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“CAMPUS PERIPHERIES”: ACADEMIC FICTION(S) DURING THE RISE AND FALL OF THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

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For Hortencia and Roberto

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Preface

I've thought about this dissertation's topic in some form ever since my sophomore year of college at UC Santa Barbara. It was during this year that I first began to think about the separations an institution like the university creates between the individual who attends them and the communities these individuals come from. For me this separation was both cultural and economic and was dramatized in an experience I had at one of the university's dining commons. I was in line to grab some food and when I looked up the person serving me food reminded me of my father due to their physical appearance as an older Mexican man. In this moment, the separation the university had been cultivating dissipated as I was reminded of my low-income Mexican background, and of the family and community that still existed and lived in that space. In more categorizing terms, I was reminded of my status as a first-generation college student as I confronted these separations alongside unforeseen middle-class university norms.

Around this same time I received an informational email from the university's McNair Scholars program, a two year intensive research program meant to inform historically underrepresented students about graduate school as they simultaneously prepared to apply to graduate school programs. I enjoyed literary study and figured I could continue do it through research at the graduate level, so I applied to the McNair Scholars program and was accepted, where I began to study the topic of class mobility as it exists within racial communities and how this is depicted in postwar/ contemporary American fiction. I wrote a thesis for UCSB's English Department and a section of this thesis served as my writing sample for graduate school programs, of which the University of Chicago's English Department was one of. This dissertation is about academic fictions such as the campus and academic novel, as well as nonconventional ones for which I make the case for throughout its chapters. But at this point in

my studies, in the latter half of my time at undergrad, I had not yet encountered a study of academic fiction, or even knew that it existed as a genre. Yet I was still carrying with me that experience I had in the dining commons and wanted to find a literature that narrativized the first-generation experience that moment made visible. In the absence of what I would eventually come to know as academic fiction I turned my focus to literature that attended to class mobility and the separations it created amongst racialized individuals and their communities.

It was during my first year of graduate school where I first came across the study of academic fiction in Kenneth Warren's class "The Pivotal Decade" when reading Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*. For McGurl, the postwar American university was and is essential to understanding postwar literary production given that a healthy number of postwar writers were either trained at MFA programs or simply attended a post-secondary education during this period. Reading through a wide array of novels McGurl shows how the fictional worlds of these texts reflect their author's institutional attendance through their inclusion of content, forms and tropes of the university and the university's pedagogies. In this same class we read a critique of McGurl, written by Christopher Findeisen, that argued against the democratizing nature of the university McGurl's monograph upheld. For Findeisen, the postwar university was not a democratizing or egalitarian institution as many of the students who walked its halls and continue to do so are already financially well off. Campus novels, for Findeisen, upheld the fiction of American socio-economic mobility given that they depict progressive upward mobility narratives mediated by university attendance. While both of these studies reeled me into a study of academic fiction, they raised more questions than answers as I continued to search for a first-generation literature. For one, while some critics have read McGurl as a reader of academic fiction, McGurl glosses over the genre, and even somewhat dismisses it as a thematic symptom

of the rise of postwar American mass higher education. He doesn't attend to its longer history in American letters. Findeisen does take the history of the genre and its aesthetics more seriously and provides helpful accounts of what it does and what it represents. And he even shows just how many authors have partaken of the genre. That critics have ignored or overlooked its literary significance is a different issue altogether. Although I didn't disagree with Findeisen's core thesis that the postwar university fails to produce economic equity, I had some disagreements with how he read the campus novels he focused on in relation to this insight. One of these disagreements appears at the end of the first chapter in which I respond to his reading of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. Furthermore, I still carried the suspicion that there were indeed narratives that spoke to the first-generation experience. Campus novels could not, in my view, be just about the jovial and chaotic nature of youth and feature depictions of sex and alcohol.

Once I began to think more about and seek a "minority" "first-generation" campus novel I came to the realization, however, that there wasn't many to work with, at least not in the postwar period I was interested in. During a conversation with one of my advisors, Adrienne Brown, I raised the question of "Why wasn't there any campus novels written by minority authors?" As she quickly helped me see, this was the wrong question to ask. Instead, she guided me towards asking what the novels I was reading *were* doing. During my orals exam reading period I came across novels that alluded to the university with characters who could be classified as first-generation college students. However, they were not campus novels as there was no campus setting or any of the other tropes of academic fiction. Returning to and re-reading McGurl's work I came across a sentence that struck me in which he coyly suggests that we can read all postwar novels as campus novels "of a sort." Again, McGurl wasn't very interested in campus novels, but this aside guided me towards thinking about how I could read for academic

fiction in postwar novels given that many of the authors I was reading had relationships to the university. From this realization I came up with the term "campus peripheries."

These campus peripheries, as I argue for, are brief moments in texts—such as a sentence or a paragraph—that allude to the postwar university's significance despite the novel's totality not being about the university. In each of my chapters I read these moments as crucial for understanding issues such as individual achievement and community service found in postwar education discourse. My dissertation argues for expanding our understanding of academic fiction beyond its conventional forms of the campus and academic novel. When we do this, we encounter literature that dramatizes the separations between the individual and their community, more thoroughly engages with the complexity of the university's promises of postwar upward economic mobility and whether these promises extend to the communities these characters come from. Ultimately, this study shows how academic fiction can be a site for "first-generation" narratives, and that it can also include "minority" voices in the immediate postwar period, despite the genre's conventional forms being written by predominantly white authors.

Acknowledgements

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Thank you to my parents, family and friends who supported me throughout this academic journey from a distance. You'll never know how much your support meant to me throughout these years away from the home your proximities make possible. Thank you to Sirenia Sanchez and Nanchi for making Chicago warmer and saner the first few years. Those winter blues would have been much harsher without you both.

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Abstract

This dissertation argues for an expansive understanding of academic fiction in the postwar period—specifically as associated with the rise and fall of the "Golden Age of the American University"—beyond the conventional forms of the campus and academic novel. Rather than restricting academic fiction solely to types of novels that are explicit about their campus influences, via their incorporation of actively present and legible university characteristics such as college students, staff, faculty, and campus settings, this dissertation proposes alternate but adjacent sites to look for the influence of American higher education. To that end, it argues for the unique nature of these alternate academic fictions it names "campus peripheries" as they address the education issues of human capital, economic mobility, "minority" status, inclusion/ exclusion, individual achievement, and community service. These "campus peripheries" are brief and thus peripheral moments in novels that allude and gesture towards the university's significance despite their seemingly small contribution to the totality of the text they appear within. Additionally, this dissertation consolidates a review of conventional academic fiction and its accompanying criticism to show how this work has often failed to distinguish between two versions of this genre: student-centered campus novels and faculty-centered academic novels. I then turn to highlighting the alternate ones, "campus peripheries," which largely borrow from campus novels, through several close readings of select novels that I argue are representative of these peripheral moments. Overall, through readings of these campus periphery moments in some key novels, this dissertation argues for a novel way of understanding academic fiction and the indebtedness these novels and their authors have to American higher education in the postwar period when its centrality in American life was becoming more pronounced.

Introduction: "The Golden Age of the American University"

The American university's historical period that frames this dissertation on academic fiction emerges after the end of the Second World War and has been referred to as the "Golden Age of the American University" (roughly the period between 1945-1975), when "pumped full of federal and foundation funding, the university grew exponentially, both in the expansion of established universities and the founding of many new state universities."[1] This period saw the breakthrough of the American research university that was gaining international prestige, the "community college" a "distinctively American institution" as well as for-profit colleges that housed vocational and trade schools.[2] To be sure, this was a disorganized exponential growth that housed a wide array of both complementing and competing stakeholders, inclusive of orthodox and unorthodox students, university presidents, federal agencies, state governments, private and public universities, faculty, and the tax-paying public. In this sense, University of California President Clark Kerr's term the "Multiversity" is an appropriate descriptor of the American university in this period as it describes the multiple directions in which the university was being imagined, pushed, pulled and built: "'The Idea of a Multiversity' is a city of *infinite variety*. Some get lost in the city; some rise to the top within it; most fashion their lives within one of its many subcultures."[3] (emphasis added)

Although the American university had before 1945 gone through notable changes—from being sectarian in its early period to adopting "practical" fields of study, such as agriculture, after

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[1] Jefferey J. Williams. "The Post-Welfare State University." *American Literary History*, Spring, 2006, Vol.18, No. 1 (Spring, 2006), 192.
[2] John R. Thelin. *A History of American Higher Education*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 260.
[3] Clark Kerr. *The Uses of the University*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 41.

the Civil War through the land grant colleges—it wasn't until this postwar moment that it grew exponentially in its teaching and research capabilities, and enrollment capacities. Whereas 3% of Americans had gone through American university doors in 1900, 48% had done so in 1970, and this percentage only increased as the century continued (understood numerically a different way, 1.5 million students were enrolled in 1939 vs 7.9 million in 1970, an increase of over 400% in just three decades). The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (more colloquially known as the G.I. Bill) education and training segment played an important and spearheading role in this growth as it became a major and unprecedented (its creators expected only a modest enrollment) social-entitlement program that gave returning World War II veterans access to tuition-free enrollment at any university of their choosing.[4] As it has been infamously retold, the federal government, fearing disgruntled and jobless veterans, planned for a peacetime economy that accounted for their re-immersion into American society. World War I veterans—known as the "Bonus Army"—had protested and demonstrated on the grounds of the U.S. capital against a lack of proper and timely renumeration for their services, ultimately resulting in a violent response from the military, ordered by then President Herbert Hoover. Fearing another event like this—an event that some saw as the nail in the coffin to Hoover's re-election—and the re-emergence of the Great Depression, New Deal President Franklin D. Roosevelt planned accordingly, and the university played a role in this plan. Considering these facets of history, it

[4] And it was arguably the most impactful segment of the bill as, according to Suzanne Mettler, "The education and training benefits constituted by far the most popular program, utilized by 51 percent of all returning veterans, or 7.8 million individuals." Comparatively, "Fourteen percent of all veterans used the full year's worth of generous unemployment benefits offered by the program, and 29 percent used low-interest guaranteed mortgages for the purchase of homes, farms, or businesses." See Mettler, "The Only Good Thing Was the G.I. Bill": Effects of the Education and Training Provisions on African American Veterans' Political Participation." *Studies in American Political Development*, 19 (Spring 2005), 31-52. (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 31.

should be recognized that in this so called "Golden Age," "The university opened its gates not only in the spirit of democracy but as a social salve, if not a measure of control. A further principle of the American university is that it has developed not only in the service of altruism or utilitarian progress but also in reaction to perceived political pressures and fears."[5]

Scholars also point to the success of research in military technology as one of the catalysts of this postwar expansion, understanding the United States newly found global superpower status as a motivating reason behind the push for continued growth in the halls of the university—a growth that extended to other budding academic fields not neatly associated with military research: "The triumph of organized war research conducted in university labs convinced [academic leaders and contemporaries] that such [research] efforts, if expanded to focus on social problems as well as military concerns, could remake American society and perhaps even the world."[6] As Ethan Schrum argues in his book, *The Instrumental University*, postwar research expanded to encompass "business and engineering schools" and fields like "city planning, industrial relations, and public administration" in addition to military research. For Schrum, this "instrumentality" had pre-war roots in "technocratic progressivism," but it was "the belief that the United States had won World War II" that enabled it to gain traction in the postwar period. The university's importance, and relevance, in American life was growing more and more beyond its wartime commitments. In this postwar period the American university found itself in the novel and fluid position of being an instrument of and for economic and social progress both at home and across the world.

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[5] "The Post-Welfare State University," 194.
[6] Ethan D. Schrum. *The Instrumental University: Education in Service of the National Agenda After World War II*. (Ithaca [New York]: Cornell University Press, 2019), 2.

