'money, sex and power genre' discussed in Rita Felski's later work.<sup>134</sup> A genre typified by the work of Judith Krantz, Felski argues that these novels perpetuate 'a longstanding association between femininity and consumption' while also 'offer[ing] reassurance that women can achieve traditional male economic success without sacrificing familiar forms of female (hetero)sexual power.'<sup>135</sup> However, the form also exhibits a fundamental contradiction: alongside these traditional characterisations, 'the money, sex and power novel also contains a classic *Bildungsroman* plot governed by values of individualism, ambition and self-realization':

Like the Balzacian hero, the Krantzian protagonist desires what is in the world rather than outside of it, identifying with the predominant social values of her time, albeit

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<sup>132</sup> *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 355.

<sup>133</sup> Sue Thornham compares Friedan's objectives with the more revolutionary 'Radical Feminists' in 'Second Wave Feminism', in Sarah Gamble ed. *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, pp. 35 – 38.

<sup>134</sup> Rita Felski, 'Judith Krantz, author of "the cultural logics of late capitalism"', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 8:2 (1997), pp. 129 – 142 (p. 142).

<sup>135</sup> Felski, 'Judith Krantz', p. 136; p. 139



values that have been traditionally denied to women. Her achievement will be to master the rules of social and economic advancement more skilfully than anyone else.<sup>136</sup>

Felski's analysis reveals 'two distinct, co-existing narratives and temporal modalities within a new popular form', a fundamental ambiguity which is shared by *Legally Blonde*, *Tam Lin*, and *I'll Take You There*.<sup>137</sup> These novels signify the perpetuation of gendered characterisations and maintain the equation between higher education and personal development even as they depict the expansion of women's opportunities into a previously-male literary tradition.

The extent to which these novels propagate established forms emphasises the limitations of their political activism: as Felski continues, '[money, sex and power] novels are 'feminist' only in the very limited sense of affirming an individual woman's right to wealth and success'.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, campus novels offer a bleak commentary on a range of productive strategies outlined by contemporary feminisms.<sup>139</sup> In *Legally Blonde*, Elle, Sarah and Josette's experiences undermine the re-appropriation of 'girlie things' central to much scholarship included under the banner of 'postfeminism' by emphasising the exploitation and conformity inherent in such theorizations.<sup>140</sup> *I'll Take You There* further problematizes the difficulties of an individualistic approach: the narrator's instability is a direct result of 'conceiving of [identity] categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power', by which Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Leslie McCall have defined an intersectional approach.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>136</sup>'Judith Krantz', p. 136; p. 137

<sup>137</sup> 'Judith Krantz', p. 140.

<sup>138</sup> 'Judith Krantz', p. 139.

<sup>139</sup> For an overview of contemporary feminist activism, see Jo Reger 'Contemporary Feminism and Beyond' in Holly J. McCammon, Verta Taylor, Jo Reger, and Rachel L. Einwohner ed. *The Oxford Handbook of U.S. Women's Social Movement Activism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 109-130.

<sup>140</sup> Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 1991) and Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1993) exemplify the 'post-feminist' perspective. For an overview of 'post-feminism', see Sarah Gamble, 'Post-Feminism' in Sarah Gamble ed. *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, (Routledge: London; New York, 2004), pp. 49-54.

<sup>141</sup> Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Leslie McCall, 'Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis', *Signs* (38:4, 2013), pp. 785-810 (p. 795).

Universities in these novels offer a route to a limited conception of success, defined by a masculine literary tradition, and fail to conceptualise a method for feminist action. Like 'second wave' texts, the university in these works is a site which inhibits female solidarity and denies various strategies for improving women's experiences in contemporary America. This oppressive function is mirrored in novels which depict the experiences of Black students in contemporary American colleges. Engaging with a diverse range of historical and philosophical conceptions of the role of higher education in achieving racial equality, colleges are prevalently depicted as institutionalised representations of white supremacy and their role in achieving racial equality is under debate.

## Chapter 5: The Contemporary African American Campus Novel

The American campus novel has remained preoccupied with the role of higher education in perpetuating and redressing structures of white supremacy in American society since the genre's inception. In novels by Black authors, works have interrogated not only the utilitarian function of education in achieving racial uplift following the Emancipation Proclamation, but also a wide range of ideological barriers, such as concerns of 'over-education', the pernicious influence of respectability politics, and questions of racial authenticity in relation to a specifically Black aesthetic. These novels constitute a substantial corpus of texts; however, as Lavelle Porter argues, novels by Black authors illustrate how 'black intellectuals crafted counternarratives in defiance of white supremacy and created their own academic lives.'<sup>1</sup> Indeed, campus novels by Black authors have been consistently engaged with the priorities of the African American community.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, campus novels by Black authors interrogated higher education's role in achieving racial equality following the Emancipation Proclamation. Sutton Griggs, whose *Imperium in Imperio: A Study of the Negro Race Problem* (1899) is the first campus novel written by an African American author, was also the first Black author to achieve commercial success by primarily writing for Black audiences.<sup>3</sup> In *Imperium in Imperio*, the fictional Thomas Jefferson College's veneer of racial integration masks a Black nationalist movement. However, when Sutton Griggs' protagonist, Belton, leaves university, his difficulty finding employment suggests that a social revolution cannot be achieved through a new educational system alone. Education also featured prominently in W.E.B. Du Bois' fictional

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<sup>1</sup> Lavelle Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Following Kimberlé Crenshaw, citing Catherine Mackinnon, I capitalize 'Black' throughout this chapter to indicate 'a specific cultural group' (Mackinnon quoted in Crenshaw). Like Crenshaw, 'I do not capitalize "white," which is not a proper noun, since whites do not constitute a specific cultural group.' (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991), 1241–99 (footnote to p. 1244)). Throughout this chapter, and thesis, the term 'Black' is used to indicate 'the Manichean divide' between whiteness and Blackness identified by George Yancy in "'Seeing Blackness" from within the Manichean Divide' in George Yancy ed. *White on White/Black on Black* (Maryland and Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield Publishing, 2005), pp. 233-264. On occasions when 'African American' is used, this term signifies a pan-African perspective, particularly in the work of W.E.B. DuBois.

<sup>3</sup> See Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, p. 49.

work: the short stories 'Tom Brown at Fisk' (1887-88) and 'Of the Coming of John', included in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and, in his later years, Du Bois also published *The Black Flame* trilogy – *The Ordeal of Mansart* (1957), *Mansart Builds a School* (1959) and *Worlds of Colour* (1961) – which depicts the experiences of a professor and college president, Manuel Mansart. Du Bois rejected the reassuring narrative arc of the campus story in 'Of the Coming of John', a story which traces the different experiences of a Black and white student, both named John. The education of the Black John results in his awareness of white supremacy, knowledge which causes conflict within his community and results in his murder by lynching.<sup>4</sup> Like the white elite literary tradition and campus novels featuring female students, these campus novels present the university as a microcosm of wider society – attendance at college is equated with entry into the public sphere. However, these novels abandon the *bildungsroman* form wherein education is equated with socialization. Rather, Griggs and Du Bois' works equate education with awareness of white supremacy, resulting in the exclusion of Black Americans from American society.

These novels emphasise the importance of education in the lives of newly-emancipated Black Americans, mirroring prevalent concerns of the period. Racial uplift was a prominent concern following Emancipation. A contested term, Laura R. Fisher argues that:

African Americans interpreted uplift more generally as a call to service and education. Even while truncated and unequal, education constituted the main modality of citizenship available to African Americans living under Jim Crow, which made the black school a crucial domain of politics and prime locus of social reform.<sup>5</sup>

While Fisher defines a more general interpretation of racial uplift, Hazel Carby has argued that the Postbellum period was 'the age of [Booker T.] Washington and [W.E.B.] Du Bois', and the philosophers' divergent interpretations of racial uplift.<sup>6</sup> Du Bois, the first Black American

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<sup>4</sup> See Lavelle Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, pp. 17-22 for discussion of 'over-education' as an important context for reading academic novels by Black authors. 'Of the Coming of John' has received sustained critical attention, including Sieglinde Lemke's chapter 'Of the Coming of John' in *The Cambridge Companion to W.E.B. DuBois* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 37-47. See Amy L. Ferrell and Ray Black, 'Of the Coming of John: A Contemporary Counter-Story of Race and Gifted Education', *Urban Education*, April (2019), [Online] <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085919842628>> [Accessed 16th July 2020] for discussion of the story in the context of Critical Race Theory and education.

<sup>5</sup> Laura R. Fisher, 'Heads and Hands Together: Booker T. Washington's Vocational Realism', *American Literature*, 87:4 (2015), pp. 709-737 (p. 713).

<sup>6</sup> Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 6.

to receive a PhD from Harvard, articulated the importance of a broad-based education including the Liberal Arts while Washington advocated for the utilitarian approach employed in the Tuskegee Institute. Despite their divergent perspectives, both Washington and Du Bois emphasised the importance of education for Black Americans, a belief which is mirrored in the period's campus novels.

Novels published during the culture wars of the 1960s and 70s align university institutions with broader structures of oppression. This relationship is particularly evident in novels which depict various social justice movements of the period. Gil Scott-Heron's *The Nigger Factory* (1972) and Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) both depict student activists in the Civil Rights movement. While Walker's novel traces the protagonist, Meridian's, voter registration and desegregation initiatives, Scott-Heron's novel juxtaposes these gradual strategies with a militant Black nationalist movement at Sutton College.<sup>7</sup> Despite their divergent political foci, both of these novels align universities with white supremacy. In *Meridian*, a tree named the Sojourner forms a focal point for the students of the evocatively-named Saxon College - the tree's presence at the college emphasises higher education's significance in the struggles for liberation for both women and Black Americans.<sup>8</sup> Characteristic of the complexity of Walker's novel, *Meridian* also interrogates the social construction of femininity, particularly the role of motherhood - Meridian gives her child up for adoption and has a hysterectomy, rejecting this definition of femininity in favour of dedicating her life to the communal, political activism which preoccupies her for the rest of

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<sup>7</sup> Academic scholarship of *The Nigger Factory* is lacking, perhaps due to, as Lavelle Porter has highlighted, Scott-Heron's reputation as 'the father of rap or the godfather of hip-hop [while being] lesser known for the written word'. (Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, p. 120) However, see Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, pp. 119-124 for discussion of *The Nigger Factory* alongside Walker's *Meridian*. See Roberta M. Hendrickson, 'Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, *Meridian* and the Civil Rights Movement', *MELUS*, 24:3 (1999), pp. 111-128 and Karen F. Stein, 'Meridian: Alice Walker's Critique of Revolution', *Black American Literature Forum*, 20:1/2 (1986), pp. 129-141 for discussion of Walker's novel and the Civil Rights movement.

<sup>61</sup> Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) was an abolitionist and women's rights campaigner. Truth is most well-known for a speech delivered at the Ohio Women's Convention in 1851 which was subsequently titled, 'Ain't I a Woman?' after a much-changed version of Truth's original speech published by Frances Gage in 1881. In her original speech, Truth refers to her experiences while enslaved as evidence of the value of women's contributions, and their ability to contribute to public life. See Manning Marable ed. *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal: an African American Anthology*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 67-68 for Truth's original speech and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage ed. *History of Women's Suffrage* (New York: Charles Mann, 1886), pp. 115-117 for Gage's recollections, including the version of the speech which has become frequently-cited, on p. 116.

her life. As Lavelle Porter has noted, the intersectionality of Walker's interrogation of anti-racist and anti-misogynist activism 'is largely illegible in the masculine nationalism of Scott-Heron's *The Nigger Factory*.'<sup>9</sup> Scott-Heron's novel subverts the role of the rebellious football player, recognisable from *Stover at Yale*: in *The Nigger Factory*, the football players form the MJUMBE - Members of Justice United for Meaningful Black Education - a militant anti-racist group. The novel's title itself, and its opening lines, decry college's ability to counteract white supremacy in America:

Black colleges and universities have been both a blessing and a curse on black people. The institutions have educated thousands of our people who would have never had the opportunity to get an education otherwise. [...] They have never, however, made anybody equal.<sup>10</sup>

Like nineteenth century novels, *Meridian* and *The Nigger Factory* reject the chronological stability of the classical *bildungsroman* in favour of fragmented narratives which reject narratological closure. Indeed, through the use of flashbacks, narrative fragmentation, and the uncertainty with which these novels conclude, the relevance, success, and value of student activism in the 1960s and 70s is questioned.

Continuing their engagement with prominent political concerns, *Meridian* and *The Nigger Factory* engage with contemporaneous ideologies which emphasise the social mechanics of racist discrimination. Most evidently, these novels directly depict the student protests and Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 70s.<sup>11</sup> However, these novels also engage with specific mechanics which continued to oppress Black Americans throughout the twentieth century. Both *Meridian* and *The Nigger Factory* react against the role of respectability politics in defining the behaviour of Black Americans, highlighting the ideology's links to whiteness and white supremacy. Respectability politics is a term originally coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in a study of Black women's activism in the Methodist Church; Paisley Harris highlights that 'African American women were particularly likely to use respectability and to be judged by it. Moreover, African American women symbolized, even

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<sup>9</sup> Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, p. 119.

<sup>10</sup> Gil Scott-Heron, *The Nigger Factory* (London: Canongate Books, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> See Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2015) pp. 102-170 for discussion of the Civil Rights movement and second wave feminism.

embodied, this concept.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Meridian rebels against a particularly strict form of female identity. Discussing the ideology's decline in the early-twentieth century, Harris identifies the foundation of the rejection of respectability politics which is evident in *The Nigger Factory*:

More masculinist strategies that Garveyism and the Nation of Islam embraced focused on economic nationalism, equal rights, self-defense, and self-determination. These tactics finally overshadowed bourgeois respectability with the onset of the Great Depression.<sup>13</sup>

These 'masculinist strategies' are evident in *The Nigger Factory*. Indeed, Lavelle Porter identifies '[*The Nigger Factory's*] macho vision of black nationalism [which] was undoubtedly inspired in the movement itself'.<sup>14</sup> However, while this narrative purported to reject respectability politics, the Civil Rights activist Gwen Patton highlights the contradictions in the Black Power movement:

It is true that Black Power shook many Black men and for the Movement this was a necessary and vitalizing force. Black men could respond positively toward Black Power and could assert their leadership, which included a strengthening of their masculinity and, unfortunately, an airing of their egos. [...] Women do have definite, subordinate roles and to deviate is an infamous assault on manhood.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, these novels situate the university within broader structures of white supremacy, while also depicting students who struggle against these oppressive mechanics, with various degrees of success.

Contemporary campus novels maintain this engagement with various approaches to racist discrimination in the United States. In particular, these novels interrogate the university's position in a broader network of systemic racism; the engagement of individuals with social institutions; and the way in which Black students contribute to and work within their communities. The emphasis on the contributions of universities to systemic racism is one which is interrogated in Craig Wilder's work: *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of American Universities* (2013). This study highlights the extent to which

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<sup>12</sup> Paisley Harris, 'Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women's History and Black Feminism', *Journal of Women's History*, 15:1 (2003), pp. 212-238 (p. 213).

<sup>13</sup> Harris, 'Gatekeeping and Remaking', p. 213.

<sup>14</sup> Porter, *The Blackademic Life*, p. 121.

<sup>15</sup> Gwen Patton, 'Black People and the Victorian Ethos' in Toni Cade Bambara ed. *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970 [2005]), pp. 179-187 (p. 184).

higher education institutions maintained and perpetuated slavery, through involvement in the trade of enslaved people as well as providing ideological justifications for the industry. Wilder's approach – contextualising the university within a system of systemic racism – has been extended to knowledge itself. Patricia Hill Collins' work, for example, emphasises the extent to which epistemology itself derives from white supremacist ideologies which exclude and oppress Black Americans.<sup>16</sup> Intersectionality is a theoretical framework which enables consideration of individuals' engagement with social institutions, and the way in which such institutions are incapable of the nuance required to accommodate the multiplicity of human identity. Thus, it is a key framework for considering students' entry into society following higher education.