The university's understanding of itself as being an "instrument" coincided with the emergence of the economic theory of "human capital" that proposed that through personal investments, such as education, a person could acquire tools (instruments) that would translate into better economic prospects: "The many forms of such investments include schooling, on-the job training, medical care, migration, and searching for information about prices and incomes…all these investments improve skills, knowledge, or health and thereby raise money or psychic incomes."[7] Additionally, "By investing in themselves, people can enlarge the range of choice available to them. It is one way free men can enhance their welfare."[8] That is, if people educated themselves through the halls of a college by picking up "skills"—and being awarded a degree—they would find better job opportunities that appropriately rewarded these skills and expertise. The Higher Education Act of 1965 would prove to be an embodiment of this human capital ideology as its passing was significantly influenced by economists and economic advisors who were sympathetic to and proponents of this nascent human capital theory. As Melinda Cooper demonstrates in her telling of this history, "By 1960, then, some combination of [Theodore] Schultz's human capital theory and Musgravian public finance economics had become the received wisdom among representatives of the Council of Economic Advisers, and it was this institution in particular that can be credited with inspiring President [Lyndon B.] Johnson's astonishing commitment to public education."[9] Johnson's landmark Higher Education Act "doubled the federal budget for higher education, and imparted a coherent vision of

[7] Gary S. Becker. *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*. New York: National Bureau of Economic Research; Columbia University Press, 1964), 1.
[8] Theodore W. Schultz. "Investment in Human Capital." The American Economic Review, Mar., 1961, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Mar., 1961), 1.
[9] Melinda Cooper. *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 222.

democratic inclusion to the sector as a whole."[10] One problem, as we look back retrospectively at this promising moment, is that championing "human capital"—as tied to higher education—as the preferential path to take towards accomplishing economic equity, and in effect reducing poverty, has failed to be comprehensive. As John Marsh has argued, despite the century long and ongoing commitment to education broadly and higher education specifically, the United States remains an unequal society that a more democratic access to education has failed to ameliorate. So even if "education pays," and it does, one should question whether what might help one individual achieve economic success is enough to help an entire country—or even a community.[11]

Eventually even this liberal funding of higher education came to a halt as reactionary politicians such as Ronald Reagan, citing the 1960's civil unrest and its ties to the university, began to draw back its funding. As Christopher Newfield reminds us: "Conservative elites who had been threatened by the postwar rise of the college-educated economic majority…put that majority back in its place. Their roundabout weapon has been the culture wars on higher education in general, and on progressive cultural trends in the public universities that create and enfranchise the mass middle class."[12] Although led on a cultural front, these attacks found their grounding in the stripping down of progressive economic policies such as tuition free college and Pell Grants that had enabled the financially burden-free attendance of low income and minority students. No longer was higher education significantly subsidized by the government. Students and their families now had to take on the financial burden that would eventually be defined by

[10] Ibid.
[11] John Marsh. *Class Dismissed: Why We Cannot Teach or Learn Our Way Out of Inequality*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 67.
[12] Christopher Newfield. *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-year Assault on the Middle Class*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 5.

crushing student debt. The purchasing power of Pell Grants was increasingly replaced by the predatory credit system of student loans that appeared to continue to give democratic access to education but ultimately saddled students with debt that stunted their financial security and mobility.[13] Despite the withering of these progressive economic policies of the "human capital" ideology, as Jon Shelton demonstrates in his book, *The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy*, the ideology persisted even as students now took on more of the financial burden of attending university: "While Reagan's presidency shrunk the promise of American social democracy, it did not arrest the growth of the notion that *investing in education* could serve the alchemical purpose of ensuring all Americans had the equal opportunity to compete in an uncertain world." (emphasis mine)[14] While this dissertation reads some fiction written during the "fall" of this "Golden Age," it does so with the understanding that the ideology of higher education as shaped by ideas of human capital persisted (and persists) past this period.[15]

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[13] Suzanne Mettler notes that "Early on, the average student received considerably more in grant aid than he or she borrowed in loans—five times as much in 1975-1976, for example. By the mid-1980's, however, students typically borrowed at least as much as they received in grant aid, and loans and grants have remained at comparable levels ever since." And, "To make up the difference in paying their tuition bills, students took advantage of increased borrowing leniency and took on greater amounts of debt in order to attend college, a trend that has continued since then. As of the 2010 school year, average student loan debt at graduation was $22,011 among borrowers who obtained degrees at four-year public universities, up from $12,157 in 1992, in 2010 dollars." See Mettler, *Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream*. (New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2014), 52-53.

[14] Jon Shelton. *The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy*. (Ithaca [New York]: Cornell University Press, 2023), 122.

[15] One example of this persistence akin to "the education myth" is "the education gospel," a term Tressie McMillan Cottom uses to explain people's faith-like pursuit of high-risk education which she calls "Lower Ed." In the same way we might, falsely, believe in myths, we do the same with faith: "Lower Ed is the subsector of high-risk post-secondary schools and colleges that are part of the same system as the most elite institutions. In fact, Lower Ed can exist precisely because elite Higher Ed does. The latter legitimizes the education gospel while the former absorbs all

This dissertation offers an account of how certain academic fiction(s) engaged, reflected and at times disavowed these ideological notions of "human capital" and its promises of economic mobility during this postwar period as made possible by the "Golden Age" of the American university. Critical to this dissertation's intervention on the study of academic fiction is how it is influenced by and builds on Mark McGurl's seminal *The Program Era.* Citing the overwhelming exponential growth of the postwar American university, McGurl asks us to consider just how impactful the institution of the university was (and is) for American literary production:

> But the fact is that, at least insofar as we remain interested in literature per se, the rise of mass higher education in the postwar period might well claim an *objective priority* over all these other elements of socio-historical and political context, if only in the literal sense that it is something we should account for first if we are to understand postwar American literature in genuinely historical materialist terms. This is so not because it is either inherently or ultimately more important than the rest, but because *the university has been the indispensable and all but omnipresent institutional mediator of the relation between postwar text and postwar context*. (emphasis mine)[16]

The "postwar context" for this dissertation are higher education's ties to the emergent notion of "human capital" and its "postwar texts" are academic fictions. Crucially, however, this dissertation pays particular attention to academic fictions it names "campus peripheries" as they

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manner of vulnerable groups who believe in it: single mothers, downsized workers, veterans, people of color, and people transitioning from welfare to work." See Cottom, *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-profit Colleges in the New Economy*. (New York: The New Press, 2017), 10-11.

[16] Mark McGurl. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009.), 284.

address the issues found in education discourse about human capital, economic mobility, "minority" status, inclusion/ exclusion, individual achievement, and community service. These "campus peripheries" can be understood as academic fictions because despite lying outside of the bounds of the campus proper, they tell a story about the American university. Indeed, whereas academic fictions have previously been understood exclusively through the generic forms of campus and academic novels—the former centering student experiences and the latter the experiences of faculty—the forms that "campus peripheries" take on are distinct in that their appearance, length, and size often comprise parts of novels rather than their totality. A campus periphery in a novel can be a sentence, or a paragraph, or even a 1/5 of a novel, and can be found in novels that are not explicitly about the university, or even about education. But by taking up Mark McGurl's suggestion in *The Program Era* that all novels written in the postwar period can be considered campus novels (i.e., academic fictions) "of a sort," due to their intimate relationship to the site of the postwar university, this dissertation argues for understanding these moments in texts as academic fictions.

Through readings of these campus periphery moments in some key novels, this dissertation argues for a new way of understanding academic fiction and the indebtedness these novels and their authors have to American higher education in the postwar period when its centrality in American life was becoming more pronounced. If literary fiction can be understood as a site of artistic "truth-telling," I argue that these depictions differ from those in traditional academic fictions, such as campus novels, by offering a more well-rounded and honest portrayal of the postwar American university, a seemingly democratic and inclusive institution as shaped by progressive economic policies such as the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 and the Higher Education Act of 1965.

The first chapter, "From Yale to Dark Academia: Campus Novels, 'Campus Peripheries,' and the Stakes of Education," reviews conventional academic fiction and its criticism to show how this work has often failed to distinguish between two versions of this genre: student-centered campus novels and faculty-centered academic novels. I then show how "campus periphery" fiction—which largely borrows from campus novels—stages brief and thus peripheral moments that allude to and gesture towards the university's significance despite the seemingly small contribution these moments make to the overall narrative they appear within. As part of this overview, I also demonstrate the lack of serious attention that student-centered academic fictions have received despite their continuing popularity over the last several decades in other forms of media, such as television and film, up until present iterations of it in the internet "aesthetic" trend of "Dark Academia." To help accentuate the "campus periphery," and its literary importance, the chapter ends with a brief comparative analysis of *The Secret Histo*ry by Donna Tart and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. Arguably the quintessential American campus novel of the second half of the twentieth century *The Secret History* centers on student academic life and culture. By contrast, Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* only alludes to a college future (with no depiction of attendance) in a few sentences. Despite keeping the actual college campus on the periphery, Cisneros's novel, in contrast to Tartt's, makes the university central to its treatment of class mobility in the postwar era.

Chapter Two, "Education Fictions: Individuals and Community in the Shadow of the University" provides an extensive close reading, using the campus periphery lens, of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*. At the same time that American liberal leaders of the second half of the twentieth century tied higher education's power of uplift to the idea that national economic growth would be spearheaded by the individual through their

development of "human capital," "minority" authors negotiated the social tensions that this path towards economic freedom presented to them and the communities from which they came. Acknowledging the importance of higher education in an economy and market that presented it as the viable path towards freedom and mobility, minority authors also understood the inherent shortcomings the university posed to a group of people who not so long ago suffered from the nation's more overt practices of racism and disenfranchisement. Edana Franklin in *Kindred* and Grant Wiggins in *A Lesson Before Dying* are both college graduates who contend with how their distinguished status as college-educated individuals fails to ameliorate the stagnancies of their racial "communities."

The third and final chapter, "Expelled: On the Outskirts of the Ivory Tower" focuses on expulsion as a campus periphery instance that authors use to show the exclusionary tendencies of the American university during its postwar democratic turn. I first frame my discussion of these exclusions through highlighting the inclusive nature of conventional academic fiction, represented by John William's *Stoner*, an established campus/ academic novel. I then turn to the protagonists of John Okada's *No-No Boy* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* to show that despite being expelled, these former university students continue to uphold the promises of the university, a misguided affect indicative of the growing gravitational power of the postwar American university. This chapter ends with a reading of Junot Diaz's contemporary Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, to raise the question of whether campus periphery forms persist as the United States inches towards becoming a majority "minority" nation.

From Yale to Dark Academia: Campus Novels, "Campus Peripheries," and the Stakes of Education

Dark Academia as a Stylistic Progeny of Campus Novels

At the same time much of the world receded into isolation in the early Spring of 2020 due to the burgeoning effects of a once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic, an "aesthetic" rose and spread throughout the pages of the internet labeled "dark academia."[1] This "dark academia" aesthetic, contrary to what its name might suggest, was far from being a critique of the "dark" or negative side of contemporary academia. Rather, this aesthetic embraced a certain way of doing academia (or at least an imagined, and often nostalgia-laced, way of doing it)—black coffee, tweed jackets, gothic architecture, dimly lit rooms, beat poetry, existentialist thought, Old English Universities, and ancient canonical books, to name a few of its many interests. An online trend led primarily by Generation-Z teenagers and young adults, dark academia's enthusiasts re-shared images that encapsulated this aesthetic and posted personal videos emulating the fashion on social media sites like YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram and TikTok. Akin to others facing the ascending global pandemic, these enthusiasts met the dwindling of social and public life with an immersion into an internet sub-community. Or, as Amal Abdi put it in an article published at the peak of the trend: "dark academia [provided] a dreamy digital substitute for all the students whose plans for

[1] Although I had heard of this term in passing, I didn't gauge its full relevance in relation to academic fiction until I began to teach my course on the topic in the Spring of 2023. Leading up to the start of the course I was asked to name it "Dark Academia" as a way of attracting enrollment. I chose to call it "'Novel' Perspectives on the University" instead, a name which was more fitting for what I intended to teach. The term came up again in the first week of class as some students informed me of their interest in the course based on the social media trend that arose during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. I was happy with my decision to name the course the way that I did, but I do wonder what other kinds of attention it would have invited had I included "Dark Academia" in the title in some form.

further education and freedom [were] paused by the pandemic."[2] As I began to teach my course on academic fiction in the Spring Quarter of 2023, I couldn't help being intrigued by what appeared to me a cultural interest and exploration of higher education. This was especially relevant because my students had just lived through approximately two years of online learning, making them prime members of the dark academia demographic given their age and social situations. Reading more on this topic I quickly learned that one of the novels we were engaging later in the quarter, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt (1992), was at the top of the reading list for those drawn and interested in this dark academia aesthetic. And to my pleasant surprise, a good portion of my students registered for the course precisely because it promised to expose them to similar texts.

The Secret History by Donna Tartt is arguably the quintessential American campus novel of the second half of the twentieth century. Its intellectual, moody, secretive, and wealthy college characters, often dressed in black and expensive wear, and found reading and conversing in Greek, have served as the basis of inspiration for many of dark academia's college aged acolytes. Numerous Instagram posts and YouTube videos have been devoted to speaking at length about the role this novel has played in the formation of the aesthetic, which is seen by many as one of the ur-texts of the movement (and its most consequential novel).[3] Primarily an aesthetic rooted in visual elements given the dissemination of its contents, however, the online community also cites

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[2] Amal Abdi. "Dark Academia is the Viral TikTok Trend That's Perfect for Fall." *Refinery29*. Last Modified October 8, 2020. https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/10/10079305/dark-academia-aesthetic-tiktok-trend.

[3] Rowan Ellis. "The Problem with Dark Academia," YouTube video, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfkYXVdkUEE; The Take. "What Dark Academia Says About Elite Education," YouTube video, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_inuS6Kcwq4&t=22s;
The Book Leo. "the ultimate guide to dark academia books," YouTube Video, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MC88ehQ14c4

films like *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and *Kill Your Darlings* (2013) as sources of inspiration for the fashion and look of their styles. The constant theme that runs through most of these internet cosplays is the romanticization of higher education as imagined on elite liberal arts college campuses. Commuting for an hour to your state school from your parents' home or attending night classes at your local community college is far from what this community fantasizes as the ideal collegiate experience (even if some from the same group bemoan the lack of "realism" many of these novels and films have).[4] Noteworthy as well, despite the ongoing devaluation of the humanities across universities, the aesthetic prioritizes the idolization of literature, art, history, classics, and other humanistic fields. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine that many of those who participate in this speculative and fantastical cosplay of higher education do so as an alternative to a system that demands their adherence to a market where certain fields or majors might promise more economic advantages and opportunities over others. Given recent studies on life expectancy and quality of life as tied to levels of post-secondary education, this worry is not unfounded even if perhaps exaggerated.[5] [6] So while one might be dissuaded from majoring in English or Philosophy due to the fear of ending up a Starbucks barista, one can certainly post safe cosplays about embodying these humanistic fields on social media sites. That a business

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[4] Kate Dwyer. "Is the Campus Novel Dead?" *Esquire*, 2023. https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/a45894579/campus-novel-dead/.