This chapter discusses three contemporary campus novels' engagement with higher education's ability to address racial inequality and white supremacy in America. T. Geronimo Johnson's *Welcome to Braggsville* (2015) particularly interrogates the function of Berkeley, University of California. In Johnson's novel, Berkeley is aligned with oppressive structures of white supremacy while the novel's theoretical focus – performativity – proves unable to combat systems of oppression. Connie Briscoe's *Big Girls Don't Cry* (1996) particularly depicts an individual's experience within a broader structure of white supremacy. While Briscoe's novel depicts college's creation of the entrepreneurial subject who does not attempt to reform racist structures, Naomi eventually manages to achieve self-definition which enables her contribution to her community. C. Kelly Robinson's *Between Brothers* (2008), emphasises the importance of community in the education of Black students, while also demanding students' contribution to those communities. In this sense, Robinson's novel contradicts the social fragmentation which defines neoliberal higher education, however, *Between Brothers* is, in this sense, idealistic. The conclusion to this chapter situates these three novels within conversations regarding the definition and function of African American literature.

### ***Welcome to Braggsville: The University and Institutional Racism***

T. Geronimo Johnson's *Welcome to Braggsville* explores the ramifications of four Berkeley students' attempts to protest a Civil War re-enactment in Braggsville, Georgia. Throughout the novel, Johnson explores the complex relationship between Berkeley's liberal, west coast

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<sup>16</sup> See Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, pp. 251-272.



values and a southern town which remains dominated by the segregationist and discriminatory values of the confederacy. D'aron's reflections at the end of the novel reveal Berkeley's institutional position in Johnson's work:

[Berkeley] had cut Daron, who had thought the university the center of the world and learned it was only a part, a smaller part than one imagined, certainly less than advertised. Not all people warm much to others, and nothing the school said or wrote would change that. Uprooted from the soil of lived truth, none of their theories, French philosophers, or social justice creeds amounted to a hill of beans, and wouldn't grow a beanstalk if they did.<sup>17</sup>

As D'aron notes here, Berkeley is resolutely detached from the lived experiences and social structures which organise Braggsville. However, Johnson's novel does not merely interrogate the detachment of the university from wider society. Mirroring the ambiguous nature of the neoliberal university, Berkeley is also placed within a broader network of institutional racism which emphasises the extent to which it continues to exert institutional power. Thus, the juxtaposition with mechanics of institutional racism erodes Berkeley's institutional influence, while also highlighting the extent to which the university contributes to the perpetuation of racist discrimination in American society.

The term institutional racism was coined by Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967). In defining the term, Ture and Hamilton first of all juxtapose institutional racism with its 'individual' counterpart:

Racism is both overt and covert. It takes two, closely related forms: individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism. The first consists of overt acts by individuals, which cause death, injury or the violent destruction of property. [...] The second type originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation than the first type.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> T. Geronimo Johnson, *Welcome to Braggsville* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015) [Apple Books edition], p. 347

<sup>18</sup> Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 19.

While institutional racism relies upon and enacts the same ‘anti-black attitudes’ as individual racism, it is, in contrast, invisible and institutionalised in society’s ‘established and respected forces’.<sup>19</sup> The covert nature of institutional racism, as well as its manifestations in established institutions, means “[r]espectable” individuals can absolve themselves from individual blame’ while society ‘pretends it does not know [...] or is in fact incapable of doing anything meaningful about it.’<sup>20</sup> Ture and Hamilton outline three distinct mechanics by which institutional racism operates throughout American society – the political, economic and social. Institutional racism in the political sphere operates through the ‘white power structure’ and ‘indirect rule’, wherein Black political leaders are assimilated into white supremacist ideologies and perpetuate institutionally racist policies.<sup>21</sup> Institutional racism in the economic sphere relies upon economic exploitation which maintains the ‘economic dependency’ of Black communities while simultaneously increasing the wealth of white Americans.<sup>22</sup> As Ture and Hamilton articulate, institutional racism also operates upon a ‘social’ level, primarily through the continuance of ‘the embedded colonial mentality’, on the part of both white and Black Americans, which serves ‘to degrade and to dehumanize the subjected black man.’<sup>23</sup> In *Welcome to Braggville*, the university’s relationship with institutional racism is examined. Illustrating the erosion and exertion of neoliberal institutional authority, Johnson’s Berkeley is both contextualised within this broader network of institutional racism, and its ability to counteract the mechanics of institutional racism is rejected.

When D’aron arrives at Berkeley, his conceptions about identity are swiftly contradicted by the school’s dominant ideology. The South is central to D’aron’s own conception of his identity, however, at Berkeley he is surprised to find that he is not called upon to discuss the Civil War; the professor of the class, D’aron is told, has ‘a resistance to *essentializing*’.<sup>24</sup> D’aron further realises the fallacy of essentialist assumptions when he meets his academic supervisor, a Black woman whom D’aron assumes will be aggressive and

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<sup>19</sup> Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power*, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> *Black Power*, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> See *Black Power*, pp. 22-32 for discussion of institutional racism in the political sphere.

<sup>22</sup> *Black Power*, p. 32. See *Black Power*, pp. 32-39 for discussion of institutional racism in the economic sphere.

<sup>23</sup> *Black Power*, p. 47. See *Black Power*, pp. 39-48 for discussion of institutional racism in the social sphere.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, *Welcome to Braggville*, p. 6.

unsympathetic to his initial academic difficulties at Berkeley. However, she instead draws parallels between their rural backgrounds, and reassures him that he belongs at the prestigious institution. Berkeley is 'the university, the universe where no one has a body', a community dedicated to anti-essentialist theorisations of identity.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, this attitude is embodied by D'aron's roommate Louis, whose Malaysian heritage means he is mistaken for Indian, and whose desire to be 'the next Lenny Bruce Lee' exemplifies racial fluidity.<sup>26</sup> Two other students with whom D'aron and Louis develop friendships also display loyalty to performative theorisations of their own identities. Candice cites Judith Butler's theorisation of gender performativity, while Charlie highlights that 'Ashanti Young says even race is a performance'.<sup>27</sup>

Berkeley's anti-essentialist conception of identity is further reflected in *Welcome to Braggsville's* narrative device. The novel's complex narrative device particularly undermines social definitions of subjectivity. The structure, narrator, and linguistic form of the novel reject engagement. The novel is chronologically complex, shifting from present, to past, to future, a complexity which is evident from the chapters' names – rather than following Chapter Twelve, Chapter Thirteen is between Chapters Twenty and Twenty-One; the final chapters are named 'Chapter Next' and 'Chapter Latest'. This instability is mirrored in the narrative position of the narrator. While having privileged access to the characters' thoughts, in particular D'aron's, the narrative also includes extra-diegetic commentary: '(Back in ninth grade, Slater Jones from 4-H said only: I don't have sex, I make babies. Remarkable prescience for a fourteen-year-old, *hence this parenthetical.*')<sup>28</sup> On a linguistic level, the novel deploys a number of techniques which further preclude in-depth engagement, as exemplified in a section dedicated to D'aron's various nicknames:

Faggot when he hugged John Meer in third grade, Faggot again when he drew hearts on everyone's Valentine's Day cards in fourth grade, Dim Ding-Dong when he undressed in the wrong dressing room because he daren't venture into the dark end of the gym, Philadelphia Freedom when he was caught clicking heels to that song (Tony thought he was clever with that one), Mr. Davenport when he won the school's

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<sup>25</sup> Johnson, *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 54

<sup>26</sup> *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 11. Louis' ambitions coalesces the name of a white comedian, Lenny Bruce, with that of the Hong Kong-American martial artist and film star, Bruce Lee.

<sup>27</sup> *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 35; p. 135; pp. 135-6.

<sup>28</sup> *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 37 (italics added).

debate contest in eighth grade, Faggot again when he won the school's debate contest in eighth grade, Faggot again more times than he cared to remember, especially the summer he returned from Chicago sporting a new Midwest accent, harder on the vowels and consonants alike, but sociable, played well with others that accent did, Faggot again when he cried at the end of WALL-E<sup>29</sup>

In this passage, the meaning and significance of language is undermined using a number of linguistic devices. The passage is one sentence, which in fact continues for the novel's entire first page. Furthermore, the varying contexts in which D'aron has been called '[f]aggot' suggests the word has no fixed meaning, while the inclusion of 'Mr Davenport' suggests different people – an adult perhaps, rather than D'aron's peers. The subject of the passage itself – D'aron's name – challenges his ultimate subjecthood, while the anthropomorphic 'accent' which 'played well with others' challenges the association between subjectivity and humanity.

By emphasising the influence of discourse, *Welcome to Braggsville's* narrative techniques engage with the novel's central theoretical concern: performativity. As defined by Jillian R. Cavanaugh in *Oxford Bibliographies*, '[p]erformativity is the power of language to effect change in the world: language does not simply describe the world but may instead (or also) function as a form of social action.'<sup>30</sup> The narrative of *Welcome to Braggsville* engages with this theorisation: the novel's language creates an uncomfortable reading experience, while language is also detached from social constructions such as time and subjectivity. By blurring the boundary between theory and fiction, Johnson's novel exemplifies a narrative strategy discussed by Mark Currie in *Postmodern Narrative Theory: theoretical fiction*. As Currie identifies, theoretical fiction deconstructs the boundaries between discourses: it is 'a way of giving the novel a critical function, the ability to explore the logic and the philosophy of narrative without recourse to metalanguage'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, exemplifying the circularity which could be said to characterise Johnson's novel, theoretical fiction is also fundamentally performative:

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<sup>29</sup> Johnson, *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Jillian R. Cavanaugh, 'Performativity' in *Oxford Bibliographies*, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2015. Online: <[<sup>31</sup> Mark Currie, \*Postmodern Narrative Theory\* \(Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press, 1998\), p. 52.](https://oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0114.xml#:~:text=Performativity%20is%20the%20power%20of,a%20form%20of%20social%20action.> [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> October 2020].</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

The theoretical fiction is a performative rather than a constative narratology, meaning that it does not try to state the truth about an object-narrative but rather enacts or performs what it wishes to say about narrative while itself being a narrative.<sup>32</sup>

The consequence of this blurring between fiction and theory, Currie laments, is that 'it leaves the subject-object relation between a text and its reading mysteriously untheorised'.<sup>33</sup> In *Welcome to Braggsville*, any sense of defined subjectivity is rejected. Rather than depicting the personal development of students, then, Johnson's novel persistently rejects social definitions of subjectivity.

When Louis, Candice and Charlie discover that Braggsville stages Civil War re-enactments, they are determined to visit the town to stage a 'performative intervention'.<sup>34</sup> During Spring Break, the group stay with D'aron's family and prepare to recreate a lynching during the event. Charlie's unease upon their arrival gestures towards the reality of racist discrimination in the South, although D'aron assures him that he will not face any problems. On the day of the re-enactment, and protest, the students' performative methodology is emphasised during Louis and Candice's preparations. Louis dresses in a costume, wearing an afro wig from a costume party and black face; with Candice using a harness to hang Louis from a tree. When the members of the re-enactment arrive, 'Louis started braying and kicking and yelling, Sorry massuh, please don't whip me.'<sup>35</sup> As Candice recalls:

[Louis] was supposed to wiggle and yell that he was sorry, and he wasn't human, and he couldn't think real good on account of his being black. He wrote that line out, and rehearsed until he was satisfied that it sounded right. I was dressed like a man. We didn't think women did much of the whipping back then. That might make it too erotic.<sup>36</sup>

However, tragic consequences arise from the group's protest in Braggsville: attendees at the re-enactment include members of a white supremacist group, one of whom begins to whip Louis, causing his death. George Yancy has emphasised the limitations of anti-essentialist theorisations of race:

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<sup>32</sup> Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, p. 60.

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 138.

<sup>36</sup> *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 139.

It is one thing to show that the concept of race does not refer to some “given” in the empirical world. The ontological groundlessness of race, however, did not save the life of young Black Emmett Till, whose face was beaten beyond recognition by white racists; it did not save Black bodies from being brutally lynched; it did not prevent the pernicious, systemic practices of Jim Crow.<sup>37</sup>

Louis’ death emphasises the redundancy of anti-essentialist theories when confronted with structural, institutionalised racism, as Yancy highlights. While Berkeley is clearly aligned with anti-essentialist theorisations of race, this approach is undermined in the novel alongside universities’ contribution to the achievement of racial equality.

Various narrative techniques in *Welcome to Braggville* also undermine Berkeley’s ability to counteract racist discrimination. Throughout Johnson’s work, academic discourse is included in subversive contexts. Appendix 2 is a list of Works Cited in the novel, an academic convention which is once again undermined. Some of the works are genuine and the citations are included in a recognisable academic format, however, one citation reads ‘Butler, J. (2000). *Everything*. New York, NY: Various Press’ rather than referencing a specific text.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, fictional works are included, including Geronimo’s novel itself, D’aron’s dissertation and ‘Old Hitch (1825–1999). *Cooking by Heartlight*. Braggville, GA: Handheld.’<sup>39</sup> The inclusion of these fictional works thus casts doubt upon the veracity of a number of unpublished works cited, authored by Johnson himself.

The use of academic discourse in *Welcome to Braggville* illustrates Frederic Jameson’s seminal definition of pastiche in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*: pastiche is ‘the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language.’<sup>40</sup> While both pastiche and parody imitate established linguistic forms, pastiche is ‘devoid of any laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic norm still exists.’<sup>41</sup> Even the comedic effect of *Welcome to Braggville*’s pastiche does not undermine its cynicism – Jameson continues, highlighting that ‘[t]his omnipresence of

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<sup>37</sup> George Yancy, “‘Seeing Blackness’ from Within the Manichean Divide”, p. 256.

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, *Welcome to Braggville*, p. 364.

<sup>39</sup> *Welcome to Braggville*, p. 364.

<sup>40</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 17.

pastiche is not incompatible with a certain humor, however, nor is it innocent of passion: it is at least compatible with addiction – with a whole historically original consumers’ appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and “spectacles”.<sup>42</sup> In particular contexts, the undermining of academic discourse derides Berkeley’s engagement with social and racial inequality. In a history class, the students attend a ‘Salon de Chat’ with discussion topics such as ‘Civil Disobedience’, ‘Tradition and Social Justice’, and ‘Uncivil Disobedience and Protest’ are presented in the form of a menu – as the ‘Starter’, ‘Entrée’, and ‘Dessert’ of the session.<sup>43</sup> The class has the subversive ‘tagline’: ‘[p]eople who don’t know their history are doomed to eat it!’<sup>44</sup> The novel’s first appendix contains a more overt critique. The ‘Sexicon (The Glossary for the Rest of Us’), emphasises academic discourse’s avoidance of significant events.<sup>45</sup> The ‘Civil War’ is defined as ‘(1) Polite disagreement. (2) When people of the same race argue over what to do with people of another race. (3) Divide and conquer taken to the extreme.’<sup>46</sup> The definition of ‘[u]niversity’, is ‘[c]olonialism’s most exquisite distillation’.<sup>47</sup> The use of pastiche in Johnson’s novel undermines Berkeley’s authority and influence, particularly pertaining to the achievement of racial equality. However, as this definition of the institution implies, Berkeley is also explicitly aligned with structures of white supremacy which perpetuate discrimination against Black people throughout American society.

While the influence of Berkeley’s anti-essentialist conceptions of race is undermined, the university institution is also aligned with white supremacist strategies which dominate Braggsville. Following Louis’ death, D’aron discovers the existence of a white supremacist militia in Braggsville. According to their leader, the militia is ‘the legacy [their] forefathers built’; in photos on the wall of the group’s hunting lodge, D’aron recognises the town’s founder, his children and D’aron’s own parents.<sup>48</sup> The militia’s power persists: they influence employment at the local mill and their leader, the local postmaster, personifies the relationship between white supremacy and local institutions. The wide-reaching influence of the militia and their discriminatory ideology illustrate Joe R. Feagin and Kimberley Ducey’s

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<sup>42</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, *Welcome to Braggsville*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>44</sup> *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 458.

<sup>46</sup> *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 359.

<sup>47</sup> *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 241

<sup>48</sup> *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 297.

definition of systemic racism in *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations*:

[...] we stress here a conceptual framework understanding this white racism as centuries-long, deep-lying, institutionalized, and systemic. Systemic racism includes a diverse assortment of racist realities: the unjustly gained economic and political power of whites; the continuing resource inequalities; the rationalizing white-racist frame; and the major institutions created to preserve white advantage and power.<sup>49</sup>

Braggsville's social structure illustrates Feagin and Ducey's definition, emphasising the mechanics by which white supremacy is maintained in the town. Furthermore, Berkeley is embedded within the same structure. An email from D'aron's professor emphasises Berkeley's position within the 'institutionalized, and systemic' structures of white supremacy described by Feagin and Ducey. 'Professor P.' warns D'aron, '[d]o not idolize California...[o]ur institutions eerily resemble post-Reconstruction chain gangs, but without the chains.'<sup>50</sup> While Berkeley is unable to influence social change, it is indicted within a broader social structure which maintains white supremacy and perpetuates the discrimination of Black Americans. This complicity is further emphasised by the erasure of racist discrimination by the town, and the university.

Throughout the town of Braggsville, the racist motivation for Louis' death is denied. Both D'aron's mother Janice and the town's Sheriff attempt to erase the town's racism. The contradictions between the histories of Braggsville presented by D'aron's mother, Janice, and the Black community's mayor, Otis Hunter, expose the town's racist history. While Janice emphasises 'the absence of slavery' in Georgia and peaceful racial integration, Hunter reveals that 'they'd never stopped flying Old Dixie here in Braggsville' highlighting the town's persistent confederate allegiance.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, while D'aron's mother argues that '[the re-enactments] have nothing to do with slavery, secession, or segregation', Hunter highlights that 'the first modern...re-enactment took place a week after King delivered his *I Have a Dream* speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial'.<sup>52</sup> This erasure of racism is further exemplified by the manipulations of Braggsville's Sheriff during the interrogation following

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<sup>49</sup> Feagin and Ducey, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2019), p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Johnson, *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 241.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson, *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 113; p. 217.

<sup>52</sup> *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 115; p. 217.



Louis' death. In a review of the novel, Benjamin Carter Olcott highlights: '[f]ugue-like, each [of the students'] voice[s] emerges as a linguistic theme, but themes retrenched in safe discourses in the suppressing face of the sheriff's authority.'<sup>53</sup> The Sheriff's strategy mirrors Janice's revisionist history by erasing the students' recollections of Louis' death and erasing the participation of white supremacists. Once again, this erasure is an established strategy for maintaining white supremacy. Feagin and Ducey highlight the erasure of slavery in the development of the U.S. Constitution, arguing that, '[m]any historical analysts have portrayed slavery as only a minor matter at the 1787 Constitutional Convention. Yet slavery was central, as a leading participant, James Madison, made clear in notes on convention debates'; 'the often death-dealing slave trade hung over the convention like a demonic specter.'<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, this mechanic mirrors the 'covert' nature of institutional racism identified by Ture and Hamilton.

Academic discourse is guilty of the same erasure performed by Janice, Braggsville's Sheriff, and the Constitutional framers. D'aron's professor proceeds to advise D'aron that he would support the subversion of D'aron's experiences into 'a reflective essay, a documentary,' or novel.<sup>55</sup> In D'aron's resultant dissertation, his interpretations, as a white man, are prioritised, while casting doubt on Charlie and Louis' accusations of racism.<sup>56</sup> The widespread institutional racism reflected in Johnson's novel contextualises academia within a broader network of racist discrimination. In this case, by prioritising the experiences of white Americans and refusing to acknowledge racist discrimination, academia is merely another social institution contributing to the structural racism which defines American society.

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<sup>53</sup> Benjamin Carter Olcott, 'Review: *Welcome to Braggsville* by T. Geronimo Johnson', *KGB Bar Lit*, March 26<sup>th</sup> 2015. Online: <https://kgbbarlit.com/lit/journal/welcome-to-braggsville-by-t-geronimo-johnson> [accessed: 20th January 2020].

<sup>54</sup> Joe R. Feagin and Kimberley Ducey, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations*, p. 2; p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> Johnson, *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 241.

<sup>56</sup> D'aron's dissertation is included between chapters 'Thirty-O' and 'Thirty-1' without page numbers; page numbers indicated here are the page of the dissertation. The document asserts that 'informants [Louis] Lee's and [Charlie] Kain's pre-existing prejudices about Southerners prevented them from seeing the Sanderses as generous.' (*Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 13) 'Lee and Kain may not have wanted to seat themselves on the periphery, but by willingly doing so, they were complicit in their own segregation.' (*Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 13) While the dissertation notes that 'Lee and Kain also later expressed displeasure about the Sanderses' questions about their athleticism and sexual orientation', no conclusion is drawn from this. (*Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 13).

The students' fates at the end of the novel further undermine the role of higher education in achieving racial equality. As a Black man, Charlie's experiences exemplify individual struggles against racial profiling: 'Charlie would occasionally whistle Vivaldi to reassure bystanders because, No one expects to be mugged by a dude who knows classical music'; Charlie's awareness of racist structures allows him to be '[a] great conciliator'.<sup>57</sup> Charlie's experiences illustrate those of a person struggling against social definitions of identity. Johnson has discussed the personal transformation of his characters in an interview with his publishers. When asked 'Was it important that this book, and the characters in it, transcended the social norms?...Was it your aim to say [Charlie] is A, but he's going to be B?'<sup>58</sup> Johnson responds:

Definitely...it needed to be the case for everyone, and obviously the case for Louis. He goes through a complete transformation into another form of being, and another type of presence. I wanted it to be the case for everyone; each of them had to go through a very significant transformation. Part of it is just that this world changes us....We start off and then we find that adult responsibilities are competing with our facility for wonder and our willingness to question.<sup>59</sup>

As Johnson highlights, *Welcome to Braggsville* is particularly concerned with the socialization process, and the extent to which the students are defined and restricted by dominant social norms which they have no power to change.

Indeed, the conclusion of Johnson's novel emphasises the extent to which broader structures of white supremacy persist undisturbed. During a reunion at D'aron and Candice's new home in New Orleans, Charlie appears to be more comfortable with his sexuality: he brings his boyfriend Freddie and has a frank discussion with D'aron about sex. Charlie is studying a degree in Sociology and Social Justice, and at the end of the novel laments the experiences of Black people in America, situating his experiences within a broader context. Charlie emphasises the racist discrimination in the constitution, education provision, scientific discourse, and the police force.<sup>60</sup> However, Charlie's plea that white people 'just be

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<sup>57</sup> Johnson, *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 79; p. 168.

<sup>58</sup> Candice Carty-Williams, '4<sup>th</sup> Estate Interviews T. Geronimo Johnson', *4<sup>th</sup> Estate* (7<sup>th</sup> April 2015). Accessed online: <https://www.4thestate.co.uk/2015/04/4th-estate-interviews-t-geronimo-johnson/> [accessed: 20<sup>th</sup> January 2020].

<sup>59</sup> Carty-Williams, '4<sup>th</sup> Estate Interviews T. Geronimo Johnson'.

<sup>60</sup> *Welcome to Braggsville*, p. 339.

happy' with existing inequality suggests a note of futility at the end of Johnson's novel. This perspective is reinforced by D'aron's lack of action. At the end of the novel, D'aron reflects upon his experiences:

How could you blame them for working together, for looking after their own? Besides, as his father said, the collective weren't really a threat. None was. Black people weren't no more interested in starting a race war than making mayonnaise. And in regards to population, the Mexicans were just outfucking us; it's plain and simple ánde, arriba, arriba under the covers.<sup>61</sup>

The conclusion to *Welcome to Braggville* illustrates the continuation of institutional and systemic mechanics described throughout the novel. While Charlie is able to find personal fulfilment, D'aron's reflection highlights the extent to which silence and personal action merely allow the continuance of racist ideas – in D'aron's reflection, directed towards 'Mexicans'. This individualistic attitude, and the extent to which it precludes the social change required to address institutional racism, is further depicted in Connie Briscoe's *Big Girls Don't Cry*.

### ***Big Girls Don't Cry*: Education, Individualism, and Self-Definition**

Connie Briscoe's *Big Girls Don't Cry* depicts the life of its protagonist, Naomi Jefferson, from her childhood in the 1960s to her adulthood in the 1980s. College is a particularly important element in Naomi's life – it determines her behaviour as a child; constitutes her first attempt to enter society; and provides the foundation for the professional success with which the novel concludes. More specifically, in Briscoe's novel, university is explicitly aligned with the institutional racism which characterises American society and is but one of the institutions which oppresses Naomi due to her race and gender. In order to negotiate these discriminatory institutions, Naomi adopts an individualistic approach, leaving structures of white supremacy unchallenged and thus exemplifying the individualistic entrepreneurial subject of the neoliberal university. However, Naomi's professional, romantic and familial achievements highlight methods by which communities can be formed outside of established institutions. Thus, while Naomi adopts an individualistic approach regarding the dominant

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<sup>61</sup> Johnson, *Welcome to Braggville*, p. 348

institutions of white America, she dedicates herself to the establishment and stability of Black communities.

As a critical framework, intersectionality is fundamentally engaged with the relationship between individuals and social institutions. In a definition of the approach, Amy Ansell highlights this fundamental feature:

Intersectionality is an analytic tool pioneered by women of color concerned to emphasize the operation of race, ethnicity, class, and gender as interlocking, mutually constructing systems of power. [...] Proponents of intersectionality argue that approaches to discrimination that focus on single category descriptions fail to reflect the reality that people inhabit multiple identities, that they are members of more than one community at the same time, and that as a result it is possible for a person to experience both disadvantage and privilege simultaneously.<sup>62</sup>

As Ansell highlights, an intersectional approach is particularly useful for isolating institutions' insufficiently varied engagements with individuals – institutional norms, policies and behaviours are so far unable to accommodate the 'multiple identities' which people 'inhabit'. Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal works – 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' and 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color' – exemplify this approach by examining, particularly, the experiences of women of colour within the justice system and social services.

Patricia Hill Collins' discussion of a 'subjectivity approach' to considerations of the 'matrix of domination' which operates within, and defines, American society similarly highlights the relationship between individuals and social institutions. Collins delineates between structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains of domination, with the structural domain 'encompass[ing] how social institutions are organized to reproduce Black women's subordination over time.'<sup>63</sup> Hill Collins particularly highlights the role of segregation in producing 'unjust results' while also emphasising that 'empowerment cannot accrue to individuals and groups without transforming U.S. social institutions that foster this

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<sup>62</sup> Amy E. Ansell, *Race and Ethnicity: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 92.

<sup>63</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 277.

exclusion.<sup>64</sup> Consideration of *Big Girls Don't Cry* through an intersectional lens highlights the university's role in the creation of an entrepreneurial subject who fails to enact the form of social resistance articulated by Collins. While Naomi experiences discrimination and oppression offered by American society's 'matrix of domination', she ultimately chooses an individualistic approach which precludes the transformation Collins describes.

The critique of broader racial inequality in Connie Briscoe's novel *Big Girls Don't Cry* is personalised through the experiences of the novel's protagonist, Naomi Jefferson. Naomi's childhood is dominated by practical restraints placed on her due to her gender. As the novel's book jacket affirms, during Naomi's childhood 'her biggest concern centers around virginity'; concerns of hyper-sexualisation are further reflected in her struggles with her parents to wear pantyhose, go on a date, and wear makeup.<sup>65</sup> In a conversation with her mother about having sex, these gendered-restrictions are justified:

You must never do anything to jeopardize going to college. It's the most important thing you'll ever do. You have to get a good job and be able to take care of yourself when you grow up. Negro women - <sup>66</sup>

Naomi's restricted experiences are justified by the importance of college which Naomi's mother argues is particularly important for Black women. Indeed, throughout the novel, Naomi's personal experiences of racial discrimination are contextualised within broader social and historical contexts. When Naomi, her brother Joshua, and her mother experience racist abuse from a group of white men, it is when they cross the border from Northern Washington to Southern Virginia, evoking the Federal/Confederate divide from the Civil War. When Naomi encounters colorism among her friends, her mother attributes this prejudice to slavery: 'probably because of how we were separated during slavery: the dark-skinned ones

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<sup>64</sup> *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 277.

<sup>65</sup> Connie Briscoe, *Big Girls Don't Cry* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. p. 55; p. 78; p. 58. The hyper-sexualisation of Black girls and women has a long and complex history, entwined with white supremacy, misogyny, and capitalist exploitation. For an historical overview, see Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1985). For discussion of representations of Black women in the post-Civil Rights era, with particular attention to class disparities and impact on social policies, see Patricia Hill Collins, 'Get Your Freak On: Sex, Babies, and Images of Black Femininity' in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 119-148.

<sup>66</sup> Briscoe, *Big Girls Don't Cry*, p. 80. Naomi's father also emphasises the importance of college, claiming that '[o]nce you got that degree, no one can ever take it away from you.' (*Big Girls Don't Cry*, p. 76.)

in the field, the light ones in the house.’<sup>67</sup> Following Naomi’s brother’s death in a car accident on his way to an anti-racism protest, the novel’s description notes that ‘the rift between black and white American becomes much too personal’.<sup>68</sup>

In *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman*, Geta J. LeSeur argues that this entwinement of the person and political is typical of the Black *bildungsroman*: ‘the African American novelist tends to use personal experience in order to make a viable protest that is almost always about race, slave history, and the White establishment.’<sup>69</sup> LeSeur further identifies the co-existence of the personal and social in the formal tendencies of the form: ‘[t]he voices in these novels tend to be in the first and third person, allowing the author to juxtapose self-revelation with the larger issues of the African American’.<sup>70</sup> While Briscoe’s novel features an omniscient narrator, it is firmly focalised from Naomi’s perspective, further coalescing the social, and the personal. The juxtaposition LeSeur notes gestures towards a conflict between the personal and social which is a prominent theme in *Big Girls Don’t Cry*. As a child, Naomi’s individual confinement is justified with reference to social mechanics which oppress Black women; Naomi’s personal sufferings – of racism and her brother’s death – are placed in an explicitly social context. For Naomi, entry into society constitutes her entry into the American ‘matrix of domination’.

Naomi’s attendance at college reveals university to be firmly situated within these oppressive power structures. At Atlanta Tech, one of Naomi’s professors proves to be racist and misogynistic; with her friend Dean’s support, Naomi organises a student protest.<sup>71</sup> However, a conversation between the two friends is revelatory:

[Dean said,] “He sounds like a real character.”

“Tell me about it. But I think I want to concentrate on the racist part. The sexist part is bad, and I could probably get more people involved if I included that, since not a whole lot of blacks go to Atlanta Tech but the racism definitely bothers me a lot more.

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<sup>67</sup> Connie Briscoe, *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, p. 99. Aisha Phoenix defines colorism as ‘inter- and intra-ethnic prejudice on the basis of skin shade’. (Aisha Phoenix, ‘Colourism and the politics of beauty’, *Feminist Review*, 108 (2014), pp. 97-105 (p. 98).)

<sup>68</sup> Briscoe, *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, Novel Description.

<sup>69</sup> Geta LeSeur, *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1995), p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> LeSeur, *Ten is the Age of Darkness*, p. 74.

<sup>71</sup> Naomi tells her boyfriend Ralph that her professor is racist and misogynistic on p. 121; she attends his class, and is ignored, on p. 125.