[5] Anne Case and Angus Deaton detail the stark life expectancies between those with a college degree and those without one in their chapter "The Lives and (Deaths) of the More and Less Educated" in *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. To be sure, their study is limited due to their demographic constraints, amongst other factors, but it nonetheless corroborates studies identifying the wealth gap between those with a college degree versus those without one.

[6] Exaggerated because a college degree—regardless of the major—still offers more earnings over one's lifetime when compared to just a high-school degree. See, "Earnings of Humanities Majors with a Terminal Bachelor's Degree." *Humanities Indicators*. https://www.amacad.org/humanities-indicators/workforce/earnings-humanities-majors-terminal-bachelors-degree.

major continues to be one of the most popular degrees across the country is further representative of this aversion to degrees and fields that might not be "worth" the time, energy and money one pays to attend college.

Yet despite being catalyzed by a once in a lifetime global pandemic—an event categorically deserving of isolation measures and practices of internet and media escapism—the glorification and idealization of campus life is not a new phenomenon.[7] Although the college-educated have always been met with some level of suspicion, they have also been met with admiration and intrigue for the cultural and economic signifiers their degrees and experiences carry. This particular interest in Ivy League and Oxford-like liberal arts collegiate education can be seen as a stylistic extension of the campus novel category of academic fiction, centered on the perspective of students, critics have called "dappled quads."[8] As Merritt Mosely writes, "dappled quads" are constructed to be "redolent of nostalgia for the beauties and ineffable subtleties of undergraduate life, almost always at Oxford, Cambridge, or, if American, an Ivy League university." He goes on to write that:

> historically, and by powerful convention, dappled quads are found in novels about Oxford, Cambridge, and the Ivy League. *Thus the topic itself, and the romantic attitudes it evokes, and the special language in which it is presented, contrive, like the quadrangle*

[7] And "Dark Academia" itself, though dramatically rising and peaking during the heights of the pandemic, had earlier phases in niche internet spaces. According to Simone Murray, "The characteristically platform-agnostic DA scene emerged first on blogging website Tumblr around 2014, then migrated to surging social-media rival Twitter, shifted again around 2017 to image-centric platforms Pinterest and Instagram, before reconvening on the then-booming micro-video platform TikTok, where it was "discovered" in the digital wild." See Murray, "Dark Academia: Bookishness, Readerly Self-Fashioning and the Digital Afterlife of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*." *English Studies*, Vol. 104, No. 2, 347-364. (2023), 347-348.

[8] If we subscribe to Jefferey Williams' observation that campus novel narratives were absorbed by film in the second half of the twentieth century, then we can also posit that the contemporary Instagram and TikTok wave of "dark academia" is another arm of this visual media formatting.

> *itself, a privileged enclosure*. Reading about them presumably can give the actual Oxford/ Cambridge/ Ivy League undergraduate the pleasures of nostalgia. The *vastly large readership made up of outsiders* becomes eligible for the same kind of satisfaction that the thousands of tourists visiting Oxford seek. Those tourists can enter the colleges during limited hours; they can see the halls but not climb the staircases, perhaps visit the dining halls when the meals are not being served, walk around the quadrangles but not across them." (emphasis added)[9]

Moseley correctly identifies the differences between reading about elite colleges and attending them, and the affects that might draw outsiders towards these selective institutions, whether that involves visiting them or reading about them in fiction. Still, that one can enjoy the imaginaries these academic fictions provide does not entail belonging to or benefiting from these elite universities. Writing for *Avidly* on the topic of "dark academia" Ana Quiring posits another perspective to this insider/ outsider dynamic. While Quiring is sympathetic to the criticisms many have leveraged at dark academia—mainly its pedestaling of euro-centric and elite characteristics, as well as its romanticization of mental illness—she nonetheless argues for the democratizing power of the social media trend, stating that: "it democratizes [the trappings and texts of the Western canon] by making them available as fashion. Though you might not be able to attend private boarding school, you can listen to Chopin, read Waugh, and buy scuffed black brogues from the thrift store."[10] And, furthermore, given the ability of practitioners to stylize their fashion and "aesthetic" however they choose, while still operating under the umbrella of

[9] Merritt Moseley. *The Academic Novel: New and Classic Essays*. (Chester: Chester Academic Press, 2007), 100-103.
[10] Ana Quiring. "What's Dark about Dark Academia" *Avidly*, Los Angeles Review of Books. 2021. https://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2021/03/31/whats-dark-about-dark-academia/

dark academia, allows for the disruptive potential of the trend. For example, a popular influencer of dark academia on TikTok challenges the eurocentrism of the online trend as a young black Muslim woman who shares non-western texts and styles. If per Mosely, reading about and visiting Ivy Leagues offers a welcoming glimpse into the lifestyle, then for Quiring, cosplaying the lifestyle on social media sites further advances a sense of belonging and even has democratizing potential for all those (the majority) who cannot attend.

Still, one should be wary of these claims, for while having fun and being creative in the age of digital media can be harmless, it should not be mistaken for the socio-economic advantages afforded to those who *do* attend elite universities such as Oxford and Harvard. As Christopher Findeisen has shown in his critique of Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*, it is critical to discern when palliative measures of inclusion don't replace concrete material gains in the context of higher education, especially because "during the past sixty years or so, the higher-educational system has been one of America's most effective technologies for sustaining the ideology of equal opportunities, and it has done this by orchestrating a myth of systemic inclusion—the incorporation of populations, behaviors, and academic disciplines that give the illusion of equality—while class stratification has become worse."[11] A mythos of "systemic inclusion" might look like university syllabi that champions diverse voices—while still excluding much of the poor from its classrooms—but it can also look like trivially assigning democratic ideals to online trends. That the university has the power and gravity to invite these forms of illusions can be read as symptomatic of what Jon Shelton, in his recent study, has called "the education myth" surrounding American higher education that arose in the second half of the

[11] Christopher Findeisen. "Injuries of Class: Mass Education and the American Campus Novel." *PMLA* 130, no. 2 (2015): 284–98. P. 295.

twentieth century, where "building human capital through education represented the best, and increasingly, the only way for Americans to access economic opportunity."[12] Dark Academia, even at its most promising, might just be a contemporary creative iteration of the relatively recent myth that upholds the university (and education) as a democratizing institution in a society that has de-prioritized, and sometimes fully abandoned, other avenues of reducing wealth disparity.

But if Dark Academia is, as I claim, only a contemporary iteration of the "education myth," other instances of this myth in history are worth attending, particularly as they relate to the growth and evolution of academic fiction, of which Dark Academia's stylistic leanings can be read as belonging to, during the last century. In the sections that follow I'll attend to how the site of the campus propagates "education myths" through a review of select academic fiction and their accompanying criticisms. Through this reading, this section will also trace a lineage that begins with early campus novels up until its "dark academia" progeny. I'll then turn to introducing and expanding upon this dissertation's critical notion of "campus peripheries" and how these moments also act as derivatives of the genre's literary stylings and lineage. Finally, to accentuate this critical notion of the "campus periphery," I'll read the established campus novel, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, alongside a novel I argue is representative of "campus peripheries," *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, as they represent economic mobility.

From Yale to Dark Academia

[12] Jon Shelton. *The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy*. (Ithaca [New York]: Cornell University Press, 2023), 2.

Academic fictions that center student experiences differ significantly from those that center faculty. This section will provide an overview that leans towards the "campus novel"/ student side, which are often happy-go-lucky coming-of-age narratives. Academic novels, on the other hand, tend to be more satirical, morose, and center middle class adult experiences.[13] To be sure, their combined literary history doesn't always reflect the view's that American society, or its government, had about education. For example, in the first half of the twentieth century, the federal government and other country leaders did not position education as an important vessel for economic growth and opportunity. For the popular academic fictions that appeared during this time—in this case, campus novels—the sites of higher education were often represented as playgrounds for the wealthy for whom economic superiority was already a given as their access to such institutions neatly reflected their class positions.[14] And if an "education" was being received, it had little to do with academics or with providing "skills" for students to join the evolving workforce. Institutions outside of higher education, both formal and informal, provided these services. In essence, academic fictions—whether those recently imagined by Dark Academia through their social media mediums, or as seen with the proliferation of the campus novel in the early moments of the twentieth century—position the campus as a space ripe for mythmaking, educational or otherwise.

In a reading of how literature mobilizes one of these "myths," Travis M. Foster identifies the campus novel in the period after the Civil War as a symbolic vehicle for white reconciliation accomplished via fictional practices of college fraternity and camaraderie. In these novels, the extracurriculars of college life are highlighted and favored because this is where the true learning

[13] Although both have exceptions.
[14] "Injuries of Class," 286.

and growing occur: "In valuing 'college life' over book learning and native intelligence over rote memorization, campus novels suggest the civic qualities of a college degree come about through relaxed sociality rather than the acquisition of any particular knowledge."[15] An irony of these texts, which Foster acknowledges, is that while the campus novel might have been celebrating civic qualities and attempting to create a more "robust national identity," few Americans (~5%) actually went to college, undermining its democratic ideals. And perhaps more detrimentally for the time, these campus novels imagined a "newly reconciled world in which opposition to re-subjugation [found] itself removed from political discourse."[16] For Foster, the fictionalized democratic ideal of friendship aided white reconciliation by being conducted at the expense of Reconstruction. Here, the myth that academic fiction invites is that of a country moving democratically forward in fraternity, despite the nations deeply unequal society that continued to subjugate the formerly enslaved. To be sure, the myths of democracy academic fiction invited at the turn of the twentieth century were certainly more perverse than the ones social media enthusiasts might push today in their attempt to create an idealized collegiate experience. But the American campus as a space that invites and propagates faulty ideals of democracy and inclusion, then and now, should be noted, even if the circumstances are different.

Although Jon Shelton's main interest in explicating his notion of the "education myth" lies in attending to the ideologies and policies that shaped higher education following World War II, he also offers some background as to what higher education was imagined to accomplish prior to that pivotal moment in American education. For example, in the first third of the twentieth century (and for much of American history, though with varying degrees and directions),

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[15] Travis M Foster. "Campus Novels and the Nation of Peers." *American Literary History* 26, no. 3 (2014): 462–83. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43817650. P. 466
[16] Ibid.

American leaders and reformers primarily saw the role of education as one meant to provide citizenship training. Progressive intellectual John Dewey thought investing in education would democratize American politics by helping students develop independent "civic" and "political" capabilities, and labor leader Margaret Haley envisioned the role of teachers as stewards of teaching citizenship and democracy for the public at large (and crucially, teachers could only accomplish this if they demanded respect as teachers through organizing).[17] Notions of citizenship training during this era also carried with them negative associations when influenced by feelings of nativism and nationalism. Reacting to the increasing number of European immigrants some education reformers thought education could assimilate the children of the foreign born, and in doing so "Americanize" them. Indeed, Travis Foster's identification of campus novels as sites of American citizenship building—and the consequences of this thinking—aligns with what country leaders imagined education to do during the same period, though his analysis was relegated to institutions of higher education as imagined in fiction rather than public education. Furthermore, as Foster notes, this higher education and cultural landscape produced a social practice feedback loop in which: "undergraduates and preundergraduates learned in part how to become college students and interact within college social networks precisely by becoming familiar with a novelistic genre…"[18] That is, fictional renderings were received and viewed as educational materials for a class of students who were otherwise uninterested in actual academic study. In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, the importance of identifying the purpose(s) of education through different eras becomes increasingly relevant as

[17] *The Education Myth*, 32.
[18] "Campus Novels and the Nation of Peers," 467.

"the education myth" that Shelton identifies becomes engrained and codified in American life in the postwar period.

Amid these discourses about education's purpose, it is difficult to imagine, or even find examples of, academic fiction that don't take up the question of "learning" or "teaching." Even when, as Foster and others have identified, the campus novel genre is predicated on the irony of detesting formal and institutional instruction, academic fiction still believes itself to be a model of and for forms of education as its campus settings are inherently pedagogical. A pivotal shift in relation to this occurs right around the end of Foster's timeline of the early campus novel (~1910). As Foster recounts, F. Scott Fitzgerald's campus novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920) alludes to this question of "learning" as obtained from academic fiction, and mediated through the university, when the protagonist Armory Blaine cites *Stover at Yale* by Owen Johnson (1912) as educational inspiration: "He read voluminously all spring, the beginning of his eighteenth year…*Stover at Yale*, that became somewhat of a textbook…" [19]*Stover at Yale* was the last novel Foster used to demonstrate American citizenship building, and the novel accomplished this by quelling the threat of socialism through benign friendship.[20] Beyond continuing to identify the threads between the institution of the university and the consequential "myths" it enacted, the transition between these two novels and how one influences the other is good for marking the next shift I want to highlight. Not only does *This Side of Paradise* cite one of the last campus novels invested in Foster's identification of citizenship building as a "textbook," it also emerges as an important novel in its own right in the history of the genre. As John Lyons puts it, *This Side of Paradise* is "the first attempt in American novels of college life to describe an intellectual

[19] F. Scott Fitzgerald. *This Side of Paradise*. P.29
[20] "Campus Novels and the Nation of Peers," 476.

awakening, and for this reason it might be said that [it] is the first American novel of education."[21]

This observation, coming from John Lyons, was a significant one as Lyons, in this same study of the "college novel," had lamented that "A study of the novel of academic life in America must inevitably be concerned more with the history of the novel as a literary form and social document than with genius."[22] Lyons certainly felt this way about most of the "college novels" his study took up, which ran the chronological course of over a century, starting with Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Fanshawe* (1828) and ending with *Riverside Drive* by Louis Simpson (1962). Many developments in the genre have occurred since 1962. Contrary to Lyons prediction that the market of these novels was "saturated" and that we should only expect about "an average of four new college novels each year," the opposite has been true as academic fiction of all stripes, on par with postwar university enrollment, has grown at fast rate (though the campus novel's growth has seen more of a plateau).[23] Lyons, as an academic studying works purportedly about higher education, was justified to bemoan the genre's seeming lack of seriousness. These early campus novels tended to be about young white men, often from Harvard or other private eastern-based universities, and their trials and tribulations surrounding sports such as football, trouble with alcohol and romances with girls (with a strange emphasis on the sisters of their friends). A good portion of *Stover at Yale*, for example, is concerned more with sports than with education—two areas of university life which continue to be pitted against each other to this day,

[21] John O. Lyons. *The College Novel in America*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), 28.
[22] *The College Novel in America*, xii.
[23] Ibid, 180.

particularly as the business of sports has overtaken spaces of learning.[24] Many scenes of the novel depict thorough, sometimes exhaustingly so, depictions of the act of playing football, making it out to be the "thing" in the novel. Nowhere is this clearer than in an early line where Dink Stover says to himself, as he walks onto Yale's football field for one of the first times: "The goal was his—the goal of Yale—and, underfoot at last, the field more real to him than Waterloo or Gettysburg!"[25] Achieving success on the football field, for Stover, is akin to some of history's more iconic battle scenes. Although this might seem to be a bit farfetched (equating war with sports), the truth is that this sentiment aligned with ideals of masculinity during this period that positioned a college education as a site for cultivating "culture and character" for white middle-class men.[26] The goal Stover is seeking in the novel is that of becoming liked by his peers through excellence in football and social life, but not in academics. There is a certain optimism, excitement and naivete found in these campus novels given the young age, and point in life, of their protagonists. Campus novels, as opposed to academic novels which are told from the perspective of the stereotyped depressing faculty, are more palatable for this reason, as they work on and resemble the model of the bildungsroman. The mistakes, anxious thinking, and even the self-aggrandizing of these characters can be forgiven because they're young and college serves to protect and nourish their admittedly messy development.[27]

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[24] William C. Dowling. *Confessions of a Spoilsport: My Life and Hard Times Fighting Sports Corruption at an Old Eastern University*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.
[25] Owen Johnson. *Stover at Yale*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1931. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/46674/46674-h/46674-h.htm), 46.
[26] Daniel A Clark. *Creating the College Man: American Mass Magazines and Middle-class Manhood, 1890-1915*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 7.
[27] Although of course, this "forgiving" nature that universities can cultivate can also prove to have negative consequences, as the first pages of Bret Easton Ellis's contemporary campus novel, *The Rules of Attraction,* shows.

Still, as Lyons notes, advances on the genre occur with the publication of Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise.* The intellectual awakening that Lyons describes happens when Amory Blaine finds himself on Princeton's campus contemplating and questioning his reading tastes after encountering a like-minded peer. After a conversation in which they trade reading recommendations, the student, Thomas Parke D'Invilliers, invites him upstairs to his room—suggesting an enlightenment—to let Amory borrow some books. Amory leaves with "a heterogeneous mixture" of Wilde, Yeats, Chesterton, Keats, Suderman, to name a few, and "suddenly discovers that he had read nothing for years."[28] To be sure, even if the setting of the university breeds contemplations about intellectual pursuits it does not mean that students, and in this case Amory, are in any way attached to the formal education provided by these universities. Indeed, soon after, Amory admits to not trying hard in his classes because fields of study such as psychology "proved to be a dull subject full of muscular reactions and biological phrases rather than the study of personality and influence."[29] For Amory, the study and understanding of "personality" and "influence" is of more importance for a young man attempting to impress his peers in the setting of the elite Princeton (an impulse inherited from *Stover at Yale's* Dink). Compare Amory's dismissal of "dull" university subjects against how he talks about the mystique of the university as he sees it embodied in its architecture and campus: "He liked knowing that Gothic architecture, with its upward trend, was peculiarly appropriate to universities, and the idea became personal to him. The silent stretches of green, the quiet halls with an occasional late-burning scholastic light held his imagination in strong grasp, and the chastity of the spire became a symbol of this perception."[30] Appearances, then, are valued more

[28] *This Side of Paradise*, 45
[29] Ibid, 57.
[30] Ibid.

than substance. The advancement of an "idea"—a myth—of what educational experiences look like (or *should*/ *can* look like) is what the campus novel genre does well, and it is also what its offspring of dark academia continues to practice. The young adult, and now more diverse, demographic is still invested in romanticizing the educational coming of age experience, albeit through different mediums of expression.

Academic fiction isn't solely occupied with the point of view of students as it also focuses on other members of the university such as faculty, staff, and administrators. Critics label this category of academic fiction "academic novels." What campus novels and academic novels share is their use of "an American institution of higher education as a crucial part of their total setting."[31] The campus setting enables the cloistered and secluded feeling given off by academic fiction as it reflects its "Ivory Tower" tropes of elitism. That this seclusion—meant to act as a haven—can sometimes produce bouts of hysteria is dramatized in Tartt's *The Secret History*:

> Hampden College, as a body, was always strangely prone to hysteria. Whether from isolation, malice, or simply boredom, people there were far more credulous and excitable than educated people are generally believed to be, and this hermetic, overheated atmosphere made it a thriving black petri dish of melodrama and distortion. I remember well, for instance, the blind animal terror which ensued when some townie set off the civil defense sirens as a joke. Someone said it was a nuclear attack; TV and radio reception, never good there in the mountains, happened to be particularly bad that night, and in the ensuing stampede for the telephones the switchboard shorted out, plunging the

[31] Kramer, John E. *The American College Novel: An Annotated Bibliography, 2nd ed*. (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2004), v.

> school into a violent and almost unimaginable panic…Though the world, in fact, was not destroyed, everyone had a marvelous time and people spoke fondly of the events for years afterwards.[32]

Here, the "townie," meant to stand in as a low-class intruder to the campus, creates chaos within an otherwise "serious" institution of higher education given the "hermetic" and isolating features which define it. Still, depending on whom you ask, these barriers enacted against outside forces can be construed as a strength of the university's world. While my work is primarily interested in the campus novel (which is to say student) side of academic fiction, I also consider the parallel historical trajectories shared by both the campus and academic novel as they coincide with the expansion of American higher education. Yet it's important to not conflate the two, which much of the criticism about academic fiction has tended to do (and continues to do), because "this conflation…misses the important historical shift of higher education from a liberal arts to a professional institution."[33] This is a shift that others in critical university studies have identified when bemoaning the corporatization, neo-liberalization, or instrumentalization of the American university.[34]

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[32] *The Secret History*, 378-379.

[33] Eric Leuschner. "Body Damage: Dis-Figuring the Academic in Academic Fiction." (*Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*) (2006), 339.

[34] Bill Readings, in *The University in Ruins*, laments this transition, claiming that "The University…no longer participates in the historical project for humanity that was the legacy of the Enlightenment: the historical project of culture," with "culture," as I understand it, being a stand in for "liberal arts." See Readings and Diane Elam. *The University in Ruins*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 5; Although, of course, others have argued against this nostalgia for a pre-neo-liberal university. For example, when it comes to the G.I. Bill, "Almost invariably, however, this story [of yearning for the past] neglects the ways this [postwar] expansion was underwritten by militarized funding priorities, nationalist agendas, and an incorporative project of counterinsurgency." See the co-authored "Abolitionist University Studies: An Invitation." P. 5.

Jefferey Williams, via utilizing John E. Kramer's extensive bibliography documenting both campus and academic novels, provides a Franco Moretti-inspired graph and analysis of the trajectory and rise of these novels. While the "campus novel," that is, a novel dealing with the experiences of students, flourished in the first half of the twentieth century, the "academic novel," that is, a novel dealing with the point of view of faculty and staff, rose in the second half. As Williams puts it: "Parallel to the way in which the campus novel grafted with the bildungsroman and became a prime theater of coming of age, the academic novel has grafted with the mid-life crisis novel, the marriage novel, and the professional-work novel to become a prime theater of middle-class experience."[35] An early exemplar of this in the postwar period is Mary McCarthy's novel *The Groves of Academe* (1952). The first few lines introduce us to Henry Mulcahy, "a middle-aged instructor of literature" who is irritated at having to manage a heavy teaching load amongst his other professorial responsibilities.[36] This stock image of the middle-aged (often male) crisis-ridden faculty member most immediately defines the genre of the academic novel in the second half of the century. Indeed, the whole of McCarthy's novel can be seen as an exercise in displaying the grumblings of faculty and administrators at a small liberal arts college. What academic novels like McCarthy's do well is envision a world where the borders of the campus reign supreme, disinviting all outsiders. Towards the end of the novel, at an on-campus poetry conference, the invited poets all find it hard to get to the campus as planned, arriving via their own routes and at their own times: "Yet the poets, as usual at such affairs, elected to display their individualism and their freedom from the trammels of the academic by ignoring the train suggested and arriving by diverse routes and at different hours of

[35] Jeffrey J Williams. "The Rise of the Academic Novel." *American Literary History* 24, no. 3 (2012): 561–89. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23249750), 562.
[36] Mary McCarthy. *The Groves of Academe*. (New York, New York.: Signet Books, 1963), 11.

the day."[37] The novel credits their campus disorientation to their inherent nature as poets, but I would argue that the campus itself serves as a disinviting, almost mythical setting, that is by all accounts difficult to enter. Even though academic novels begin to leave the campus setting more frequently, their continued reliance on the campus as a critical space for their narratives is something they share with campus novels—and because of this, as Leuschner notes, there is room for conceptualizing the academic novel as an evolved version of the campus novel, rather than seeing them as totally separate entities.

To return to William's graph, higher student enrollment following World War II did not produce a big increase in "campus novels" in the same way it did with academic novels. William's explanation for this is that the mediums of film and television absorbed these student narratives during the mid-century with popular campus films such as *The Paper Chase* (1973), *Animal House* (1978), and *Good Will Hunting* (1997). Dark Academia's recent rise gives credibility to this theory of visual media absorbing campus novel narratives as it is an overwhelming digital media phenomenon. And interestingly, there is suggestive evidence that dark academia's ur-text *The Secret History* was at least partially inspired by a television miniseries adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*.[38] Dramatizing youthful exuberance in film, or television, might prove easier to do than dramatizing the solitary working hours of faculty.[39] Another explanation for this might be rooted in a surface level observation, which is that writers of the academic novel write from the perspective of faculty and other staff. Students go to school for a few years before heading into the "real" world, but for faculty and

[37] *The Groves of Academe,* 219.
[38] "Dark Academia: Bookishness, Readerly Self-Fashioning and the Digital Afterlife of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History,"* 355.
[39]Although as time progresses it might be the case that visual media absorbs all considering social media's overwhelming presence in daily life.

other staff, the campus is the real world as it is their place of work. So even if over time there are more students, those whose lives revolve more significantly around the university campus have more reasons to write about it. John William's 1965 academic novel *Stoner* illustrates this reason (and the institutional shift from a liberal arts to a professional institution) as it begins as a campus novel before fully immersing itself into an academic novel.[40] Its protagonist, William Stoner, enters college at the turn of the twentieth century to study agriculture where he hopes to obtain the tools and practices (later to be understood as "human capital") that might help his parent's modest farm. While there, however, Stoner falls in love with literature, and under the mentorship of his challenging teacher and mentor, Archer Sloane, continues his studies in the university's Literature graduate program. Eventually, Stoner receives his Masters and Doctorate degrees and remains in the school as a professor until his death. The undergraduate portion of the novel is less than a chapter long, and thus the novel structurally subsumes the "campus novel" narrative form it begins and teases with. In the spirit of its postwar contemporaries, *Stoner* deals with the themes of adultery, middle-age, petty bureaucratic grievances, and academic scandals, even though the setting takes place during and after the first World War. As *Stoner* illustrates, and to Jefferey William's point: "the academic novel has taken a more significant position because it has become a *major vehicle* for middle class, adult experience." (emphasis added)[41] The university professor in the postwar setting, for Williams, became an integral member of the middle class and therefore relatable to an American audience who themselves were increasingly becoming acquainted with higher education through their own attendance. The English professor Elaine Showalter's monograph on the topic, *Faculty Towers*, touches on this explanation when

[40] John Williams. *Stoner*. New York: New York Review of Books, 2006.
[41] "The Rise of the Academic Novel," 569.

she questions and answers: "Why is the academic novel my favorite literary genre? Maybe it's just narcissistic pleasure."[42] The criticism on academic fiction also tends to skew towards postwar faculty narratives, offering additional evidence of a "narcissistic," for lack of a better word, interest in these types of academic fictions.[43]

"Is the campus novel dead?"