It's hard to try to deal with what he says about women when we've got racism to contend with, too."

"Oh, I agree with that approach. Things could get muddied if you try to do both. Concentrate on one or the other."<sup>72</sup>

In order to effectively challenge the professor's racism, Naomi must sacrifice protesting his misogyny. The administration's sexism is further exhibited during the students' negotiations: the college Dean repeatedly calls the female protestors 'young lady', and the students have a discussion as to whether or not a male student should attend meetings, as the Dean 'won't talk down to a man.'<sup>73</sup> The students' protests also occur simultaneously with Naomi and her friend Pamela's discoveries of their boyfriends' infidelities, aligning the Dean's institutional misogyny with similar disrespect in the private sphere.<sup>74</sup> Naomi notes the conflict between her experiences: '[p]eople around campus were beginning to look up to her as a leader in the demonstration. Strangers gave her the black power salute. And her boyfriend treated her like shit.'<sup>75</sup>

In *Big Girls Don't Cry*, the university is symptomatic of a broader social system which creates particular forms of oppression for Black women, a process highlighted by Kimberlé Crenshaw's application of an intersectional perspective. Political intersectionality, as Crenshaw discusses in 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', denotes the extent to which Black women suffer due to their membership of 'at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas.'<sup>76</sup> Crenshaw continues:

The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of colour, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women.<sup>77</sup>

Crenshaw's definition is exemplified in *Big Girls Don't Cry*: Naomi's particular oppression due to her gender is justified by anti-racist motivations. This conflict is starkly illustrated in the

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<sup>72</sup> Briscoe, *Big Girls Don't Cry*, p. 134.

<sup>73</sup> *Big Girls Don't Cry*, p. 172, 181, and 182; p. 174.

<sup>74</sup> Naomi discovers her boyfriend's infidelity on p. 141; her friend Pamela, on p. 131.

<sup>75</sup> Briscoe, *Big Girls Don't Cry*, p. 168.

<sup>76</sup> Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins', pp. 1251-2.

<sup>77</sup> Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins', p. 1252.

campus protest – the professor’s misogyny is ignored, leading to Naomi experiencing the patronising and misogynistic speech of the Dean; furthermore, Naomi must secede authority to a male student, in order to further their anti-racist agenda. Crenshaw’s work advocates a structural approach to discrimination, considering a range of experiences within social institutions; an intersectional approach relies on ‘[t]his process of recognising as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual’.<sup>78</sup> Naomi’s childhood and college experiences, therefore, emphasise the extent to which her life is defined by racist and misogynistic social institutions.

The narrative of Naomi’s life emphasises the university’s position as a gateway between the personal and public spheres. Briscoe’s novel traces Naomi’s difficulty entering into an American public sphere which is defined by white supremacy. The end of the novel’s first section, dedicated to Naomi’s childhood, is marked by Joshua’s death and the revelation, for Naomi, of structural white supremacy in American society. The novel’s second section begins at Atlanta Tech, where Naomi is attending college. Here, she attempts to stage an anti-racism protest which fails in its bid to remove a racist professor. Feeling excluded from academia, Naomi returns home and attempts to forge her own path, however, she is denied an internship because she doesn’t have a college degree. Following this setback, Naomi finally feels empowered to take control of her life:

Look where it got *her* whenever she tried to do anything. It was a cruel world out there.

*Yes, it is Naomi. But stop blaming everybody and everything and get off your butt and deal with it.*

...Joshua?...Then she realized that the voice in her head wasn’t Joshua’s. It was her own.<sup>79</sup>

Following this insight, Naomi decides to return to college.

The narrative arc of the early sections of Briscoe’s novel indicate the individualistic approach Naomi adopts to manoeuvre discriminatory society. An individual’s entry into society is termed initiation, as highlighted in Mordecai Marcus’ seminal essay ‘What is an

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<sup>78</sup> Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins’, pp. 1241-2.

<sup>79</sup> Briscoe, *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, pp. 227-8 (original italics).



Initiation Story?’<sup>80</sup> Marcus identifies three types of initiation, each of which Naomi experiences in *Big Girls Don’t Cry*. The first category of initiation Marcus identifies ‘lead[s] only to the threshold of maturity and understanding but do[es] not definitively cross it.’<sup>81</sup> Like Joshua’s death, this initiation is often ‘shocking’ and occurs when the protagonist of the story is young.<sup>82</sup> Naomi experiences Marcus’ second category of initiation at Atlanta Tech, it is here that the events of Briscoe’s novel ‘take their [protagonist] across the threshold of maturity and understanding but leave them enmeshed in a struggle for survival.’<sup>83</sup> Once again, this experience is defined by Naomi’s growing understanding of racism and her struggles to reform a racist society. Marcus’ ‘most decisive’ third category are ‘initiations [which] carry their protagonists firmly into maturity and understanding’.<sup>84</sup> Naomi’s ‘understanding’ is her conclusion to ‘*stop blaming everybody and everything and get off your butt and deal with it*’, as she later reflects: ‘[s]he had come to believe she could do more by proving herself than ranting and raving about all the injustice she faced along the way.’<sup>85</sup> The final stage of Naomi’s initiation into society reveals her individualistic approach. Naomi’s challenge to structures of white supremacy leave her ‘enmeshed in a struggle for survival’ and her attempts are ultimately unsuccessful. It is only when Naomi adopts an individualistic perspective, leaving racist mechanics undisturbed, that she is achieves ‘maturity and understanding’ and is able to enter society.

This individualism is further reflected in the manner by which Naomi achieves professional success. *Big Girls Don’t Cry* emphasises achievement through the acquisition of vocational skills and accrument of economic influence. During her childhood, Naomi fostered dreams of studying fashion design, however, she eventually completes a degree in ‘Business administration’, a more vocational discipline.<sup>86</sup> Naomi’s success is due to her technical skills, Naomi’s company ‘had gone from a big clunky mainframe and shared work stations to having personal computers on every desk’, ‘[e]veryone is computerizing and they

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<sup>80</sup> Mordecai Marcus, ‘What is an Initiation Story?’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 19:2 (1960), pp. 221-228.

<sup>81</sup> Marcus, ‘What is an Initiation Story?’, p. 223.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Briscoe, *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, p. 252.

<sup>86</sup> *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, p. 237.

need people [like Naomi] to design specialized software programs.’<sup>87</sup> Naomi’s friends follow the same path and at the end of the novel are working in Naomi’s business. Naomi achieves economic success as the founder of a technology firm which, appearing as an Epilogue to her *bildungsroman*, entwines financial success with her individual maturation. However, at the end of the novel, Naomi presents herself as the result of historical progress: detailing the work of civil rights protesters and Black Americans who struggled against slavery, segregation and the violence of Jim Crow South, Naomi acknowledges ‘all the preparation that went on before [her].’<sup>88</sup>

The vocational method by which Naomi achieves professional success evokes the work of Booker T. Washington. An influential figure following the Emancipation Proclamation, Washington’s work emphasises the role of education in mediating Black people’s entry into the public sphere, a central concern in *Big Girls Don’t Cry*. At the 1895 Atlanta Exposition, a speech nicknamed ‘The Atlanta Compromise’ by W.E.B. Du Bois, Washington advocated for an individualistic approach rather than attempts for structural reformation.<sup>89</sup> As in *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, this salvation is aligned with specifically economic concerns: ‘for the next half century and more the greater part of the energy of the masses will be needed to develop its material opportunities.’<sup>90</sup> While Washington adopts an individualistic approach, particularly when juxtaposed with Du Bois’ pedagogy, commercial success, personal maturation, and contribution to the community are explicitly entwined with Washington’s work. In ‘The Case of the Negro’, Washington emphasises the importance of aligning personal objectives with the broader community: ‘we want to impress upon the Negro, more than we have done in the past, the importance of identifying himself more closely with the interests of the South: of making himself part of the South, and at home in it.’<sup>91</sup> *Big Girls Don’t Cry* exemplifies Washington’s educational philosophy in a number of ways: for both, higher education is individualistic and economically motivated, while Briscoe’s

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<sup>87</sup> *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, p. 260; p. 315.

<sup>88</sup> Briscoe, *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, p. 374.

<sup>89</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 34.

<sup>90</sup> Booker T. Washington, ‘The Awakening of the Negro’, *The Atlantic*, September 1896. Accessed online: <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1896/09/the-awakening-of-the-negro/305449/>> [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> December 2019]

<sup>91</sup> Booker T. Washington, ‘The Case of the Negro’, *The Atlantic*, November 1899. Accessed online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1899/11/the-case-of-the-negro/476934/> [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> December 2019].

novel also emphasises gradual progress rather than structural transformation, particularly through the use of the *bildungsroman* form. Furthermore, both Briscoe's novel and Washington place individual achievement within a broader context of community uplift, suggesting methods by which Black communities can persist within a broader context of structural racism.

In her private life, Naomi is similarly only able to achieve a fulfilling personal identity through her own individual action. In order to complete her college degree, Naomi must abandon hopes of romantic fulfilment: 'she didn't have time to think about sex or much of anything besides school.'<sup>92</sup> In her professional career, Naomi is repeatedly, forcefully reminded of the duality of her personhood – at work, '[e]ven if they were talking about hiring a woman director, a black woman was probably furthest from their mind'; after leaving the firm, her partner Marshall notes that she will face particular difficulties starting her own business due to her race *and* gender.<sup>93</sup> Naomi's professional success fails to liberate her from such gendered expectations. While dating a man who specifies how she should dress, Naomi 'wondered if she was picking the old-fashioned ones out of the pot or if the pot was just filled with men like that.'<sup>94</sup> In addition, she notes that 'the more successful she became, the harder it seemed to be [to find a partner].'<sup>95</sup> Naomi internalises these gendered expectations, frequently considering what women 'were supposed to do – get married, or at least have children, and buy a house'.<sup>96</sup> However, rather than the suburban, financially stable Marshall, Naomi marries Dean who works within the local Black community; Naomi realises that '[s]he didn't need the doctor or the house on the Gold Coast or the boutique to feel like a whole woman. *This* [a relationship with Dean] was what she needed'.<sup>97</sup>

Briscoe's novel illustrates a prominent theme in Black feminist thought, as Naomi interrogates the social definitions she must negotiate and achieves self-definition – both of her own 'self' and her personal definition of her individual desires. Self-definition is a significant theme in Black feminist scholarship. Patricia Hill Collins identifies 'The Power of Self-Definition' as one of the 'Core Themes in Black Feminist Thought' and dedicates a

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<sup>92</sup> Briscoe, *Big Girls Don't Cry*, p. 238.

<sup>93</sup> *Big Girls Don't Cry*, p. 262; p. 333.

<sup>94</sup> *Big Girls Don't Cry*, p. 294. Naomi has a similar thought on p. 246

<sup>95</sup> *Big Girls Don't Cry*, p. 261.

<sup>96</sup> *Big Girls Don't Cry*, p. 270. See also, p. 224, 247, and 281.

<sup>97</sup> *Big Girls Don't Cry*, p. 363 (original italics).

chapter to identifying a number of significant themes, including silence, safe spaces and Black female relationships.<sup>98</sup> As Angela Harris similarly argues:

In my view, there are at least three major contributions that black have to offer post-essentialist feminist theory: the recognition self that is multiplicitous, not unitary; the recognition that differences are always relational rather than inherent; and the recognition wholeness and commonality are acts of will and creativity, rather than passive discovery.<sup>99</sup>

Harris contrasts this creative action with the 'shared victimization' which she argues provides the foundation of much feminist theory.<sup>100</sup> In particular, Harris highlights the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker as examples of work which 'do not linger on black women's victimization and misery; though they recognize our pain, they ultimately celebrate our transcendence.'<sup>101</sup> Naomi's self-definition and performance of gendered roles reject institutionalisation, highlighting the extent to which her university education fails to encourage community-based, structural activism. For Harris, creative self-definition restores female agency, and challenges the conception that '[w]omen are the victims, the acted-upon, the helpless, until by radical enlightenment they are somehow empowered to act for themselves.'<sup>102</sup> In this way, a creative conception of female identity rejects universities' ability to empower Black women. Furthermore, such creative action is a particularly individual experience, 'something made of fragments of experience, not discovered in one's body or unveiled after male domination is eliminated.'<sup>103</sup> A fulfilling identity is only achieved through Naomi's own, personal creative actions.

The extent to which Naomi's self-definition enables the development of community outside of established social institutions is further depicted in her adoption of a role in the domestic sphere. Naomi becomes a maternal figure to her nephew Joseph, a role which is required following her brother's death. While initially sceptical regarding Joshua's paternity, Naomi gradually welcomes him into her life. Despite Joseph's disruptive behaviour, Naomi

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<sup>98</sup> See Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, pp. 97-122.

<sup>99</sup> Angela P. Harris, 'Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory', *Stanford Law Review*, 42.3 (1990), 581-616 (p. 608).

<sup>100</sup> Harris, 'Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory', p. 612.

<sup>101</sup> 'Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory', pp. 614-5.

<sup>102</sup> 'Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory', p. 612.

<sup>103</sup> 'Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory', p. 613.

agrees he can stay with her over a summer.<sup>104</sup> When picking Joseph up at the airport, Naomi resolves that ‘the boy getting off that plane was going to have to straighten up. He was going to act right if she had to break every bone in his body.’<sup>105</sup> Naomi and Dean are particularly important when they realise Joseph has become friends with a group who carry guns. While Naomi initially considers returning Joseph to his mother, she decides to send Joseph to Dean who can provide an avenue for engaging productively with the community through sports programs. Naomi and Dean are successful: at the end of the novel, Joseph is ‘a graduate of MIT and is employed at Price Waterhouse.’<sup>106</sup> Naomi emphasises the continuity between them by saying ‘[o]ne of these days, I’m going to snatch him away and lure him to my firm.’<sup>107</sup>

Naomi’s role in Joseph’s life emphasises the way in which she is able to coalesce self-definition with supporting her community. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and The Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins highlights that ‘othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood’.<sup>108</sup> For Hill Collins, ‘[t]he centrality of women in African-American extended families reflects both a continuation of African-derived cultural sensibilities and functional adaptations to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and nation’.<sup>109</sup> Hill Collins traces the tradition of othermothering in West African communities, slavery and the post-Emancipation South to the challenges faced by African American communities in the 1980s, as *Big Girls Don’t Cry* depicts. During this period, ‘community-based child care’ faced specific structural challenges:

In the 1980s, the entire community structure of bloodmothers and othermothers came under assault. Racial desegregation as well as the emergence of class-stratified Black neighborhoods greatly altered the fabric of Black civil society. African-Americans of diverse social classes found themselves in new residential, school, and

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<sup>104</sup> Joseph ‘cuts school, stays in the streets, won’t listen to [his mother].’ (Briscoe, *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, p. 267).

<sup>105</sup> *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, p. 347.

<sup>106</sup> Briscoe, *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, p. 375.

<sup>107</sup> *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, p. 375.

<sup>108</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 178.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

work settings that tested this enduring theme of bloodmothers, othermothers, and woman-centered networks.<sup>110</sup>

In this broader social context, Hill Collins emphasises that ‘African-American women who continue community-based child care challenge one fundamental assumption underlying the capitalist system itself: that children are “private property” and can be disposed of as such.’<sup>111</sup> Thus, ‘[t]he resiliency of women-centered family networks and their willingness to take responsibility for Black children illustrates how African-influenced understandings of family have been continually reworked to help African-Americans as a collectivity cope with and resist oppression.’<sup>112</sup> Hill Collins’ discussion particularly illuminates the mechanics by which Naomi is able to maintain and contribute to her community. Despite the structural forces which require her involvement in Joseph’s life – the racism which contributed to Joshua’s death; the poverty of Joseph’s mother – Naomi is able to establish a stable home for Joseph and enable his future success.