The direction in which the genre of academic fiction (and its criticism) has leaned towards in the past few decades would suggest a "death" of the campus novel, or a withering of it at the very least (but perhaps a "splintering" would be a more apt description). Does Dark Academia's rise dispel this assumption, as imaginative renderings of the undergraduate collegiate experience continue to be produced, albeit through different mediums of expression beyond those of print and text? Or does social media's absorption of this genre signal its death, as it mass produces its content for algorithmic driven consumption? I would for argue for the former, as these renderings are done explicitly through the naming of their campus novel influences, and because they also romanticize undergraduate life in the same fashion campus novels have historically done. This serves as an explanation as to why both depictions have received negative, or little, criticism as their content might seem unserious. Furthermore, it would be uncontroversial to suggest, as others have, that Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* was influenced by a TV adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited,* which features campus settings and characters, while she was a student at Bennington College. That Dark Academia was in turn

[42] Elaine Showalter. *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 1.
[43] In addition to the Showalter's *Faculty Towers* and Moseley's collection of essays, see Womack, Kenneth. *Postwar Academic Fiction: Satire, Ethics, Community*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave, 2002.

influenced by Donna Tartt's novel is already well established. This web of influences is thus indicative of a shared genealogy.

A recent *Esquire* article by Kate Dwyer, titled "Is the campus novel dead?," also reveals how much interest the genre's life continues to invite, while being representative of the genre confusion its discourse continues to spur.[44] Dwyer offers an assessment and survey of the contemporary state of the "campus novel." While Dwyer does a good job at documenting important questions about what the genre can and cannot accomplish—can an elite form ever be inclusive? —she commits the same mistake many critics before her have done of conflating memoir, young adult fiction, campus novels, and academic novels, placing them all under the categorization of "campus novels." Although these all might have important points of overlap, the distinctions are crucial to maintain as a way of separating university coming-of-age narratives from those that might be more concerned with middle class or "adult" anxieties. These distinctions allow us to see what purposes the university might be imagined having, or serving, for different demographics and classes as shaped by their contexts. The university, for an undergraduate student, might be a transitionary place where they self-discover through the frivolous enjoyment of their youth. On the other hand, the university for a faculty member might represent the anxieties of professionalism and middle-life. Still, what Dwyer's continued act of conflation in her article makes clear is that there is an instability under which the genre has operated under in the past decades. If a memoir and young adult (YA) fiction (typically novels featuring younger characters and about boarding school and not higher education) can be thought of as belonging to the lineage of novels like *Stover at Yale*, then perhaps the genre is dead in the sense that it is incoherent as these are different genres (one is even non-fiction), with different

[44] "Is the campus novel dead?"

protagonists, altogether. Alternatively, the splinterings of the genre can be traced and analyzed for the novel perspectives that are being brought to a historically rigid form. In the same footnote in which Jefferey Williams says midcentury film adopted campus novel narratives, he also notes that these narratives "continued as an element in larger novels…" citing Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man* as an example.[45] I want to return to *Invisible Man* at length later in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, but suffice it to say that this aside by Williams is crucial for understanding one of the "splinterings" of the campus novel, the campus periphery, that is relevant for this dissertation's intervention on the genre of academic fiction.

Williams isn't alone in identifying the continuing element of academia in fiction in the postwar era. A more thorough, but somewhat subtle, account of academic fiction is Mark McGurl's seminal work *The Program Era*. I say subtle because McGurl's work isn't outright making an argument for understanding the historical nuances of academic fiction, let alone the campus or academic novel. Rather, McGurl's work asks us to consider fully the institution of the American university as an important site of fiction-making as codified by the rise and establishment of its Master in Fine Arts creative writing programs. Contrary to critiques of MFA writing programs as spaces that produce unoriginality and self-absorption, McGurl argues for the unique aesthetic influence of such programs—and by proxy the campus and pedagogical setting—on a diverse set of writers like Raymond Carver, Sandra Cisneros, N. Scott Momaday, Ken Kesey, and Maxine Hong Kingston. One would imagine that no genre is more poised to capture the institutionalization of creative writing programs in universities than the campus novel. And indeed, McGurl raises the possibility of analyzing the genre as such when he asks whether "all novels aspiring to the honorific status of literature [in the postwar period] must be

[45] "The Rise of the Academic Novel," 584.

considered campus novels *of a sort[?]*" (emphasis added)[46] However, McGurl's interest in the campus novel proper starts and ends at this tongue-in-cheek assertion. He even somewhat dismisses the genre as a thematic symptom of the proliferation of the university's influence on postwar writing, asking instead to see beyond its common setting: "how might we see the metafictional reflexivity of so much postwar fiction as being related to its production in and around a programmatically analytical and pedagogical environment?"[47] Building but also diverging from McGurl, this dissertation takes literally his provocation that we could read most, if not all, postwar novels as campus novels "of a sort." This might seem like a stretch if one narrowly understands the campus novel (or, for that matter, the "college" or "academic" novel) through setting and characters alone. But as Martin Paul Eve has suggested in his own study of what he sees as the competing cultural institutions of contemporary fiction and academia: "the academy is woven both more broadly and more deeply into the fabric of the contemporary literary fiction scene than might be supposed were an investigation *limited to works that focus on depictions of the university*"(emphasis added).[48] So instead of imposing the "campus novel" category to novels that might not neatly fit into the parameters of the form—and by doing so adding to the muddling of the discourse—I propose another way to approach fiction that is distinct but adjacent to academic fiction. In doing so, I also hope to offer one answer to the mystery of what happened to the campus novel in the latter half of the twentieth century by building upon Jefferey Williams footnote aside that identified the narrative trend as continuing in larger novels.

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[46] *The Program Era*, 47.
[47] Ibid, 47-48.
[48] Martin Paul Eve and Open Book Publishers. *Literature Against Criticism: University English and Contemporary Fiction in Conflict*. (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), 19.

Campus Peripheries

In the spirit of McGurl's provocation, this dissertation proposes the term "campus peripheries" as a way of conceptualizing both fiction, and moments in fiction, that are distinct but adjacent to academic fiction. These "campus periphery" moments act as extensions of the "campus" in a variety of its educational meanings. Contrary to what the liminal space of a periphery might suggest, however, these spaces are rich with illuminating notions of what postwar higher education meant to writers who were previously denied the opportunity of attending college, themselves peripheral to the larger American higher education project. And though they lack the formal features of campus novels (steady campus settings and characters), their adjacency to them by way of the influence of the campus offers a critical lens through which to read them. Travis Foster's work presents a method and model through which to read and identify these moments in fiction. His study on the early campus novel also takes note of the influence the university had on other postbellum fiction by more canonical American authors such as Stephen Crane and Henry James. Although these authors did not write campus novels, their fiction still managed to reflect how the late nineteenth and early twentieth century American campus represented a site of fraternity and "national reunion." Crane does this in *The Red Badge of Courage* by comparing a battle with a college football game (predating Stover). And James does this in *The Bostonians* by imagining a northern/ southern reconciliation taking place in a stroll through a Massachusetts campus. Even if these moments were "peripheral"—being no longer than a line or paragraph—to the larger narratives of the novels, they still managed to uphold the important cultural impact of college life on the national stage.[49] While I will apply a similar logic to postwar novels that I argue contain "campus periphery" moments,

[49] "The Campus Novel and a Nation of Peers," 469.

my study and focus differs in a significant way from other studies given that I do not attend to the cultural implications of a university education/experience. Instead, I attend to the implications of economic mobility that were increasingly associated with the degree attached to a university education, and how fiction dramatized this mobility.

Although my readings will diverge from a direct study of the "campus novel" proper, as my focus will be on other novels, it is worth considering how the campus novel might inform our understanding of novels containing campus periphery moments. That is: how can a genre that is explicit about its characteristics be transmutable to other novelistic forms that are not? If both kinds of fictions are invested in depicting American higher education, why does only one do so with explicit and visible characteristics of the academy? As I'll begin to argue in this remaining section, as well as in the following chapters, it is because for "minority" demographics, attending university represented a severing from their community even as it presented them—the individual—with economic opportunity. To attend the university, even if through fiction, would feel like abandoning the communities that they came from. To begin this line of reasoning, the remaining section reads *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt (1992) alongside *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros (1984). I chose these novels given their close publication dates, as well as the similarities their authors share. But I also chose Tartt specifically because of her novel's unique status as a unifying text between academic fiction and its current iterations in the space of social media as seen with Dark Academia. Both Tart and Cisneros were products of university educations and college writing programs, but their first novels were quite (at least on the surface) different from each other. Tart's, as mentioned in the first few pages of his chapter, is considered a major work in the genre of the campus novel—so much so that is considered the *ur*-text of the contemporary cultural phenomenon that acts as a stylistic progeny of the form.

While Cisnero's novel also had (and has) similar levels of prestige and attention upon its publication, particularly in the fields and studies of feminist and Chicanx letters, few would characterize the novel as having anything to do with the American campus. My line of reasoning, however, is that to understand the history of academic fiction—and by an admittedly tenuous proxy, American higher education— we would also have to contend with this novels and others like it role in the fluid genre. That is, if we were to only pay attention to campus novels like Tartt's that are explicit about their campus depictions, and only read these novels as informative about the American university, we run the risk of failing to account for fiction that was similarly invested in depicting the postwar American higher education project.

The Stakes of Higher Ed.

Although Gen-Z might idealize the gloomy aesthetics and the accompanying esoteric figures of Dark Academia's ur-text of *The Secret History*, it would be a mistake to think the book lends itself to this sort of admiration. Right from the beginning of the novel, in fact, the narrator and protagonist, Richard Papen, relates to his readers the trap he has fallen for, framing the tone of the narrative as a cautionary one: "Does such a thing as 'the fatal flaw,' that showy dark crack running down the middle of life, exist outside of literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: *a morbid longing for the picturesque* at all costs" (emphasis added).[50] For Richard this "morbid longing" is the fatal flaw that allows him to fall for the exclusive and wealthy clique of Classics students who end up aiding and abetting murder in a blind embodiment of their studies. A bit later, Richard relates to us his first encounter with Hampden College, the Vermont liberal arts university where the events of the novel unfold, in which he rediscovers a brochure of the college during his time at community college: "For a long

[50] *The Secret History*, 7.

time I looked at a picture of the building they called Commons. It was suffused with a weak, academic light—different from Plano [his California hometown], different from anything I had ever known—a light that made me think of long hours in dusty libraries, and old nooks, and silence." [51] Not unlike his campus novel predecessor, Amory Blaine, Richard is also drawn to the university's image as conjured by its architectures and the moods it sets (note that both him and Amory describe the university lighting as academic/ scholastic). Both essentially seek a transformative experience from the university. But unlike Amory, Richard's background of being middle class and from a small town make the image and potential of this life that more appealing and not just something that is understood as his birthright. It is quite ironic, then, that the novel that openly admits to its protagonist's image-based flaws acts as a source of inspiration for an internet aesthetic that goes on to model yearnings for the picturesque in the form of idealizing higher education, particularly through visual depictions that themselves resemble the curated brochure of a campus. As noted earlier, the "picturesque" can take the form of mythmaking, through the romanticized renditions of an otherwise exclusive institution. While I don't believe the novel intends to be read this way, as I think it is quite easy to discern how it creates unlikeable characters and situations as part of its intention, others do criticize *The Secret History* for enabling this romanticization.

In an extensive analysis of how *The Secret History* influences Dark Academia, Simone Murray argues that because the novel fails to reflexively critique its elitist characteristics, it enables its dark academia readers to reproduce these depictions: "The Greek clique's members never seem to realise that their own brand of New England-ish high culture is—as the regions name itself betrays—a transatlantic import of nationally-specific, artificially constructed

[51] Ibid, 12.

Oxbridge ideal. To do so would, presumably, force them to confront its manufactured nature, prompting uncomfortable questions about whose interests such an institutionalising of Culture serves" (sic).[52] While Murray's critique strikes at the curated image of the campus in Tartt's novel, and how this later translates to dark academia aesthetics, this critique is also representative of a much larger disparagement of *The Secret History*, and even of Tartt's other literary works. As Richard Joseph astutely notes, Donna Tartt, despite her continued popularity, seldom receives critical attention, let alone praise, in the world of academia or other literary institutions. As Joseph notes: "The *MLA International Bibliography* yields a paltry 80 peer-review results for [Tartt's] name, as opposed to Delillo's 2,000 and Roth's whopping 20,000 [who Joseph reads as her contemporaries, and who have also written notable academic fictions, particularly academic novels]. She seldom appears in course syllabi or academic journals. In general, the literary-critical verdict seems to be that Tartt is a popular but unsophisticated author, her novels amusing romps rather than Serious Literature worthy of critical study."[53] Tartt's *The Secret History*, by being popular but being critically received and treated as unserious, has continued the tradition of the campus novel even as it has significantly advanced it (John Lyons would have certainly appreciated her novel). That is, it has continued a tradition in which student-centered academic fictions are treated as unserious due to their depictions of frivolous youth. And although there is an element to this in *The Secret History*, it is also invested in depicting serious intellectual pursuits, or, as serious as they can be for young adults. Joseph situates this reception within the "genre turn" of recent literary fiction. While Tartt can be read as a participant in this turn, she has

[52] "Dark Academia: Bookishness, Readerly Self-Fashioning and the Digital Afterlife of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History,"*357.
[53] Richard Joseph. "Fooled You: On Donna Tartt's Genre Fiction." Los Angeles Review of Books, 2022. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/fooled-you-on-donna-tartts-genre-fiction/. And could it be that because their novels were about faculty, they've been treated as more serious?

failed to do it "correctly," as the movement expects, or at least likes it more, when an author invokes a genre in order to disparage it and in doing so create an ironic distance. Tartt does not disparage her fictional works, and this causes critics and readers, like Murray, to receive her work negatively. But I think that's the point of a novel like *The Secret History*—it wants to be believable, and if its young dark academia readers fail to remove themselves from the fictional renderings, that is a different issue altogether. And, in fact, it would be difficult to blame them as the novel does a good job at creating romanticized scenes of education—drawing them into the world of the campus haven. Given the option, would students prefer to sit in on a business class learning about stakeholder engagement, or does the allure of transcendental poetics trump those pursuits?

Most of the events of the novel take place in or around the campus of Hampden College. And most of the scenes of learning take place in an initially difficult to find building referred to as the Lyceum, a building that also houses the Classic's professor Julian Morrow's office and classroom: "It was a small building on the edge of campus, old and covered in ivy in such a manner as to be almost indistinguishable from its landscape…I wandered around helplessly [inside] until finally I noticed the staircase—small and badly lit—in the far corner of the building."[54] The already exclusive space of the college campus conjures further layers of exclusion, for it wasn't enough for Richard to be let into Hampden through the generosity of "sympathetic professors" and "exceptions of various sorts," he also had to jump through more hurdles once there (some of them physical, as it took him quite a bit of time and energy to find Julian's office) in order to be taught by Julian. These hurdles were not meritocratic or educational, but rather based on his appearance of wealth and taste, and informal "referrals."

[54] *The Secret History*, 16.

After first attempting to join his class, Richard is sent away by Julian who seems bothered at the request: "[Julian] shook his head quickly, eyes shut, as if entreaty were more than he could bear." Only after running into the already enrolled students of the course where he was able to showcase his Greek knowledge, and after going out and buying attire at the "expensive men's shop" with money that wasn't his, does Julian even allow Richard to plead his case. But when finally allowed into Julian's classroom, Richard enters a world that lionizes the act of learning and the subjects it entertains.

The Secret History reproduces the genre of the campus novel quite well as it sidesteps formal instruction in favor of other forms of learning. Richard and his fellow peers—like the typical students they're supposed to be—*do* go to class, have "homework," read texts, and discuss them. However, one of the stipulations of being taught by Julian is that he act as their sole instructor, because, according to him "having a great diversity of teachers is harmful and confusing to the young mind, in the same way …that it is better to know one book intimately than a hundred superficially."[55] The novel places the building where the class takes place on the edges of campus, hidden in Ivy, and Julian infamously charges the university $1 for his teaching position (as he subsists on independent wealth), disempowering the hold the college might have on him as his employer. These gestures serve to distinguish and separate the learning these Classics students are doing from that of their peers in the "normal" college courses. The irony, of course, is that the campus (and campus novel) must still legitimize learning as an institutional experience for the students—even this coterie of them—who walk through its halls. The class might be on the edges of the campus, but it is still well within its grounds and therefore within its jurisdiction. When Richard refers to their learning as "work," Julian scoffs, asking instead to understand it as

[55] Ibid, 31

"the most glorious kind of *play*." Whereas play was understood as literal play in the worlds of the Dink Stover's—its characters goofed off, binge drank and played sports—this contemporary campus novel (amusingly) imagines play to be synonymous with academic activities and intellectual pursuits. This "play" is represented in the somewhat silly manner in which Julian begins his classes: "All right…[said Julian] looking around the table, 'I hope we're all ready to leave the phenomenal world, and enter into the sublime?" And Richard certainly feels the sublime, as he recounts Julian's lecture with idolization: "He was a marvelous talker, a magical talker, and I wish I were able to give a better idea what he said, but it is impossible for a mediocre intellect to render the speech of a superior one—especially after so many years—without losing a good deal in translation. The discussion that day was about loss of self, about Plato's four divine madnesses, about madness of all sorts; he began by talking about what he called the burden of the self, and why people want to lose the self in the first place."[56] Reading Richard's groveling, as it is written years after the events of the novel have taken place, can understandably cause some readers to roll their eyes and detest the pretentiousness with which the novel seemingly carries itself. But, again, Richard *believes* this experience of education to be true and honest, and thus his character should be read as an impressionable young student who was swooned over by the unique intellect and confidence Julian displayed. When Julian abandons his students who took the content of his classes too far at the end of the novel, one expects this façade to subside, but it does not. This further proves just how alluring he and his classes were to Richard and some of his other classmates.

Earlier I called *The Secret History* a quintessential campus novel in the history of the genre, and that's worth emphasizing here again. The over 500 pages of the novel can be parsed through

[56] Ibid, 36.

in detail for all of its scenes depicting college life, some of which are hyperbolic, while others are representative. There's gossip, love, sex, parties, drugs, learning, insider/outsider situations (the Classics students kill a non-university affiliated neighbor), and many other things. Of course, this all occurs in concert with the whydunit narrative the novel is also famously known for (we know who was killed at the beginning, but the *why* is only later revealed). How might we then engage with the novel for what it says about higher education, beyond the surface level themes and tropes of the American college that are readily visible and available?[57] Christopher Findeisen's reading of the novel argues that it reproduces the myths of equity and meritocracy of postwar education, what we might now label the "education myth." For him, Richard's acceptance into the college and into Julian's class is representative of the "progressive," but really obfuscating, nature of the postwar university, where one's socio-economic status can be positively transformed by the higher education, as Richard's journey "reflects a dominant cultural narrative that understands education as the essential technology for producing American egalitarianism through meritocratic class mobility."[58] This analysis of the texts relationship to

[57] Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, an academic novel, begins with a saturated satirical account of the characteristics that shape this demographic: "The station wagons arrived at noon, a long shining line that coursed through the west campus. In single file they eased around the orange I-beam sculpture and moved toward the dormitories. The roofs of the station wagons were loaded down with carefully secured suitcases full of light and heavy clothing; with boxes of blankets, boots and shoes, stationery and books, sheets, pillows, quilts; with rolled up bags and sleeping bags; with bicycles, skis, rucksacks, English and Western saddles, inflated rafts. As cars slowed to a crawl and stopped, students sprang out and raced to the rear doors to begin removing the objects inside; the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags—onion and garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut crème patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints…It is a brilliant event, invariably. The students greet each other with comic cries and gestures of sodden collapse. Their summer has been bloated with criminal pleasures, as always." (3)

[58] "Injuries of Class," 288.

higher education, however, overlooks Richard's own understanding of his educational journey (or the end of it). Richard was certainly not wealthy like his peers, and he does cite his lack of money as a reason for pursuing education, as he claims to have originally signed up as a pre-med major simply because doctors made money (but due to a lack of interest and poor grades, he drops it in favor of literature). However, he was also just very bored:

> In high school I developed a habit of wandering through shopping malls after school, swaying through bright, chill mezzanines until I was so dazed by consumer goods and product codes, with promenades and escalators, with mirrors and Muzak and noise and light, that a fuse would blow in my brain and all at once everything would become unintelligible: color without form, a babble of detached molecules. Then I would walk like a zombie to the parking lot and drive to the baseball field, where I wouldn't even get out of the car, just sit with my hands on the steering wheel and stare at the Cyclone fence and the yellowed winter grass until the sun went down and it was too dark for me to see. [59]

The image of Hampden College, as presented in the brochure—and affirmed in person—excited him because it transported him to a world of "green meadows," "ivied bricks," and "white spires" that juxtaposed the "zombie" like middle-class suburban town he grew up in. The college also promised to provide him "with the raw materials of wisdom." To be sure, this isn't to say that these romanticized desires are divorced from wealth, as they are very much representative of it. Rather, Richard isn't very interested in how they relate because to him the ability to cosplay this life is what is important. And in fact, his failure to recognize this puts his life in jeopardy when fending for himself during his first winter.[60] Furthermore, it's hard to believe that Julian

[59] *The Secret History*, 10.
[60] Ibid, 111-123.

could not see through the performance of class Richard was employing. Instead, Julian was also operating under the illusions of the campus that favored appearances and feelings more than substance. One of Richard's Classics classmates, for example, is an academically poor and lazy student, does not have his own money (as his parents refuse to pay for him beyond tuition), but he *performs* his posh attributes and standing quite well, therefore earning him a place in the class. And even if Julian is oblivious to Richard's real background, his blindness also stands as evidence that what matters more is the performance one is willing to make. Afterall, Julian, instead of sticking with his students once they reveal their crimes, abandons them and disappears without a sense of responsibility for how he might have pushed them to commit murder. Once the illusion of play was over, it also made no sense for him to remain.

Indeed, *The Secret History* presents a captivating rendering of the campus novel, but it does not represent class mobility as significant to the role the university plays in the plot. Indeed, it is arguably uninterested in it. As Dylan Davidson argues, "University education and its putatively transformative aesthetic cultivation [in *The Secret History*] are ultimately a momentary diversion from predictable class trajectories" as the novels surviving wealthy characters "become disaffected aristocrats" and Richard "ends up in a graduate program writing a half-hearted dissertation on Jacobean drama—hardly the raw rarefied life he envisioned for himself. "[61] Richard, at the end of novel, is seemingly stuck in the fantasy of undergraduate life and continues to be nostalgic for it. The novel itself is a testament to this as it is framed as a retelling of events that occurred eight years ago. In this way, the novel is less about what financial future one can set themselves up for, and more about reminiscing on one's college days—almost to a

[61] Dylan Davidson. "To Be Transformed." *Post45,* 2022. https://post45.org/2022/03/to-be-transformed/.

fault. Higher education did transform Richard, but only insofar as it gave him nostalgic experiences and thus material to write, as he ultimately ends up back in California in proximity to the life he once ran away from. Tartt's contemporary, Sandra Cisneros, on the other hand, does invoke the stakes of class mobility via higher education in *The House on Mango Street*, despite its lack of the characteristics of the campus novel and the university.

McGurl's work on *The House on Mango Street* offers a good place to start in my analysis of the novel, as it already begins to consider the subtle threads that intimately tie the novel to the production space of the university. Mexican-American author Sandra Cisneros (though she might prefer American Mexican), a product of a university education and specifically of an MFA program, might not be explicit about her ties to her education in her fiction writing, but she is nonetheless indebted to her time at her institution. Reading closely through *The House on Mango Street*, McGurl discerns that both the form and content of her fiction echoes her time at university. For him, the structural choice to break up the book into short story vignettes is emblematic of the short story practice of MFA programs.[62] And in the chapter, "The Three Sisters," where one of the sisters tells the protagonist Esperanza to not forget her "Mango Street" roots, it is hard not to read this serving as a reminder to come back to one's community after achieving socio-economic mobility via (presumably) academic success. After all, the "Three Sisters" could be seen as the Three Fates of European mythology—and thus knowers of the future from which the writer Cisneros is writing from. Both of these examples indicate the university influence that McGurl identifies as being indicative of Cisneros debt to her academic past and creative writing training. But apart from the non-fictional introduction to the book (which is itself a recent addition to the text), the novel doesn't mention the university. For

[62] *The Program Era*, 339.

McGurl, this would not necessarily mean that the novel is uninterested in the institution of the university. His approach to identifying the university's influence in his monograph doesn't always involve finding explicit examples of the mentioning of a campus, universities, or even education. *The House on Mango Street* also wouldn't fit under the campus novel genre—even if its ending sentences, through the point of view of Esperanza, imply that the promise land of the campus is the direction which it sees its protagonist heading towards: "One day I will pack my bags of books and paper…Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper?...They will not know *I have gone away to come back*. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out." (emphasis added) [63] The simple description of "books and paper" continues to mirror the point of view of a child we get throughout the whole book, and this vagueness distances Esperanza from the world of academia, embodying the "antiacademic" voice that Cisneros characterizes her with. And yet, it would be incorrect to say that Cisneros, or Esperanza, are dismissive of education as a path towards economic mobility, as evidenced by the "books and paper." They ultimately see it as the site through which they must go through in order to "give back" to their struggling community.[64]

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[63] Sandra Cisneros. *The House on Mango Street*. P. 110

[64] In an interview with Pam Houston for *O, The Oprah Magazine*, Toni Morrison, another writer and teacher of the Program Era that McGurl takes up, shares this sentiment of "giving back" when she says, "I tell my students, 'When you get *these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for*, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game." (emphasis mine). What's fascinating about this quote, for me, is how it also shares the human capital ideal of job security accomplished via education. Furthermore, Morrison understands this individual accomplishment as belonging to the whole "community" and not just one person, and it belongs to them as an obligation on the part of the successful "brilliantly trained" student. See, "The Truest Eye." *O, The Oprah Magazine*, 2003. https://www.oprah.com/omagazine/toni-morrison-talks-love/all

Indeed, for minority writers like Cisneros, one way of "coming back" and/or "giving back" is the act of writing itself, as it diversifies and democratizes reading lists for future generations of readers, writers, and students. This writing can serve to offer an account of the lives of those "left behind" for readers (presumably those who are better off) to contend with. As Carmen Rivera notes, Cisneros credits her experiences working with Chicago inner city youth as one of the sources of inspiration for her fictional worlds: "Cisneros' writing became a tribute to her students' tenacious spirit and endurance despite the circumstances in which they lived."[65] She desired to give a voice to the voiceless, and her fiction accomplished this as it told otherwise unheard stories, stories that would make her "Iowa Writers workshop classmates faint." Other forms of giving back are those that involve the transfer of knowledge capital and material forms of uplift. Cohorts of first-generation students—students who contend with the dissonance created between their low-income backgrounds and that of the middle-class campus—that often find themselves feeling guilty for attending university might feel the desire to give back to their family and community who they've left behind.[66] Writers like Cisneros who include "campus peripheries" into their work will often be working through this problem through their characters by treating the university as a space that they imagine to be a vessel for change, particularly an economic one. While campus novel writers of the early twentieth century and beyond portray the university setting as a space where nontraditional education or community building can be gained, campus periphery writers placed higher stakes on their university education, envisioning

[65] Carmen Haydée Rivera. *Border Crossings and Beyond: The Life and Works of Sandra Cisneros*. (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2009), 24.
[66] Rebecca Covarrubias and Stephanie A. Fryberg. "Movin' on up (to College): First-Generation College Students' Experiences with Family Achievement Guilt." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 21, no. 3 (July 2015): 420–29.

it as a critical factor in their rise from forms of poverty.[67] The promises of academia here are directly tied to attending and graduating from a university, and not just nonchalantly attending it as a rite of passage or as a romanticized experience.