### ***Between Brothers: Education, Community Uplift, and Personal Development***

C. Kelly Robinson’s *Between Brothers* depicts the final year of college of four students – O.J., Brandon, Larry and Terence – at a fictional African American college, Highland University. The primary plot of Robinson’s work centres around the students’ efforts to save the Ellis Community Centre, at which Brandon delivers classes to the local community. For these students, personal development, community uplift and higher education are firmly entwined – their educations enable the students to save the community centre; their engagement with their communities enable them to overcome the personal struggles they variously face. In depicting this dialectical relationship, Robinson’s novel particularly engages with the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, for whom community engagement was fundamental in overcoming systemic racism as well as its individual, psychological ramifications. In this way, *Between Brothers* contradicts the social fragmentation of neoliberalism. However, further in comparison with Du Bois’ work, the idealism of Robinson’s novel is revealed, particularly in its inability to engage with oppressive social mechanics, and its own discriminatory nature.

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<sup>110</sup> *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 179; p. 181.

<sup>111</sup> *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 182.

<sup>112</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 183.

Writing in 1999, Derrick P. Aldridge argues that “W. E. B. DuBois left the most comprehensive set of writings and views from which educators and policymakers can obtain contextualized, historical, and African American-based perspectives on education”<sup>113</sup> Indeed, throughout his prolific career, W.E.B. Du Bois emphasised the importance of community in his theorisations of education for African Americans. Two interconnected strands can be identified in Du Bois’ work – education as a method of community uplift, and education grounded *in* the community. Laura Fisher has outlined Du Bois’ conception of education within the Black community:

[Du Bois’] uplift described a philosophy of black leadership that emboldened well-educated, middle-class representatives to serve as guides and exemplars for the masses. It was the responsibility of this so-called Talented Tenth to function as a kind of aristocracy of elite, educated professionals.<sup>114</sup>

As Fisher highlights, Du Bois’ ‘The Talented Tenth’ (1903) particularly delineates this focus. While ‘The Talented Tenth’ envisions integration as the ultimate conclusion of his education paradigm, Du Bois increasingly advocated for a separatist approach inflected by pan-Africanism. Thus, the educational paradigm which Derrick P. Aldridge establishes from Du Bois’ varied thought places the needs of African Americans in the broader context of pan-Africanism:

Together, the principles of African American-centered education, communal education, broad-based education, group leadership education, Pan-Africanist education, and global education form an educational model that can provide a historical account of the African American experience and insight into the present conditions and problems in African American society and education.<sup>115</sup>

As Aldridge further highlights, each of these principles was designed to address specific problems Du Bois witnessed in the African American community such as the ‘two-ness’ famously articulated in *The Souls of Black Folk*, social fragmentation, and global

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<sup>113</sup> Derrick P. Aldridge, ‘Guiding Philosophical Principles for a DuBoisian-Based African American Educational Model’, *The Journal of Negro Education*, 68:2 (1999), pp. 182-199 (p. 183).

<sup>114</sup> Laura R. Fisher, ‘Heads and Hands Together: Booker T. Washington’s Vocational Realism’, *American Literature*, 87:4 (2015), pp. 709-737 (p. 713).

<sup>115</sup> Aldridge, ‘Guiding Philosophical Principles for a DuBoisian-Based African American Educational Model’, p. 186.

oppression.<sup>116</sup> Thus, Du Bois' thought aligns personal and community development through an embedded pedagogical approach. C. Kelly Robinson's *Between Brothers* illustrates a particularly cohesive relationship between higher education, personal development and community uplift, as Du Bois described. In this way, Robinson's novel seems to contradict the social fragmentation which defines neoliberalism and universities therein. However, once again in the context of Du Bois' thought, *Between Brothers* proves to present a particularly idealistic vision.

*Between Brothers* depicts the experiences of students within a clearly-defined African American community. Robinson's novel expands to include a range of characters, locales, and social institutions such as the Ellis Community Centre and the Church where O.J. preaches. Highland University typifies the novel's Black institutions: its first depiction highlights '[t]he varied visions of black folk merged into one enthusiastic, ambitious whole. Highland was a vibrant sea of Afrocentric-flavored diversity; Brandon couldn't imagine attending college anywhere else.'<sup>117</sup> These institutions are enmeshed with a distinct economy: while fundraising, the students reach out to a number of student groups to raise funds as well as their fathers, prominent Black businessmen. Writing in 1979, Elizabeth A. Schultz argues that this focus on community comprised a new wave of African American fiction. Schultz argues that writers 'have expanded their focus to include not just the dehumanizing emotional and physical effects of racism but also the growth of a common tradition within the black community.'<sup>118</sup> As Schultz highlights, racist discrimination and the structures of white supremacy comprise the background of *Between Brothers*. For example, Terence's conversation with Rory Perez, a fellow-student and member of the 'Young Republicans', reveals his isolation from mainstream politics:

When you get a strong enough swig of racism, you'll come around, man. Black folk have no business being Republican or Democrat. Give me a call when you ready to start up the Ebony party, then we can talk.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> See Alridge, 'Guiding Philosophical Principles for a DuBoisian-Based African American Educational Model', p. 187.

<sup>117</sup> C. Kelly Robinson, *Between Brothers* (New York: Random House, 2001) [Apple Ebooks Edition], p. 23.

<sup>118</sup> Elizabeth A. Schultz, 'The Insistence Upon Community in the Contemporary African American Novel', *College English*, 41:2 (1979), pp. 170-178+183-4 (p. 171).

<sup>119</sup> Robinson, *Between Brothers*, p. 157.



This detachment is further exemplified during discussion of racist abuse. Brandon argues that the students 'need to spend more time changing those things we can change instead of fretting over culturally embedded racism that may never be overcome.'<sup>120</sup>

This focus on a distinct Black community in *Between Brothers* mirrors the communal focus of W.E.B. Du Bois' educational philosophy. In 'The Development of a People' (1904) Du Bois emphasised that '[t]he growth of society is an ever-living, many-sided, bundle of activities, some of which are emphasized at different ages, none of which can be neglected without peril, all of which demand guidance and direction.'<sup>121</sup> In his later work of 1935, Du Bois clearly articulated his vision for a segregated Black community:

Negroes can develop in the United States an economic nation within a nation, able to work through inner cooperation, to found its own institutions, to educate its genius, and at the same time, without mob violence or extremes of race hatred, to keep in helpful touch and cooperate with the mass of the nation.<sup>122</sup>

As Derrick Aldridge has emphasised, 'Du Bois's advocacy of voluntary segregation was based primarily on an African perspective of communalism and socialist economic cooperation.'<sup>123</sup> This community is illustrated in *Between Brothers*. Detached from the white community and developing a communal social and economic model, Robinson's novel is populated by the figures Du Bois envisages. As a predominantly-Black university, Highland University is aligned with the other Black institutions of the novel: its economy, media, and church. The centrality of the college and its students further interrogates another aspect of Du Bois' work – the importance of education in community uplift.

In *Between Brothers*, the Ellis Community Centre particularly signifies a number of threats facing the Black community. While the centre is struggling to generate funds, three men plot its failure. Nico Lane is a prominent local drug-dealer whose business is being undermined by Ellis' work within the community; the centre's manager, Rolly V. Orange, plans to embezzle funds from Ellis with the help of a wealthy real estate developer William Eldridge. Eldridge embodies the threat of white supremacy and commercialism: in a chapter

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<sup>120</sup> *Between Brothers*, p. 171.

<sup>121</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Development of a People', *Ethics*, 123:3 (2013), pp. 525-544 (p. 529).

<sup>122</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, 'A Negro Nation within a Nation' in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer ed. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2011), pp. 186-189 (p. 188).

<sup>123</sup> Derrick P. Aldridge, 'Conceptualizing a Du Boisian Philosophy of Education: Toward a Model for African-American Education', *Educational Theory*, 49 (2013), pp. 359-379 (p. 372).

focalized from his perspective, Eldridge reflects that '[h]e had to rebuild his business; his children should never face the shame of being outdone by a minority.'<sup>124</sup> These three men particularly embody a number of threats facing the Black community in contemporary America. Nico Lane personifies the damaging consequences of drugs in African American communities, particularly following the 'crack epidemic' and so-called 'war on drugs' of the 1980s and 90s. Detached from the community, both Rolly V. Orange and William Elridge's actions embody mechanics which Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton identified as elements of institutional racism. Orange, in particular, the concept of 'indirect rule', wherein Black political leaders are corrupted by mechanics of white supremacy; Elridge embodies both individual racist attitudes and the methods of economic exploitation Ture and Hamilton note. Thus, the Highland students constitute an elite group, tasked with saving the Black community.

Such an oligarchic method of community uplift is reflected in Du Bois' concept of '[t]he Talented Tenth', outlined in an essay of the same name. These men 'stood as living examples of the possibilities of the Negro race'.<sup>125</sup> 'The Talented Tenth' Du Bois continues, 'rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up to their vantage ground'; 'the college-bred Negro...ought to be, the group leader, the man who sets the ideals of the community where he lives, directs its thoughts and heads its social movements.'<sup>126</sup> Higher education was particularly central to this conception, as Lauren A. Windling has discussed:

[Du Bois] advocated for the higher education of Black men and women who would use their passion, expertise, and knowledge to uplift Black communities. He emphasized social and political action for the good of larger society as a necessary obligation of the Black college graduate.<sup>127</sup>

Thus, Du Bois emphasised that higher education should be both embedded within defined African American communities while also fundamentally-engaged with community uplift.

Community engagement is also significant for the personal development of students in *Between Brothers*. At the novel's opening, its four protagonists - Larry, Terrence, O.J. and Brandon – are involved in a range of personal issues. Larry is materialistic and superficial,

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<sup>124</sup> Robinson, *Between Brothers*, p. 139.

<sup>125</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Talented Tenth' in *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 192.

<sup>126</sup> Du Bois, 'The Talented Tenth', p. 193, p. 197.

<sup>127</sup> Lauren A. Wendling, 'Higher Education as a Means of Community Uplift: The Educational Philosophy of W.E.B. DuBois', *The Journal of Negro Education*, 87:3 (2018), pp. 285-293 (p. 292).

preoccupied with the financial and professional success which awaits him on Wall Street, rather than a future in his father's business. Terence is facing financial difficulties and being blackmailed into a sexual relationship with a university administrator. Brandon is particularly dogmatic about his religious faith which is preventing him from developing satisfying relationships with his friends, or a romantic partner. Conversely, O.J. uses his influential position as a preacher to have sex with members of the congregations. For all four men, personal difficulties explicitly detach them from their surrounding community. However, the students' education at Highland and their engagement with the community centre encourages their personal development. The students at the centre of Robinson's novel study a range of disciplines, such as medicine, finance, and engineering and while these skills are important, particularly Larry's financial knowledge, the students' leadership skills are particularly significant in saving Ellis. The manager of the community centre, Sheryl, relies on the group for their fundraising efforts and, after a meeting with Rolly, highlights that '[t]hey're just young men learning leadership skills and finally getting a chance to give something back.'<sup>128</sup> These skills are particularly exemplified by the decision about which Rolly complains – putting donations into a separate account in order to maintain the students' decision-making power. This action is particularly brave considering the rest of the board 'follow Orange like sheep being led to the slaughter.'<sup>129</sup>

Throughout his writings, Du Bois remained consistent in his insistence that, for Black Americans, institutions of higher education must offer a broad-based curriculum, including practical skills, liberal arts, and leadership.<sup>130</sup> This cultural education was particularly

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<sup>128</sup> Robinson, *Between Brothers*, p. 58.

<sup>129</sup> *Between Brothers*, p. 62.

<sup>130</sup> In 1897, Du Bois wrote 'The training of the schools we need to-day more than ever, — the training of deft hands, quick eyes and ears, and the broader, deeper, higher culture of gifted minds'; (W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Strivings of Negro People', *The Atlantic* (August, 1897), online: <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446/>> [accessed: 26<sup>th</sup> December 2019]); in 1902: '[we] ask gently, but in all sincerity, the ever recurring query of the ages, Is not life more than meat, and the body more than raiment?' (W.E.B. Du Bois, 'Of the Training of Black Men', *The Atlantic* (September 1902), online: <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1902/09/of-the-training-of-black-men/308774/>> [accessed: 26<sup>th</sup> December 2019]). By 1935, Du Bois argued that within Black communities 'you must plant the seed of civilization. Here you must place men educated, not merely in the technique of teaching but above and beyond that into a thorough understanding of their age and the demands and meaning of modern culture.' (W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Development of a People', *Ethics*, 123:3 (2013), pp. 525 – 544 (p. 544)).

important for Black Americans to resolve the experience of 'twoness' discussed by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world.<sup>131</sup>

As Du Bois articulates here, engagement with the African American community is also crucial for personal reconciliation. For Du Bois, as Derrick P. Alridge has highlighted, 'African Americans who alienated themselves from the shared experiences of people of African descent [...] could not transcend double-consciousness'; a transcendence which allows African Americans 'to attain self-conscious manhood'.<sup>132</sup>

In *Between Brothers*, the students' personal maturation is particularly evidenced by healthier relationships with their communities. At the beginning of the novel, Brandon realises that his relationship with Monica requires as much attention as his dedication to his faith. Terence learns to trust his classmates fully. For Larry, '[c]hoosing between the politics of a [college political] campaign and doing something to help some young brothers and sisters' shows him the value of his community; at the end of the novel he defers his entry into 'Wall Street power structure' in favour of working at his father's business.<sup>133</sup> In the novel's epilogue, O.J. similarly reflects on his future, within his community: '[h]e would leave town tomorrow a changed man....Fate had pushed him to start with a clean slate, and like the friends around him, he was going to make the most of his.'<sup>134</sup> The individual characters' conclusions to the novel emphasise the importance of personal growth and community, as in the work of Du Bois.

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<sup>131</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 9.

<sup>132</sup> Alridge, 'Guiding Philosophical Principles for a DuBoisian-Based African American Educational Model', p. 188.

<sup>133</sup> *Between Brothers*, p. 338; p. 376.

<sup>134</sup> *Between Brothers*, p. 395-6.

However, Robinson's novel also alludes to the difficulties of the 'Talented Tenth', which, as Ben Burks has highlighted, was 'anything but democratic.'<sup>135</sup> The students' detachment is particularly emphasised in their interactions with inhabitants of 'the harrowing labyrinth of streets surrounding Highland'.<sup>136</sup> In a highly symbolic moment, the students must run through this dangerous local neighbourhood in order to be initiated into an influential campus group. They are not welcome, with inhabitants shouting 'Who these muthafuckas?!' and 'Who you little shits think you is, comin' on our territory!'<sup>137</sup> This spatial distinction between Highland and the local community, is reinforced by the students' inability to impact broader social change. An encounter between Brandon and Pooh Riley, a boy he teaches at the community centre, illustrates this difficulty. Brandon meets Pooh on the street looking for money to buy alcohol for his mother; while Brandon gives Pooh twenty dollars, he realises that '[t]here was so much need in the life of someone like Pooh, and he wasn't equipped to deal with all of it.'<sup>138</sup> Another student, Sheila, satirically summarizes the students' position:

"Hey, I'm just like most Highland folks," Sheila said. "We come in ready to save the world, proclaiming we'll always live in or near the hood, to help nurse it back to health. Then, after four years of feeling like nothing's changed, we're ready to become Republicans!"<sup>139</sup>

In his later writing and speeches, Du Bois reflected on the failure of the talented tenth; disappointments summarised by Derrick P. Alridge:

To Du Bois's dismay, the talented tenth had failed to adequately address issues of social justice for African Americans. Moreover, they had not adequately challenged the expansion of American imperialism and capitalism in the oppression of Blacks. Instead, Du Bois argued that the talented tenth had used their education to advance their own positions in society and to improve their own economic situations.<sup>140</sup>

These critiques are illustrated in *Between Brothers*: while the students are able to save the community centre, there is little challenge to broader systems of inequality. In addition, as

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<sup>135</sup> Ben Burks, 'Unity and Diversity through Education: A Comparison of the Thought of John Dewey and W.E.B. Du Bois', *Journal of Thought*, 32:1 (1997), pp. 99-110 (p. 105).