When Cisneros came back to Chicago after graduate school and worked for her undergraduate alma mater, Loyola University, "she frequently went to inner-city youth neighborhoods to talk to Latino/a teenagers, often low-income and educationally disadvantaged students, about the possibilities of obtaining a college degree. The fact that she was a bilingual Latina, and came from the same barrio as many of these teenagers did, helped her get through otherwise distrustful teens and parents who were usually not exposed to conversations about higher education."[68] Her actions reflected the value she placed on a university education as her own experiences a couple of years prior demonstrated its benefits. And her writing did as well, for in her introduction to *The House on Mango Street's* 25th anniversary edition, she draws significant attention to a phrase her mother often told her, "Good lucky you studied," a phrase last repeated to her as her mother soaked in the new house Cisneros was able to buy with the earnings she received from being a successful writer.[69] Her mother wasn't congratulating Cisneros for being a successful writer, however, which could be argued is the real source of Cisneros' income and financial security. "Studying" at and graduating from an American

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[67]Additionally, I'd argue that a crucial distinction between campus novels and campus peripheries are the boundaries their characters are allowed to cross. As Merritt Mosely has written "The traditional campus novel is even an enclosure, or a cloistered space, and, though many modern universities are decentralized and urban, they are in a sense psychically cloistered and intellectually enclosed. This is an advantage for both author and reader." (17) Consider this description with the story Cisneros writes—one of vignettes and of a neighborhood—and the idea of a community existing outside of the limits of the "Ivory Tower" becomes clearer and more intriguing for the "minority" figure.

[68] *Border Crossings and Beyond*, 25.

[69] *The House on Mango Street*, xxvii.

university, in her mother's eyes, is what is seen as the reason for why Cisneros was able to buy a house and fulfill the American middle-class dream that the postwar university promised. Her march through the campus, even if riddled by ostracization, is what is being imagined as the source and vehicle for her success. And her mother wasn't very far off in this assessment, as that is how the university's notions of human capital were being marketed during the second half of the twentieth century.

Despite the lack of an actual campus setting—or campus characters—*The House on Mango Street* nonetheless presents its readers with a rendering of the promises of economic opportunity and security as envisioned by the postwar American university. In contrast, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, while centering a middle-class character and their relationship to an elite university, ultimately favors other depictions, particularly those about the flaws of romanticizing appearances rather than attending to substance—an irony given what the novel has gone on to inspire. Solely reading Tartt's novel as having something to say about postwar American higher education would miss fictional depictions of the same period that were alluding to its transformational economic power. To be sure, not all of these depictions displayed the same optimism of Cisneros—an optimism that might also be understood as a palliative to the economic inequities that a democratic access to higher education cannot fix. As the next chapter will demonstrate, some of these "minority" authors acknowledged this notion of how higher education uplifted their economic status and marked them as distinguished individuals in their communities—yet these same authors also recognized the failure for it to uplift the collective communities.

Education Fictions: Individuals and Community in the Shadow of the University

> Knowledge has certainly never been so central to the conduct of an entire society. What the railroads did for the second half of the last century and the automobile for the first half of this century may be done for the second half of this century by the knowledge industry; that is, to serve as the focal point for national growth. And the university is at the center of the knowledge process.
>
> University of California President Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* [1]

"Good, good, you want to learn? Good, good, here is the burden."

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying* [2]

One way to read Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is as a novel of education—most keenly, a campus novel.[3] But *Kindred* is not a campus novel in any clear way. It lacks the fraternal hijinks, enclosed campus space or academic satire on faculty and administrative bureaucracy typically associated with the conventions of academic fiction. During the course of the novel, its characters never even set foot on a college campus. However, as Mark McGurl has persuasively argued, postwar American literature is indebted to the university—so much so that he suggests

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[1] Clark Kerr. *The Uses of the University*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 88.

[2] Ernest J. Gaines. *A Lesson Before Dying*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1994), 63.

[3] Contrary to Franco Moretti's assertion that twentieth-century Western social conditions do not allow for a re-birth of the bildungsroman, Christopher Findeisen argues that they do, and that they so do through the proliferation of the American higher education system: "it is because of educational institutions, not in spite of them, that the bildungsroman became a necessary symbolic form in the latter half of the twentieth century—a form, I argue, that has been reimagined as the American campus novel and repurposed to 'reduce and contain' the social contradictions inherent in the postwar educational meritocracy." See Findeisen, "Injuries of Class: Mass Education and the American Campus Novel." *PMLA* 130, no. 2 (2015): 284–98, (285).

that all postwar novels can be understood as campus novels. In one of these readings, he analyzes Toni Morrison's *Beloved* under this influence of the university, questioning the lack of criticism dedicated to highlighting the educational themes of the novel, something he attributes to "the same blind spot that has kept critics from making an adequate assessment of the agency of the university in postwar American literary production as a whole."[4] By paying close attention to one of the villains of the novel, "schoolteacher," McGurl draws connections between slavery and schooling, "two social institutions that have been particularly damaging to the psyche of African Americans…", and in doing so, posits a critical perspective on the novel meant to bridge its overlooked theme of education and the institution of the university.[5]

My work in this chapter is an extension of McGurl's interventions insofar as it takes his suggestion of all postwar novels being campus novels seriously. But whereas McGurl is focused on elements of institutionality, my interest lies in expanding our understanding of the campus novel as a literary genre.[6] While *Kindred* lacks many of the formal features of academic fiction it does provide us with central characters adjacent to the "student" role many of these novels rely on. That the novel presents these character's status as students as ambivalent, and unremarkable, is the point. In continuing with the arguments laid out in the previous chapter and in the introduction, this chapter argues for understanding *Kindred* as a "campus periphery" novel invested in engaging with and questioning the ideal(s) of education, as mediated through higher

[4] *The Program Era*, 347.
[5] Ibid, 348.
[6] My slight detour from McGurl is made clear in this same reading of *Beloved* where he states that: "I would not be so bold as to claim that *Beloved* is a 'campus novel'—that would be a stretch. It is rather an amalgam of slave narrative and plantation romance and gothic ghost story, and a kind of family saga to boot." I, on the other hand, would be so bold as to claim that *Kindred*, for example, is a campus periphery novel—and as such, an academic fiction. See *The Program Era*, page 348.

education's postwar university, as a flawed but necessary institution for saving a "minority" figure, or more importantly, their community. I argue that novels of the campus periphery raise and answer important questions about the stakes of higher education—questions that traditional campus novels can at times sidestep. While campus novels might try to weigh the value of education as situated within the bounds of a campus, campus periphery novels understand the campus as integral to education but ultimately limiting, and thus expand the reach of education beyond the physical boundaries of these campus havens.

In this chapter, this imperative to leave the bounds of the campus is mobilized by the question: what is the responsibility of college graduates to the communities from which they come from? There exist some studies that suggest that "minority" graduates, specifically black men from selective universities, are more likely than their white counterparts to engage in "civic activities" such as "community [although for this one black women were also more likely than their white women counterparts to be active in], social service, youth and elementary or secondary educational organizations."[7] These participations could be read as acts of "giving back" to their communities as distinguished members. And, as Suzanne Mettler has noted, black veterans who utilized the G.I. Bill's education benefits were also highly likely to be civically engaged (this finding will be critical to my reading of one of the black novelists I attend to in this chapter as they were beneficiaries of the G.I. Bill): "several studies have found that education has produced a particular interpretive effect among African Americans: a sense of identifying and sharing a common fate with other members of their racial group. This finding is contrary to what we might assume – that the elevated status that comes with education might have distanced

[7] William G. Bowen, and Derek Curtis Bok. *The Shape of the River: Long-term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 158.

African-American college graduates from the larger black community. Rather, education has not only spurred heightened political activity, but *it has also helped direct that activity toward the struggle for improved circumstances for blacks generally*." (emphasis mine)[8] Although, as Mettler's study suggests, it is worth asking if this might have had more to do with the variable of government intervention than the university itself. And yet, as I'll show in this chapter, these forces worked together in this postwar period of the "Golden Age" and therefore must be understood as complementary. Furthermore, as Kenneth Warren cautions, even if it was true that some graduates hoped to "give back to their communities," this type of "commitment has also tended to set the stage for individual rather than systemic explanations and remedies."[9] Warren's observation echoes "the education myth" propagated by the postwar university, as its solution to economic disparity was envisioned as being solved through one's personal development of their "human capital." While I'll argue in this chapter that the fictional "students" of these novels understood their graduate status as a tool meant to aid their communities—even in the absence of a campus, the site and crux of their economic mobility—I'll also demonstrate how these same novels represented the pitfalls of this thinking and the subsequent tensions that surfaced.

Alongside *Kindred* this chapter also reads Ernest Gaine's novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*, as performing the ideological work of representing individual college attendance as a vehicle of and for broad community service. Both *Kindred* (1979) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1991) lack an actual college campus, but both feature the theme of education as well as central characters who are alumni of universities. And though they are published over ten years apart, and under

[8] Suzanne Mettler. "The Only Good Thing Was the G.I. Bill": Effects of the Education and Training Provisions on African American Veterans' Political Participation." Studies in American Political Development, 19 (Spring 2005), 31-52. (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 47.
[9] Kenneth W. Warren. *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 147.

different circumstances, both novels utilize education as a backdrop to their more central thematic of exploring the afterlives of slavery. These alumni protagonists—who in addition to being student-adjacent, also act as teachers of their "community"—continuously wrestle with their background of formal education and the question of whether what they've learned at these institutions can be translated into communities that are not "free." My reading of *Kindred* and *A Lesson Before Dying* seeks to show how the authors backgrounds, and the literary and historical contexts under which the texts were produced, allows us to read them as novels of education, i.e. academic fictions. The claim is not so much that they are overtly about higher education, but that to re-consider them as appearing within the historical framework of the postwar era means reading them as texts that offer a view of university ideology that leaves the campus setting but is still bounded to it by its student characters who navigate the "real" world. This university ideology is historically and loosely understood as one which views education as a freeing enterprise, but in the postwar period, it can be grounded via understanding economic theory and policy that increasingly wedded individual college attendance with economic mobility and opportunity. As I will show, this ideology was realized most powerfully by Lyndon B. Johnson's era of Great Society programs, specifically through the passing of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and California's Master Plan of Higher Education.

Kindred

"That same day, I stole a book and began to teach him."[10]

If campus novels ask what a university education can achieve (even if they often self-satirize and answer that it is nothing), *Kindred*, as an example of a campus periphery novel, asks

[10] Octavia Butler. *Kindred*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 98.

what education, broadly, can teach.[11] Á la McGurl, though explicit scenes of a campus are missing from the text, the educational themes of the novel can be bridged with the influence of the university. To demonstrate this, I will show how Octavia Butler's journey within the setting of higher education aligns with features of her novel. Dana, the protagonist of *Kindred*, shares a great deal with Butler the author when it comes to her artistic and educational trajectory. Butler's mother also wanted her to enroll in school to become a secretary, as her mother imagined it to be better than the humiliating work of domestic labor. As Butler puts it "[my mother's] big dream for me was that I should get a job as a secretary and be able to sit down when I worked."[12] Instead, she chose to pursue creative writing at similar programs in California that Dana mentions in the novel. Although it was not secretarial work, pursuing creative writing did enable Butler to fulfill her mother's dreams of acquiring a job where she could sit down as she worked. This pursuit also exposed her to the changing world of higher education as it intersected with and was influenced by nascent Civil Rights movements. In an interview for *Callaloo* with Charles H. Rowell, Butler explains how *Kindred* came into being. While she was beginning her studies at Pasadena City College, the height of the black nationalist movement was underway, and Butler was surrounded by black students who resented their parents and grandparents for their perceived humility in the face of racist hostility. One student's more provocative statement, in which he said he'd like to kill the older black generations for holding him back, came to be the "germ" that started Butler's process of writing *Kindred*.[13] Butler had already wrestled with feeling similarly towards her mother for not standing up to the humiliation she experienced from

[11] Campus periphery novels take education beyond the limits of the campus.
[12] Charles H. Rowell and Octavia Butler. "An Interview with Octavia Butler." *Callaloo,* Winter, 1997, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 47-66. (The Johns Hopkins University Press), 51.
[13] Ibid.

her employers. Overtime, however, Butler came to understand that without this passiveness, her mother wouldn't have been able to keep a job and therefore Butler wouldn't have had food or a home. *Kindred*, seen in this light, is about imagining what a contemporary black character (or even a real-life person) might learn from the experiences they never had to deal with directly. As Butler herself puts it: "I wanted to take a character…back in time to some of the things that our ancestors had to go through, and see if that character survived so very well with the knowledge of the present in her head."[14]

This recollection in which Butler talks about the inspiration behind *Kindred* is remarkable because it provides a link between thinking about the educational themes of the novel and the author's experiences in higher education. In addition, it informs my suspicion about why campus novels for "minority" authors never predominated in this moment of heightened attention to institutions of pedagogy in the same manner those of their white peers did, beyond the simple fact of higher attendance amongst the white population. As this scene demonstrates, a glorified "Ivory Tower" could not exist separate from the social conditions that were still affecting black Americans. Nor were all university's ripe for romanticized renderings, as Dana's character attends a community college (though this is never explicitly said) as opposed to the liberal arts campus conventional campus novels depict. Still, for Butler to have been inspired to write *Kindred* in the setting of a campus influences how we read it as a novel whose central character is in the process of unraveling the tensions of different black generations, and specifically doing so under the umbrella of the university—under present "knowledge" and knowledge-producing institutions. That her protagonist, Dana, does this through the embodiment of a teacher and student is additionally telling. While the explicitness of higher education is missing from

[14] Ibid.