<sup>136</sup> *Between Brothers*, p. 44.

<sup>137</sup> *Between Brothers*, p. 46; p. 47.

<sup>138</sup> Robinson, *Between Brothers*, p. 194.

<sup>139</sup> *Between Brothers*, p. 230.

<sup>140</sup> Derrick P. Alridge, 'Guiding Philosophical Principles for a DuBoisian-Based African American Educational Model', *The Journal of Negro Education*, 68:2 (1999), pp. 182-199 (p. 192).

Sheila highlights, personal prosperity for an elite group does not necessarily result in broader community uplift. Furthermore, Alridge has highlighted that 'Du Bois, like his white male counterparts and fellow "race men," could not escape the patriarchal mindset of male-dominated leadership in the uplift movement.'<sup>141</sup> While the contributions of women are mentioned at the end of *Between Brothers*, central leadership roles are all held by men. While *Between Brothers* emphasises the centrality of college in the Black community, the novel also interrogates the consequences of relying on a small, elite group for the survival of the entire community.

### **Conclusion: African American Campus Novels and African American Literature**

Consideration of contemporary campus novels written by Black authors allows these novels to be situated within broader debates surrounding the definition of an African American literary tradition. Such a definition has been widely theorised and contested. In *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937), Sterling Brown prioritises fiction's role in realistically portraying the experiences of Black people in America, particularly emphasising this need in the face of the wealth of racist depictions of Black Americans in fiction by white American writers.<sup>142</sup> Continuing this tradition, as Maryemma Graham has highlighted, '[t]he prevailing opinion was that Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and the autobiographical *Black Boy* (1940) consolidated a tradition of social and political criticism', however, the reification of such sociologically-informed protest literature was rebuked by Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin.<sup>143</sup> For both Ellison and Baldwin, defining African American literature as protest fiction not only limited the form's artistic merit but also reinforced stereotypical characterisations of African American experiences.<sup>144</sup> Both Ellison and Baldwin emphasise aesthetics, much like Benjamin Griffith Brawley in the seminal work *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States* (1918).<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Alridge, 'Conceptualizing a Du Boisian Philosophy of Education', p. 363.

<sup>142</sup> Sterling Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1968), in particular, pp. 100-168 for discussion of African American novelists.

<sup>143</sup> Maryemma Graham, 'Introduction' in Maryemma Graham ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1 - 14 (p. 2).

<sup>144</sup> See, in particular, Ralph Ellison, 'The World and the Jug' in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 107 - 143 and James Baldwin, 'Everybody's Protest Novel' in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction 1948-1986* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), pp. 27-34.

<sup>145</sup> Benjamin Brawley, *The Negro in Literature and Art* (New York: Duffield and Company, 1918).

These conflicting demands – of activism and aestheticism – coalesce in more recent scholarly approaches to African American literature. In *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Bernard Bell offers ‘a comprehensive sociopsychological, sociocultural interpretive history of the Afro-American novel’, an analytical approach which ‘seeks to unearth, identify, describe, and analyze some of the major thematic, stylistic, and structural characteristics of the Afro-American novel from its beginnings in 1853 to 1983’.<sup>146</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr. demonstrates a particularly productive, generative approach by analysing fiction by Black authors through the lens of canonical, Western literary theories, arguing that ‘[i]t is only through this critical activity that the profession [of literary criticism] [...] can redefine itself away from a Eurocentric notion of a hierarchical canon of texts’.<sup>147</sup> Both Gates Jr.’s conception of ‘textual marginality’ and Bell’s “thick description” of the integrally related cultural and social contexts’ are useful when considering contemporary campus novels written by Black authors.<sup>148</sup> These novels engage with a predominantly white institution and literary genre as well as a specific debate – racial uplift – which defined a specific historical period – post-Emancipation.

These two considerations are central to Kenneth Warren’s definition of African American literature in *What was African American Literature?* For Warren, African American literature existed only during the time of legally-enforced segregation of the Jim Crow era – while antebellum authors were seen as exceptional individuals and post-Civil Rights-era authors interrogated more fluid conceptions of identity, ‘African American literature was a postemancipation phenomenon that gained its coherence as an undertaking in the social world defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation, which ensued after the nation’s retreat from Reconstruction.’<sup>149</sup> Warren identifies a number of key features of Jim Crow-era literature: these novels prominently feature a sense of ‘group cohesiveness’ and an interrogation of the conflict between ‘indexical’ and ‘instrumental’ literature:

Writers also knew that their work would likely be viewed as constituting an index of racial progress, integrity, or ability. Added to this was the paradox that the success of

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<sup>146</sup> Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), pp. xi-xii.

<sup>147</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. xx.

<sup>148</sup> Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black*, p. xvii; Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, p. xiii.

<sup>149</sup> Kenneth Warren, *What was African American Literature?: The W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 1.

black literature as a political tool threatened to undermine its status as an index of black integrity. The pressure exerted by these instrumental or indexical expectations shows up not only in the way that writers and critics regard African American literary texts but also within the works themselves.<sup>150</sup>

Engaged with these different positions regarding the function of African American literature, Warren argues that such novels were 'proscriptive rather than retrospective': '[t]he past was indeed important, but primarily as a way of refuting charges of black inferiority and only secondarily as a source and guide for ongoing creative activity.'<sup>151</sup>

The features which Warren outlines are prominent in *Big Girls Don't Cry*, *Between Brothers* and *Welcome to Braggsville*. These campus novels prominently discuss both the role of higher education institutions in achieving racial equality and present African American students as embodiments of those processes. The Black students in these novels perform an indexical function by engaging with white supremacist structures, whether through Naomi's individualistic approach, the community-based activism of the students in *Between Brothers*, or Charlie's withering analysis of systemic racism in *Welcome to Braggsville*. Furthermore, these novels explicitly engage with the past 'as a way of refuting charges of black inferiority', in the forms of Washington and Du Bois' theories of Racial Uplift and interrogating a past which has cemented white supremacy within the very foundations of American society. By returning to the considerations of Jim Crow-era literature as defined by Warren, these campus novels evoke a literary tradition emerging from legally-enforced segregation, emphasising that higher education remains a segregated institution which reinforces racial inequality. For Warren, 'contextual forces shape a shared set of assumptions about what ought to be represented' –the primary context of these campus novels is the university institution, and the continued preoccupation of campus novels with Emancipation-era concerns highlights that such segregation is alive and well in American colleges.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> *What was African American Literature*, p. 10.

<sup>151</sup> *What was African American Literature*, pp. 42-3.

<sup>152</sup> Warren, *What was African American Literature*, p. 8.



## Conclusion

To conclude, themes emerging from this project are considered in the context of literary trends of the 'neoliberal novel' and theorisations of the contemporary American higher education sector. The relationship between literary forms and dominant economic modes highlights how these novels both replicate and critique an economy which is increasingly dominating all forms of life, particular in America. These considerations implicate not only the role of literature in the formation and perpetuation of cultural values, but also the way in which contemporary experience is, to borrow a term popularised by Frederic Jameson, 'mediated' by and within literature.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the relationship between the novels discussed in this thesis and neoliberalism illuminates not only the role of literature in contemporary society, but also the variety of literary aesthetics which contribute towards the forms of critique evident, to varying degrees, in these novels. Evident in these novels is an enduring faith in a liberal humanist tradition which is increasingly obsolete, a loyalty revealed by their consideration alongside a range of literary trends which have been said to exemplify or explicitly resist neoliberal hegemony. Such ambiguity also characterises the engagement of these novels with the higher education sector. While these works depict a number of challenges facing the higher education sector today, a clear conceptualisation for the future is ultimately absent. In this context, this conclusion considers the extent to which the novels discussed in this thesis contribute to the redefinition of American higher education, the task established, with reference to Bill Readings, at the beginning of this project.

### **The Contemporary American Campus Novel and The Neoliberal Novel**

The ways in which the contemporary American campus novel, as exemplified by the novels discussed in this thesis, engages with features of the neoliberal university enables consideration of the relationship between the American neoliberal economy and its cultural products. The relationship between the economy and literature, in particular, is by no means a specifically contemporary concern. However, the distinction between the two is a relatively new phenomenon, with figures such as Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill perceiving little distinction between literary and economic stylistics. Smith's earlier academic work included

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<sup>1</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 416.

lectures on rhetoric and belles-lettres; Thomas H. Ford also highlights that '[Smith's] subsequent moral philosophy and political economy both remained heavily indebted to an implicit literary theory.'<sup>2</sup> For John Stuart Mill, literature and culture had a particularly instructive role to play, by enculturating the public into a mode of rationality which supported and enabled classical economic models.<sup>3</sup> Subsequent scholarship has focused on this dialectic relationship between the two. From Ian Watt's argument that the novel is an ultimately bourgeois form which reinforces capitalist hegemony, to Walter Benn Michaels' assertion that the abandonment of the gold standard marked the end of literary realism, various scholarship has emphasised the way in which dominant economic modalities have affected the social role of literature, its forms and aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> The contemporary American campus novel enables further such considerations. Having emerged from a particularly neoliberal context – the contemporary, marketized higher education sector – these novels exemplify the continued critical potential of literature, and how the form can challenge what Stuart Hall has called 'the principles of a Monetarist philosophy.'<sup>5</sup> The critiques which these novels enable are particularly evidenced through subversive and innovative forms and aesthetics, to varying degrees. While offering critical potential, however, these novels remain fundamentally engaged with established, dominant principles, to the extent that their subversive and critical potential is ultimately confined. In addition, the form and extent of these novels' critical potential – as highlighted in the Introduction to this project – can be considered in further detail through their relationship to neoliberalism.

As Dan Sinykin has noted, 'Marxist cultural critic Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism* remains the canonical account of economics and US literature since 1945', with Jameson's conceptualisation of mediation proving particularly significant.<sup>6</sup> In *Postmodernism, or The*

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas H. Ford, 'The Romantic Political Economy of Reading: Or, Why Wordsworth Thought Adam Smith was the Worst Critic Ever', *ELH*, 80:2 (2013), pp. 575-95 (p. 576).

<sup>3</sup> See John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Vol. 4: Essays on Economics and Society, 1824–1845* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), pp. 213-4.

<sup>4</sup> See Ian Watts, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Robinson and Fielding* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1957); Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show' in *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 172-186 (p. 179).

<sup>6</sup> Dan Sinykin, *American Literature and the Long Downturn: Neoliberal Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 17.

*Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson defines the relationship between cultural objects and economic conditions as mediation:

Something thereby emerges which looks like a new postmodern version of the base-and-superstructure formula, in which a representation of social relations as such now demands the mediation of this or that interposed communicational structure, from which it must be read off indirectly.<sup>7</sup>

A work of art, Jameson asserts, 'draws the whole absent world and earth into revelation around itself' although this consideration 'needs to be completed by insistence on the renewed materiality of the work, on the transformation of one form of materiality [...] into that other materiality' of the artwork itself.<sup>8</sup> Jameson's articulation enables consideration of the ways in which literature and other cultural products are fundamentally entwined with the economic, both replicating and subverting social conditions and enabling their critique.

Situating their work alongside Jameson's, Mark Fisher, and Elizabeth A. Anker and Rita Felski, assert that Jameson's approach has limited applications under neoliberalism. In *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative?* (2009) Fisher outlines 'three reasons that [he] prefer[s] the term capitalist realist to [Jamesonian] postmodernism', all of which constitute challenges to Jameson's mediation. Firstly, Fisher highlights that the supremacy of neoliberal capitalism has resulted in 'a deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility' which precludes the struggle and subversion inherent in Jamesonian mediation.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, capitalist realism 'takes the vanquishing of modernism for granted', further precluding the juxtaposition and subversion in mediation.<sup>10</sup> Lastly, that '[w]hat we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting, and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture.'<sup>11</sup> While Fisher articulates a flattening-out of culture which precludes Jamesonian struggle, Anker and Felski argue that Jameson's approach is totalizing in itself, particularly in the role of the critic. According to Anker and Felski, 'Jameson reads texts as fragments of social totalities that crystallize, often involuntarily, the defining elements of such totalities [resulting in] his unapologetic embrace

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<sup>7</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 416.

<sup>8</sup> *Postmodernism*, p. xxx.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative?* (London: Verso Books, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> *Capitalist Realism*, p. 9.

of allegorical and homological modes of reading.<sup>12</sup> However, ‘the pervasive influence of neoliberalism and economic rationality, both within and outside the academy’ renders this critical approach inadequate:

At a time when higher education is under siege, it seems urgent to articulate more compelling accounts of why the humanities matter and to clarify to larger audiences why anyone should care about literature, art, or philosophy. Accustomed to a rhetoric of dismantling and demystification, critique lacks a vocabulary and set of established rationales for mounting such defenses.<sup>13</sup>

The discussions of the contemporary American campus novel provided in this thesis suggest alternatives to the visions outlined by Fisher, Anker and Felski. Particularly when placed in the context of the broader literary tradition of the campus novel, a number of contemporary works refute Fisher’s charge of ‘cultural and political sterility’. Indeed, these novels often do so through sustained engagement with the past – whether it be *The Art of Fielding’s* engagement with established pedagogical traditions; the reconsiderations of the crime, fantasy or Greek tragedy genres; or *Welcome to Braggsville’s* critique of the foundations of American society itself – emphasising the extent to which the past continues to offer a productive means of interrogating the present. Such novels offer support for John Marx and Nancy Armstrong’s contention that ‘dumpster diving is what gives recent novels a sense of purpose’.<sup>14</sup> To clarify, Armstrong offers:

What if we say that the material culture filtered out of classic political-economic and novelistic discourse as waste or garbage has something like an immanent vitalism— and that the jarring introduction of this material revitalizes a form and discourse stuck in a repetition compulsion (aka modernism). [...] Doesn’t the rediscovery of incredible excess, or waste, produced by a form (the novel) at the heart of the discourse of “normal” modern life open up a space (the dump) where novels are relieved of the obligation to formulate an elsewhere?<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski, ‘Introduction’ in Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski (ed.) *Critique and Postcritique* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 1-28 (pp. 5-6).

<sup>13</sup> Anker and Felski, ‘Introduction’, p. 18; p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> John Marx and Nancy Armstrong, ‘Introduction: How Do Novels Think about Neoliberalism?’, *Novel: a Forum on Fiction*, 51:2 (2018), pp. 157-165 (p. 161).

<sup>15</sup> Marx and Armstrong, ‘How Do Novels Think about Neoliberalism?’, p. 161.

This conceptualisation implicates the role of the critic, and critique. As Armstrong continues, 'this concept snaps the spine of prevailing cultural historical narratives and forces us to search the not yet sensible areas of the past for makings of a history of the present.'<sup>16</sup> Armstrong and Marx's discussion results in a conceptualisation which answers Anker and Felski's charges, while maintaining the novel's potential for social critique. Armstrong and Marx argue that the novel, and critic, can engage with social realities, but in a way which emphasises that which has been discarded, excluded from dominant modes of discourse. Furthermore, Armstrong and Marx's discussion frees the novel form from its own conventions, resisting the totalizing structures which Anker and Felski criticize.

The anachronism that is a common feature of contemporary American campus novels, and the consequent relationship to the socio-economic present, draws attention towards the novels' forms. One section of *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics* is dedicated to 'Principles', which editors Matt Seybold and Michelle Chichara assert exemplify the 'isomorphic methods [which] flourish in the twenty-first century'.<sup>17</sup> 'While the contributors to this section do, whenever possible, locate the historical origins of the principles they interrogate,' Seybold and Chichara note, 'they also treat them as objects of chronic critique'.<sup>18</sup> For Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl, the novel form provides a significant opportunity: 'we hold that the novel's imbrication in and contiguity with the history of capitalism provides a unique occasion to similarly uncover and historicise the economic paradigms of the present'.<sup>19</sup> In this way, Johansen and Karl locate 'the ironic status of the state [...] both in geopolitical affairs and in the form of the novel, whose fate and development have been linked to that of the state.'<sup>20</sup> Johansen further applies this approach while considering neoliberal variations of the *bildungsroman* form. Johansen notes deviations in the form's narrative arcs, conclusions and settings, and relates these formal subversions to

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<sup>16</sup> 'How Do Novels Think about Neoliberalism?', p. 163.

<sup>17</sup> Matt Seybold and Michelle Chichara, 'Introduction', in Matt Seybold and Michelle Chichara (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl, 'Introduction: reading and writing the economic present', *Textual Practice*, 29:2 (2012), pp. 201-214 (p. 204).

<sup>20</sup> Johansen and Karl, 'reading and writing the economic present', p. 209.

the changing significance of socialization and individual subjectivity under neoliberalism.<sup>21</sup> As Jane Elliot and Gillian Harkins note:

[...] genre enables specific formations of aesthetics and politics — formations with their own rules of discourse and modes of (re)production — to appear as mere forms. While these forms may arise within specific historical conditions, as genres they conjure an imagined continuity across regions and periods.<sup>22</sup>

The continuity Elliot and Harkins note is also prevalent in discussions of cultural myths in neoliberal cultural products. While Elton G. McGoun argues that *Wall Street's* Gordon Gekko is a contemporary manifestation of the American cowboy; Dan Sinykin highlights how apocalyptic narratives have been used in American literature to respond to the 'end game' of contemporary life.<sup>23</sup> As these articulations show, consideration of form reveals 'the not yet sensible areas of the past' for which Marx and Armstrong grasp, particularly by revealing contingent concerns and the way in which they are mutated into various cultural forms.

Such is the project to which this thesis contributes. By firmly contextualising contemporary novels within the established tradition of the American campus novel, the contingent concerns of contemporary texts are revealed, establishing their responses to the neoliberal university institution. Deviations and consistencies in narrative arc, characterisation, and novelistic structure particularly reveal the variety of ways in which contemporary novels engage with the problematization of personal development; undermining of national values; and social fragmentation of neoliberal society. These features are identified by Emily Johansen as defining features of the neoliberal *bildungsroman*, signalling how contemporary campus texts have moved away from the classical form upon which early campus texts relied. Formal deviations appear in a number of guises in the novels discussed in this thesis. Fragmented narratives are particularly common; 'decentering narratives' dominate the genre, emphasising students' struggles during and after higher education.<sup>24</sup> In light of the significance of the university campus, spatial considerations also enable the critiques of some novels. *If We Were Villains* and *Black Chalk*

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<sup>21</sup> Emily Johansen, 'The banal conviviality of neoliberal cosmopolitanism', *Textual Practice*, 29:2 (2015), pp. 295-314.

<sup>22</sup> Elliott and Harkins, 'Introduction: Genres of Neoliberalism', p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Elton G. McGoun, 'Finance and Film: Wall Street Myth and Mythopoeia' in Robert J. Balfour (ed.) *Culture, Capital, and Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 169-183; see Sinykin, *American Literature and the Long Downturn: Neoliberal Apocalypse*.

<sup>24</sup> Johansen, 'The banal conviviality of neoliberal cosmopolitanism', p. 305.

illustrate the movement from the university campus to the city, a transition which not only highlights the distinction between the two, but renders the university as a site of failed maturation: cities symbolising the personal alienation Johansen notes in the neoliberal *bildungsroman*.<sup>25</sup> In *The Art of Fielding* and *The Rules of Attraction*, university campuses are juxtaposed with wider society, although no movement is offered between the two. Spatial juxtaposition, in these novels, emphasises the redundancy of higher education in contemporary America, as well as the lack of personal development offered to students entrapped in insular university communities. Still other novels which conclude with the ambiguity of the neoliberal *bildungsroman* contextualise higher education institutions within broader social fragmentation. *The Marriage Plot*, *I'll Take You There* and *The Magicians* emphasise colleges' role in creating, and perpetuating, a broader society which inhibits socialization, education and students' maturation. While the extent and form of these deviations from the classical *bildungsroman* and illustration of the neoliberal form vary, they remain vital elements of these novels' critiques of the role of higher education in a contemporary neoliberal society.

However, such critique is by no means a universal feature: many of the novels discussed in this thesis remain faithful to the socializing objective of higher education, while maintaining concerns regarding its role in contemporary American society. *I am Charlotte Simmons*, *Tam Lin*, and *Legally Blonde* depict the socialization of students following higher education, although their contributions to wider society are undermined. *I am Charlotte Simmons* deploys the fragmented narratives Johansen to depict student experiences on a college campus which is detached from, yet mirrors, wider society. In this novel, higher education individuates students, while also enforcing existing norms which demand adherence. In *Tam Lin* and *Legally Blonde*, consistent narrative perspectives and the use of space in these novels emphasises students' assimilation. In *Tam Lin*, in particular, Blackstock College is a dominant space; the novel abandons the teleological progress offered by the movement between rural and urban settings in the classical *bildungsroman*. Conversely, *Legally Blonde* revels in its cosmopolitan Californian setting, however, the novel offers a broad social landscape, rather than movement between settings; in this way, Elle's exposure and adherence to social norms is emphasised, alongside a distinct lack of personal

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<sup>25</sup> See 'The banal conviviality of neoliberal cosmopolitanism', p. 310.

development. Notably, the three African American campus texts discussed in this thesis remain faithful to the possibility of socialization, although in distinct forms. *Between Brothers* emphasises Black communities' role in achieving racial uplift. *Welcome to Braggsville* depicts students' personal development, education and socialization, although Johnson's work offers this conclusion mournfully, as indicative of the unchecked perpetuation of institutional racism in American society. Of the campus novels discussed in this thesis, *Big Girls Don't Cry* is the work which most faithfully recreates the plot arc and narrative device of the classical *bildungsroman*. However, Naomi's traversing of American society remains central to the novel's primary concern – moving from home, to university, and back home, Naomi's journey highlights the novel's assertion that the establishment of a nourishing Black community is the only manner in which a fulfilling personal identity can be achieved. *S.* offers a similar conclusion – in a novel in which the faith in rationality is maintained, the heterosexual romantic relationship which signifies successful socialization in the classical *bildungsroman* is only possible outside of the influence of social institutions, in particular, the university. While these novels conclude with the socialization which is definitive of the classical *bildungsroman*, they remain hesitant towards, or explicitly reject, its value. The way in which the novels discussed in this thesis engage with the *bildungsroman* form usefully reveals the extent and manner of their critiques. Indeed, these contemporary American campus novels depict the failure of one, or more, of the concerns of the classical *bildungsroman*.

While Johansen's work highlights one way in which neoliberal experience is replicated by formal elements, Rachel Greenwald Smith highlights a manner in which literary aesthetics can resist the totalizing impulses of neoliberalism. In *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, Greenwald Smith particularly engages with the perniciousness of the 'affective hypothesis' in American literary criticism: 'the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience.'<sup>26</sup> This core belief, Greenwald Smith argues, implicitly endorses the principles ungirding neoliberalism:

While neoliberalism casts the individual as responsible for herself, the affective hypothesis casts feeling as necessarily owned and managed by individual authors, characters, and readers. Neoliberalism imagines the individual as an entrepreneur;

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<sup>26</sup> Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 1



the affective hypothesis imagines the act of reading as an opportunity for emotional investment and return. The neoliberal subject is envisioned as needing to be at all times strategically networking; feelings, according to the affective hypothesis, are indexes of emotional alliances.<sup>27</sup>

As a mode of resistance, Greenwald Smith offers '*impersonal feelings*':

Impersonal feelings do not straightforwardly conform to a market model, because they are not easily codifiable or recognizable; they do not allow for strategic emotional associations to be made between readers and characters; and they emphasize the unpredictability of affective connections. As a result, these modes of textual affectivity, if they are recognized and defined as forms of feeling, challenge the principles of subjectivity that underpin not only our aesthetic judgments but our economic, political, and social convictions as well.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, Greenwald Smiths draws upon 'literary scholarship that sees the relationship between aesthetics and feelings as one that destabilizes the connection between the emotional and the personal.'<sup>29</sup> '[T]he neoliberal moment' Greenwald Smith continues, 'makes the recuperation and operationalization of [feelings scholarship's] history particularly urgent, as such approaches might drive a wedge between neoliberal assumptions about the self and critical assumptions about emotional dynamics in literature.'<sup>30</sup> Through consideration of novels such as Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and Paul Auster's *Book of Illusions* (2002), Greenwald Smiths determines what could be called an aesthetics of the impersonal, including '[f]ormal devices [which] emphasize [the] materiality of language; narrative and formal promises initiated and interrupted'; '[r]elations across time and space'; 'literature understood as productive of alternatives to the present'; and a '[c]ontinued belief in form as the site of alterations in perception, affection, and forms of social engagement.'<sup>31</sup> These techniques exemplify 'the way [impersonal works] mobilize feeling [which] complicates the fundamental expectations of neoliberalism by placing a focus on aspects of life that fall outside its structures.'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, p. 59.

The features identified by Greenwald Smith are prevalent throughout the contemporary American campus novels discussed in this thesis, and signify key elements of how these novels engage in critique of the neoliberal institution. Formal experimentation is prevalent, ranging from the textual complexity of *S.*, to the flashbacks and fragmentation of *If We Were Villains* and *Black Chalk*. *Welcome to Braggsville* engages with postmodern scepticism which reveals the performativity of language itself; *The Secret History* is more hesitant to abandon the power of modern and classical narratives, while simultaneously deploying a complex narrative device which undermines its own reliability. Joyce Carol Oates' *I'll Take You There* persistently problematizes the relationship between subjectivity and emotion, as reflected in a text which is inextricably linked to an anonymous narrator experiencing a period of psychological turmoil. These texts all generate the energy which Greenwald Smith ascribes to the impersonal, while evoking an ambiguity regarding the abandonment of the humanist subjectivity which has been co-opted by neoliberalism. Of all the novels discussed in this thesis, *The Rules of Attraction* most fully exemplifies the characteristics of the impersonal delineated by Greenwald Smith. Bret Easton Ellis' work features the 'flat' characters prevalent in impersonal works, directing readers' attention towards the materiality of the text itself; relationships established in *The Rules of Attraction* can only be spatial, as any deeper connection is impossible. Ellis' work offers a profound challenge to the principles of commodification and exchange which characterise personal works – while reading Ellis' novel has a profound effect, it offers nothing in return. In this way, Ellis' work exemplifies the challenge to neoliberal subjectivities, offered by Greenwald Smith, through literary aesthetics.

However, it would be disingenuous to imply that the contemporary American campus novel, to the extent that these diverse works can be summarised, exemplifies the subversive, experimental, rebellious instinct which Greenwald Smith identifies in works which challenge neoliberal orthodoxy. While challenges to textual and social norms are evident, a clear conceptualisation of new forms of living, or writing, is lacking. These texts are unable to abandon established literary genres; unable to accept the abandonment of human subjectivity at the heart of postmodernism; unable to abandon the role of higher education in achieving social stability, gender equality, racial equality. The conclusions of these novels – students' ambiguity or socialization – could be characterised by a spirit of compromise.

Indeed, the contradiction between formal experimentation and conservatism are evocative of the literary trend of '*compromise aesthetics*' identified by Greenwald Smith:

Compromise aesthetics are also suspicious of authority but not in the name of a political suspicion toward authoritarianism. Instead, compromise aesthetics envision the artist as having the freedom of the entrepreneur—radical, insofar as all formal tools are up for grabs for innovative refashioning, but not political, because collective meaning is shed from stylistic modes previously associated with ideological positions. Compromise aesthetics, I argue, are reflective of neoliberal thinking insofar as the notion of what is immediately useful and profitable overtakes any other ideological commitment.<sup>33</sup>

Greenwald Smith's discussion of a particularly neoliberal literary aesthetics tempers the radicalism of the novels discussed here, while providing evidence for the contention that these contemporary American campus novels are indeed defined by neoliberalism. Despite the novels' challenges to dominant textual and social norms, they remain faithful to the potential for higher education, and the principles the institution signifies. Novels' literary stylistics are ultimately voided of their radical potential, exemplifying the paradoxical nature of life in the neoliberal university. While the pervasiveness of compromise aesthetics throughout the contemporary American campus novel could be considered to be a capitulation to neoliberalism, it also reinforces the genre's continued engagement with the conditions of the neoliberal university. Indeed, perhaps these novels are unable to truly challenge liberal humanist orthodoxies because that would mean abandoning the university institution itself.

### **The Contemporary American Campus Novel and the Neoliberal University**

Indeed, the contemporary American campus novels of this work reinforce how the genre remains definitively engaged with experiences of higher education, while engaging with and critiquing the contemporary sector. As the structure of this thesis reflects, novels' engagement with American higher education can be distinguished between the university institution, student experiences, and the relationship between higher education and wider

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<sup>33</sup> Rachel Greenwald Smith, 'The Contemporary Novel and Postdemocratic Form', *Novel: a Forum on Fiction*, 51:2 (2018), pp. 292-307 (p. 293).

society. These novels depict and engage with several challenges to the higher education sector, in which its role in contemporary society is undermined. However, also prevalent are novels in which universities perpetuate social inequalities and preclude students' personal development, illustrating the simultaneous erosion and exertion of institutional power under neoliberalism. Student experiences are similarly indicative: uncertain futures await students at the conclusion of many of these novels, reflecting an inability to abandon hopes for personal stability, despite mounting evidence that students' futures are increasingly jeopardised. The relationship between higher education institutions and broader American society is also symptomatic of contemporary concerns – institutions are either explicitly detached, reflecting their redundancy; or they resolutely prepare students for roles in a society which inhibits critical and democratic contributions. These conclusions are particularly bleak, in a way which reflects the inability of these contemporary American campus novels to productively conceptualise alternatives to the neoliberalisation of higher education.

A number of texts discussed in this thesis depict the failure of higher education without offering any productive alternative. *The Art of Fielding* depicts the detachment of the university institution with a sense of nostalgia – Harbach's work offers Westish College as a utopian space where social tensions are abandoned, despite the associated loss of personal subjectivity. The Dupont University of *I am Charlotte Simmons* is dominated by white supremacy, misogyny and elitism, with Wolfe's text failing to conceptualise an alternative. Both *Tam Lin* and *Legally Blonde* represent their universities as tools of patriarchal oppression, either by confining women to the domestic sphere, or endorsing values which impede feminist activism and perpetuate the exploitation of women throughout American society. In these novels, universities are sites dedicated to what bell hooks has called 'a culture of domination'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, hooks' description of a discussion with her mother prior to her attendance at a predominantly white university attends to the experiences of students in these novels:

She was insisting on my power to be able to separate useful knowledge that I might get from the dominating group from participation in ways of knowing that would lead to estrangement, alienation, and worse—assimilation and co-optation. She was

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<sup>34</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), p. 231.

saying that it is not necessary to give yourself over to them to learn. [...] She was reminding me of the necessity of opposition and simultaneously encouraging me not to lose that radical perspective shaped and formed by marginality.<sup>35</sup>

Contemporary American campus novels which depict the indoctrination of students reinforce the characterisation of universities as spaces of ‘assimilation and co-optation’, spaces wherein the ‘sense of wholeness’ developed through life on the ‘margins’ is rejected:

Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center.<sup>36</sup>

hooks’ discussion illuminates the way in which these novels’ depictions of totalizing higher education institutions is a significant form of the critiques these novels enable. By depicting universities as sites of authoritarian indoctrination, the novels discussed here emphasise the insularity of these institutions, and the extent to which they exclude perspectives which are not endorsed by patriarchal, white supremacist ideologies. This tension, between the exertion of institutional power and the consequent institutional redundancy, is symptomatic of neoliberalism.

Other campus texts answer hooks’ call for a movement towards the margins as a space of ‘radical openness’ which can challenge the ‘culture of domination’ which American higher education institutions perpetuate.<sup>37</sup> *I’ll Take You There* explicitly shows how such a marginal space can be established ‘through struggle’, a struggle poignantly and powerfully evoked by the novel’s unstable narrative.<sup>38</sup> Yet, Oates’ narrator concludes the novel in dialogue with another, a movement towards the comprehension of her own experiences which the novel itself evinces. This particularly textualised struggle is further exemplified in *If We Were Villains*, *Black Chalk* and *Welcome to Braggsville*, texts which subsume their revolutionary potential within the texts’ linguistic fabrics. By doing so, these novels challenge the distinction between theory and practice which lies at the heart of higher education

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> hooks, *Yearning*, p. 229.

<sup>37</sup> hooks, *Yearning*, p. 228.

<sup>38</sup> *Yearning*, p. 235.

institutions' detachment from society, and claims to positions of authority. These texts establish *textual* margins as sites of resistance. Still others offer representational opportunities for reform outside of higher education. The textual instability of *S.* concludes with students' withdrawal from the university institution, a decision which is shared in *Big Girls Don't Cry* – for Naomi, university is a means to traverse racist social institutions; personal fulfilment is only available outside the exclusionary norms it enforces. A similar decision is taken by the protagonists of *The Marriage Plot*. While *Between Brothers* emphasises the role of higher education in a broader community context, the Black community of Robinson's work is explicitly detached from the white supremacy which dominates American society and continues to threaten the community in Robinson's work. In these novels, university itself is the site of struggle, and revolutionary praxis is only possible off-campus.

And yet, while students' well-being ultimately provides the concluding consideration of these novels, contemporary American campus fiction resists the closure offered by personal stability in any form. *Big Girls Don't Cry* is the only novel discussed in this thesis which depicts its protagonist's happy marriage, domestic and professional success and even later life. As the above discussion of the *bildungsroman* shows, these novels are ultimately truncated – they generally conclude with students' managing the challenges faced in higher education, finally free but exposed to social machinations for which university has not prepared them. In this sense, Charlie's plea, at the end of *Welcome to Braggville*, could be echoed by the students throughout these works:

Why can't you allow this crime to continue, this auspicious advent of the slow crime movement, to continue victimful but assailantless? Why can't we have a hands-off instead of a handout? Why must you dress for the party? [...] Why can't you let us die in peace?<sup>39</sup>

While justifiable in a novel which attends to the machinations of structural racism in American society, Charlie's request must be considered carefully in the light of the entrepreneurialism by which personal development is defined within neoliberal economies. As Charlie notes, such detachment allows 'crime to continue', an implicit acceptance of the impossibility of structural reform which the treatments of higher education in many of these

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<sup>39</sup> Johnson, *Welcome to Braggville*, p. 453.

novels reinforce. Indeed, the majority of these novels do conclude with students' experiences of societies with 'a hands-off instead of a handout' approach. Romantic relationships are abandoned, students make sacrifices, characters face uncertain roads ahead, literally, in the case of *The Rules of Attraction* and *Black Chalk*. However, these novels are frequently melancholy about these conditions. While catharsis is offered by the overcoming of institutional barriers which the university represents, any sense of stability is rejected. It is only *Legally Blonde* which embraces contemporary individualism with abandon, despite the enforced compromises made by Elle, Josette and the other women in Amanda Brown's work.

Students' experiences in these novels emphasise two key considerations for neoliberal higher education: challenges faced by students as a demographic, and the difficulties of conceptualising human subjectivity under neoliberalism. Students' fates in these novels illustrate the results of the commodification and privatisation of the future exemplified by increased student debt. As James Cairns notes in *The Myth of the Age of Entitlement: Millennials, Austerity and Hope*: 'a highly indebted millennial workforce faces considerable pressure to take on whatever work is on offer'; loan fees constitute 'strong incentives to hustle from part-time job to part-time job and not complain about the low pay and no benefits at their workplace.'<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Cairns' work, a current student named Serena notes that the pressure of student debt renders higher education 'a ladder to nowhere.'<sup>41</sup> Thus, the future is drained of any emancipatory promise, instead confining students to futures oriented towards debt repayment. As the title of Cairns work suggests, the university is a pre-eminent site in what Lawrence Grossberg defines as 'a war on youth', wherein 'youth is increasingly de-legitimated, that is, denied any significant place within the collective geography of life in the U.S.'<sup>42</sup> Thus, the enclosure of the future by which American colleges are dominated results in the disenfranchisement of students. It is this disenfranchisement, as a result of university education, from which students struggle to free themselves in the contemporary American campus novels discussed in this project. And yet, freed from the roles encumbered upon them, they face uncertain futures. The poignancy which awaits them is mirrored in Wendy Brown's consideration of the future of democracy

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<sup>40</sup> James Cairns, *The Myth of the Age of Entitlement: Millennials, Austerity and Hope* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), p. 95.

<sup>41</sup> Cairns, *The Myth of the Age of Entitlement*, p. 94.

<sup>42</sup> *The Myth of the Age of Entitlement*, p. 113.

after neoliberalism. '[N]eoliberal reason,' Brown highlights, 'ubiquitous today in statecraft and the workplace [...] is converting the distinctly political character, meaning, and operation of democracy's constituent elements into economic ones. Liberal democratic institutions, practices, and habits may not survive this conversion.'<sup>43</sup> Indeed, 'the citizens practicing, caring for or desiring [democracy] are challenged by neoliberalism's "economization" of political life and of other heretofore noneconomic spheres and activities.'<sup>44</sup> While the majority of contemporary American campus novels do not feature recognizable 'neoliberalised' higher education institutions, they rather depict the uncertain transition from liberal to neoliberal conceptions of human experience, melancholically. The majority of these novels, *The Rules of Attraction* and *Legally Blonde* notwithstanding, lament the individualism and competition by which Foucault, in particular, defines neoliberal subjectivity and the consequent de-legitimization of students' future contributions to society.

Indeed, students' ultimate fates in these novels implicate the relationship between higher education and wider society. Two characterisations of higher education appear in the novels of this thesis that implicate the social function of American colleges: one wherein higher education institutions are detached from wider society, and one wherein higher education is the site of a socialization which precludes critical, democratic engagement. Novels which depict the detachment of higher education from wider society do so in two key ways. *If We Were Villains* and *Black Chalk* deploy flashbacks to emphasise the temporal detachment of higher education. *The Rules of Attraction*, *The Art of Fielding* and *S.* depict a particularly spatial detachment – Ellis and Harbach's works depict institutions detached from wider society and dominated by instability and idealism; in *S.*, academic research is housed within the pages of a book. In these ways, these novels emphasise the redundancy and insularity of contemporary higher education. These five novels emphasise how universities' function as an intellectual state apparatus is under threat in contemporary America. Previously the home of ideological justifications for significant national concerns such as federalism, capitalism, and institutional slavery, the intellectual authority of American higher education institutions is under threat.

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<sup>43</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p. 17.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 17.



While anti-intellectualism has a strong tradition in American society, recent commentators such as Susan Jacoby and Chris Mooney have highlighted particularly contemporary challenges.<sup>45</sup> While Jacoby emphasises the role of the media, Mooney highlights the increased politicization of anti-intellectualism, particularly following the Republican Party's alignment with the emergent 'Religious Right' in the 1970s and 'industry':

During its rise to political triumph and domination of the Republican Party, the modern conservative movement has relied heavily on two key constituencies with an overriding interest in the outcomes of scientific research in certain areas: industry and the religious Right.<sup>46</sup>

These allegiances contribute to an American society which now has no need for the explicitly intellectual authority offered by universities. In addition, the spatial detachment of *Rules of Attraction* and *The Art of Fielding* are particularly evocative of the fragmentation of the relationship between higher education and wider society. The introduction of the market as an intermediary and defining concern in the higher education sector has fragmented the formerly cohesive relationship between colleges and the state. Economic principles overrule values by which democracy can be defined; economic principles have also been inserted *between* the state and colleges, performing a legitimating function which justify colleges' state funding and the utility of college research. Colleges' envelopment within the knowledge economy emphasises the extent to which these institutions no longer act as an intellectual state apparatus. Rather than developed explicitly in service of a public good, knowledge and ideas are now privatised.

A number of other contemporary American campus novels emphasise the way in which higher education leads to students' withdrawal from social participation. Once again, these novels can be distinguished according to the relationship between higher education institutions and wider society. *The Magicians* depicts how Enlightenment rationality has become rationalization in the contemporary American university. A significant number of novels emphasise the extent to which higher education replicates existing structures of inequality, precluding students' engagement and critiques of these very mechanics. While

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<sup>45</sup> For a history of anti-intellectualism in American society, see Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963).

<sup>46</sup> Chris Mooney, *The Republican War on Science* (New York: Basic Books, 2005 [Apple Books Edition]), p. 44.

*Legally Blonde* emphasises the role of universities in a broader patriarchal structure, *Welcome to Braggsville* and *Big Girls Don't Cry* emphasise the contribution of the institution to structural racism. Dupont University, in *I am Charlotte Simmons*, is representative of a wider society dominated by elitist, patriarchal, white supremacist ideologies. The concerns of these novels engage with American colleges' contribution to the broader social inequality which Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson highlight is damaging for democratic engagement. Not only a signal of the failure of egalitarian democratic principles, Pickett and Wilkinson highlight that inequality prevents the sympathy and public engagement which are crucial for democratic participation.<sup>47</sup> Contemporary trends in higher education pedagogy and monitoring also highlight the extent to which the production of a democratic citizenry is no longer colleges' primary concern. Furthermore, the increasing significance of college rankings, while centralising teaching practices, preclude the qualitative and nuanced measurements by which democratic engagement can be measured, if it can be at all.<sup>48</sup>

To conclude, it is worth considering how the contemporary American campus novel might offer avenues through which to consider Wendy Brown's crucial questions:

[I]f, as this book suggests, neoliberal reason is evacuating these ideals and desires from actually existing liberal democracies, from what platform would more ambitious democratic projects be launched? How would the desire for more or better democracy be kindled from the ash heap of its bourgeois form?<sup>49</sup>

The novels discussed in this project offer suggestions in both their aesthetics and representation. These novels remain faithful to the ultimate 'bourgeois form', the novel, however much they challenge previously established formal limits. The narrative complexity of *I'll Take You There*, *If We Were Villains*, *Welcome to Braggsville* and *The Secret History*, show how the fragmentation of narratives need not result in postmodernism nihilism, but can instead result in the formation of powerful new narratives, however unsettling and complex they might be. As established at the beginning of this project, these features are central to the critiques which characterise the American campus novel throughout its various iterations. Similarly, contemporary American campus novels mine various literary genres in

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<sup>47</sup> See Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Society Stronger* (New York, Berlin and London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010), pp. 49-62.

<sup>48</sup> See Tuchman, *Wannabe U*, p. 127.

<sup>49</sup> Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 18.

order to highlight and emphasise challenges faced by contemporary American higher education institutions. In a broader, literary context, furthermore, these novels exemplify the way in which ‘the desire for more or better democracy [can] be kindled from the ash heap of its bourgeois form.’ The campus novel in America emerged as a particularly elitist mode, a reputation it has more or less maintained throughout its century-and-a-half history. Yet, this reputation is undermined in contemporary works, to which the variety represented in this thesis attests. The contemporary American campus novels discussed here are themselves evidence that the potential for conceptualisations of new forms remain possible.

These novels offer a more ambiguous answer Brown’s first question. Most potent is the desire to escape oppressive social norms. Where, then, can students’ emancipatory desires be fulfilled? Not in the university, but in smaller communities, oriented around specific, local goals. This is the hopeful depiction shared by *Between Brothers*, *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, and *S*. However, this conclusion, however optimistic in these novels, must also be considered with trepidation. At a time when increasing tribalism and partisanship have been lauded as harbingers of the downfall of American democracy, such recusal from social institutions has been flagged as a cause for concern.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the partisan results of Donald Trump’s impeachment proceedings; manipulation enabled by social media ‘echo chambers’; and the disappearance of the middle class caused by increasing economic inequality illustrate the damaging impacts of social and political stratification and fragmentation. More broadly, tribalism is not only a threat to a democratic regime that has always been a ideal, but is particularly concerning at a time when collective action is required to manage the most vital issues of our time, such as climate change or the covid-19 pandemic.

Viewed through a different lens, however, *Between Brothers*, *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, and *S* gesture towards a promising model for social participation. Grassroots activism offers a method by which the concerns and power of local communities can be mobilised to influence broader social institutions. Indeed, just as Naomi exemplifies the tradition of ‘othermothering’ discussed by Patricia Hill Collins, so too does Ariella Rotramel identify this same action as central to the activism of women of colour in New York City. Rotramel

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Steven Kornacki, *The Red and the Blue: The 1990s and the Birth of Political Tribalism* (New York: Ecco, 2019); Amy Chua, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019); Jonah Goldberg, *Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics is Destroying American Democracy* (New York: Crown Forum, 2018).

highlights that Hill Collins ‘conceptualizes motherwork as public action that extends beyond families’, a theorization that includes ‘the cumulative efforts of a community made up of biological and chosen families, neighbors, friends and strangers who find themselves taking up a shared cause like improving housing or street safety.’<sup>51</sup> It is vital to recognise that women of colour are central to this new conceptualization of public participation. It is women of colour, Stacey Abrams highlights, who ‘are looking for places to stand so they can move their communities forward.’<sup>52</sup> Indeed, when discussing her own work, Abrams offers a productive way of counteracting the institutional and individual alienation, and social fragmentation, that are depicted throughout contemporary American campus novels:

We have to remember that people vote because they think something will come of it. And communities that have long been disenfranchised and distanced from voting have done so because they’ve seen generational poverty, they’ve seen long-term voter suppression, and they no longer believe that there’s a direct correlation between the act of voting and changing their lives. And so what we do through Fair Fight is connect the dots.<sup>53</sup>

By reasserting the relationship between education and individuals’ lives, encouraging broader participation in higher education, and ensuring that the concerns of communities are heard, perhaps higher education institutions will be able to participate in ‘connect[ing] the dots.’ Indeed, the opportunities offered by widening participation programs, academic interdisciplinarity, or decolonisation initiatives offer examples of how these principles can be translated into an academic environment.

While this chapter (or campus novel) remains to be written, it is certainly a vital contribution to the reconsideration for which Readings called. In this way, contemporary American campus novels continue to offer a glimpse, however minor, into the possibilities for the future of higher education in America. However, the fact that such a contribution is evident in few of the significant number of texts discussed in this project constitutes evidence that such theorisations are rare in contemporary American campus novels. To the extent that campus novels are a vital medium through which to engage with the American

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<sup>51</sup> Ariella Rotramel, *Pushing Back: Women of Color-Led Grassroots Activism in New York City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020), p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Stacey Abrams and Valerie Boyd, ‘Carving a Path for Those Who Will Follow: Stacey Abrams in Conversation with Valerie Boyd’, *Southern Cultures*, 25:3 (2019), pp. 22–9 (p. 24).

<sup>53</sup> Abrams and Boyd, ‘Carving a Path for Those Who Will Follow’, p. 27.

higher education sector – a central claim of this thesis – pessimism is a recurring and prevalent tone. However, by asserting, highlighting, and contextualising the range of critiques which are definitive of, and prevalent in, this literary form, this project itself contributes to the ongoing re-examination of the American higher education sector. By identifying the range of critiques, the failures of higher education, and the difficulties facing students in contemporary America, conceptualisations such as that of Connie Briscoe in *Big Girls Don't Cry* stand out for their gesturing towards a radical potential, conceptualisations that must be considered thoughtfully and urgently if higher education is to play a productive role in American society in the future.

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