Kindred, the overarching thematic of education is not. And Dana, as a college graduate and student, is a vehicle for this representation.

Even when scholars like Megan Behrent contextualize *Kindred* within the political turmoil of the 60's and 70's, placing Butler's novel in conversation with the debates of the period, they overlook the role the university plays within the fictional account. Recollecting the inflammatory comments made by the male student, Behrent notes that "In this moment, PCC [Pasadena City College] became, for Butler, a microcosm for debates playing out on the national stage, as questions of resistance to oppression, violence, and the right to self-defense rose to prominence."[15] She even goes further, in a footnote, noting that "Many future members of the [Black Panther Party] were members of the Afro-Association, which began in 1961 at Oakland City college (renamed Merritt in 1964) and fought for Black Studies…That Butler's Black literature course was taught by a visiting professor from California State at Los Angeles highlights the state-wide impact of these campaigns."[16] And yet, Behrent spends little to no time thinking through the educational themes as they appear in the novel. Although she can see how the campus space serves to inspire Butler's writing of *Kindred*, she does not attend to how the fictional depictions of the novel reflect themes of higher education. As Melinda Cooper has shown, the radical students that surrounded Butler at PCC belonged to the inaugurating classes of Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs and legacies. In California, this took the form of the state's Master Plan for Higher Education, endorsed by University of California President Clark Kerr, "a former labor economist and champion of Schultzian human capital theory…"[17]

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[15] Megan Behrent. "The Personal is Historical: Slavery, Black Power and Resistance in Octavia Butler's *Kindred.*" *College Literature* 46.4 (Fall 2019): 795-828, 1.
[16] Ibid, 35.
[17] Melinda Cooper. *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. New York: Zone Books, 2017), 227.

Human capital theory, which viewed the skills people earned through education as forms of capital situated within and cultivated by individuals, largely shaped the Johnson administration's higher education policies. Ironically for these liberal administrators, however, the democratic desire to include lower-income and minority students into college also brought in a wave of students critical of U.S. power. And though, "[these students] would not have existed without Johnson's enormous infusion of public money into higher education and the efforts of liberal administrators such as UC President Kerr to maintain a free state university system," they held those in charge in contempt.[18]

Butler's novel, thus, emerges at this intersection of demographic shifts in higher education undergirded by the economic theory that viewed college attendance as economic opportunity. In this way, *Kindred* responds to the nascent politics of campus life as it relates to previously restricted black college students. And, furthermore, it could be viewed as a derivative of the genre of the campus novel, for which there was a seeming plateau, even amongst those not written by minorities. As Lavelle Porter has argued, the term "campus novel" can limit the discourse surrounding the socio-politics of higher education as it pertains to black students and academics.[19] He cites novels that still take up the question of academia but do so outside of the bounds of the campus, such as *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* where questions and ethics of anthropology and field research are as illuminating as novels that center the campus setting. *Kindred* as a novel of the campus periphery does similar work in placing its boundaries beyond the campus scene. In fact, the novel's innovative view on education is that it deprioritizes higher education as the primary site of learning and "struggle." Although campus novels magnify

[18] *Family Values,* 232.
[19] Lavelle Porter. *The Blackademic Life: Academic Fiction, Higher Education, and the Black Intellectual*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 115.

socio-economic mobility, freedom, and types of learning questions, a view on education that starts and ends there might not be adequate for communities for which higher education was historically difficult to come by—and who had before this period been generalized as racially inferior.

As Dana gets continuously sucked back into the past of slavery, not many things remain stable. She and her white husband, Kevin, struggle to keep their sanity as the comfort of the present world they know seems farther and farther away from the overbearing past they're forced to survive in. There are few things they're allowed to carry with them across the generations without the potential of violating the norms of a society where slavery still exists. Even when little slips do occur—like indicating that they, a white man and a black woman, are married— it conjures the potential for unseen consequences. *Kindred* has been read as a neo-slave narrative, as it is a novel removed from the past of slavery but still invested in exploring its history, lingering effects, and afterlives through a contemporary character who is dealing with slavery.[20] And although Butler is most famous for being a writer of science fiction, she has refused to label the book as such, instead calling it a "grim fantasy." Working through this prism of fantasy, the novel envisions what it would mean for a 1970's black woman to be jolted back into the past of slavery. The result is a morally complex and horror-like narrative involving not only the fate of Edana Franklin (Dana), the novel's protagonist, but also that of her ancestors and her husband. The premise of the novel rests on the world-shattering (as embodied by the inexplicability of the mechanisms through which the time travel occurs) reality of a present-day black person living in the past of slavery. Within the shadow of this mechanism, the novel is also coy in teasing out

[20]Ashraf H.A Rushdy. *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

how distant the worlds of the past and present really are from each other. Apart from the obvious irony that Dana must act, at times detrimentally, to protect both her black and white ancestors to ensure her own future, there are other moments where slavery is still seen to seep into the present day in both work life and relationships. A struggling writer and student, Dana works at a casual labor agency which she and the other regulars call "a slave market." In the next sentence, though, she immediately takes this back, stating "actually, it was just the opposite of slavery" given the lack of care of the bosses.[21] "Care" here being whether they showed up to work, as there was always a surplus of those looking for a job. Furthermore, throughout the novel, there is a constant parallel drawn between Rufus, Dana's white slave master ancestor, and her husband, Kevin. As Rufus grows older (he is a child when Dana first meets and rescues him from drowning), the relationship he has with Dana starts to creep into one of forced romance from his end. In this way, Kevin and Rufus become even more like each other—both assuming the role of Dana's lover, and both holding power over her. This becomes literal when Kevin must pretend to be Dana's slaveowner to justify their presence together in the past of slavery. But what keeps them on the plantation—and in effect keeps Dana in proximity to her ancestor, Alice, to ensure her "safety"—is the educational nature, and teacher roles, of their characters. Education quite literally, in this world of fantasy, becomes the vehicle through which Dana plans to save her life. Because of this, the role of education in the novel should not be read as incidental but critical to the advancement and development of the plot as Dana continues to figure out how to ground herself as she in transported back and forth in time. What else could Dana offer in the past that would not immediately render her property meant to be reclaimed? At least, that is what the novel suggests as Dana's educational abilities allow her "safe" passage while in the past.

[21] *Kindred*, 52.

Rufus, showing an early attachment to Dana, desires to be taught by her once it is revealed that she can read and write despite being a "slave." As her reality settles in, Dana plans to teach Rufus reading and writing, but more importantly for her own sake, she plans to teach him the humanity of the slaves he will one day inherit from his father. As she tells Kevin, "Let's see what we can do to keep [Rufus] from growing up into a red-haired version of his father."[22] All of this is done with the goal of both surviving the world of slavery while she's there, and about lessening the harshness for those who cannot escape once she leaves back home. In this way, the novel sets out to ask what education—particularly a hazardous one—can accomplish for one's community, even if this community is conjured as one from the distant past. Can "teaching" find ways out of oppressive and exploitative societies and systems? Although the irony of a slave teaching a white slave master how to read and write is apparent, there is a bit more depth to this worth teasing out. The history of literacy as a vehicle for freedom as it pertains to black authors is much longer than that of the history of universities as sites of socio-economic mobility. One need not dig that deep to connect this scene with one of the more critical moments in black letters found in Frederick Douglass *Narrative,* where Douglass states how "The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch*, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*."[23] Butler reimagines this liberatory history of literacy, but instead of a slave learning to read and write as a path towards freedom, the slave is teaching the slave master these tools as a form of survival and potential reform. Of course, this only works because of the prism of fantasy the novel inhabits where Dana comes from a

[22] Ibid, 81.
[23] Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 46.

contemporary world where her knowing these tools is more likely and accessible. And not only that, but that these skills are central to her character.

Indeed, it is important to note that Dana and Kevin don't just fall into this role of educators but are characters suited for it before and once they are both transported into the past. Both have a background in creative writing and are college educated, though for their professional aspirations they favor the former. More of the focus will be on Dana, although their roles as educators coexist for a portion of the novel. One of the key indicators marking this novel as one adjacent to a campus novel is through Dana's ambivalence about being a college student. Answering Kevin's questions about her life, she details how she has, to the chagrin of her aunt and uncle, quit school to better pursue her aspirations as a writer: "I always got good grades. They just didn't mean anything to me. I couldn't manufacture enough interest in the subjects to keep me going. Finally, I got a job, moved away from home, and quit school. I still take extension classes at UCLA, though, when I can afford them. Writing classes."[24] This formal education that Dana eschews for the specialized knowledge of creative writing will ironically become more important during her travels in the past. Basic skills like reading and writing gain bigger importance in the past of slavery for their ability to aid in potential escapes. When Dana is first being pulled into the past, Kevin offers to write letters in support for her, and when Dana is contemplating escape, she acknowledges the importance of being able to read maps in order to plan out the escape routes. While these skills are better appreciated in the past, Dana must also learn new ones if she is to survive and fit in. Thus, the education she receives in the novel doesn't end with the knowledge handed out by formal institutions. While in the society of

[24] *Kindred*, 56. Interestingly, McGurl doesn't take up *Kindred* or Butler at any length in his analysis, even though Butler appears to fit the demographic mold of his monograph's subjects.

slavery Dana must learn how to better behave as a slave, to fit in and to help around the plantation: "[Sarah] seemed to warm up to me a little and she was patient with my ignorance of cooking. She taught me and saw to it that I ate better…Under her direction, I spent God knows how long beating biscuit dough with a hatchet on a well-worn tree stump."[25] She is not only a student within her contemporary setting, but also in the historical past she is transported (abducted) into. In this way, her identity as a student travels across time as well. And while her identity as a student is somewhat in flux, her role as a teacher is a bit more settled as it is through this role that she plans to teach Rufus her humanity.

Education in the novel proves to be dangerous when Dana eventually expands her teaching role to teach the slave children how to read and write, risking not only her life but that of the children (and not really risking hers at all due to the mechanisms that save her when her life is in perceived danger). But the act of education is also dangerous because teaching a slave master the humanity of slaves proves to be a fraught endeavor on its own. In a standoff moment with Rufus, Rufus comes across a history book that Dana has brought with her from the future. The tangibility of education with the object of the book in this scene mimics that of the classroom. Distracted, Dana lets Rufus rummage through her bag where Rufus discovers a history book Dana has brought back from the future and reads it, immediately exclaiming "This is the biggest lot of abolitionist trash I ever saw."[26] The irony here is that Dana's pedagogy is what brings her close to danger as she's been teaching Rufus how to read (and it has been hinted at a couple of times that Rufus isn't the brightest student).[27] Nonetheless, the moment when the

[25] Ibid, 81.
[26] Ibid, 140.
[27] In fact, this is why Weylin even allows Kevin and Dana to stay at the plantation—to tutor him as he recovers from his broken leg.

practicality of education is achieved—that is, when Rufus can read an advanced book all by himself—does not translate to a learned humanity. Foreshadowing the ending of the narrative, there is a limit to what education can achieve in an exploitative and racist society. In fact, in this instance, education might even be dangerous beyond the "classroom" setting. Dana quickly realizes that in the hands of a slave master are the events of a liberatory history that hasn't happened yet, "I had said I couldn't do anything to change history. Yet, if history could be changed, this book in the hands of a white man—even a sympathetic white man—might be the thing to change it."[28] Once again, the tangibility of education is highlighted through the image of the history book in the hands of Rufus. In his hands lie the histories of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. What would the future of abolition look like without these figures? Dana is no longer just risking her life and the lives of her ancestors, but potentially the future of hundreds of thousands of slaves.

Although Dana is older and her character wouldn't fit into the bildungsroman mold of the early American campus novels, her nature as a student—that is, someone who learns, often through mistakes—is highlighted throughout the novel.[29] The instance above is one example of her inability to think through what might happen if certain things from the future were to fall into

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[28] Ibid, 141.

[29] Even if Dana's progression in the novel isn't one that mirrors that of the bildungsroman, as she is already past the "coming of age" age, it can be argued that Rufus inhabits this role. In this way, the novel suggests that only a certain demographic can inhabit the campus novel genre freely. On the other hand, it might be shortsighted to try to read for the bildungsroman in this postwar period. As Long Le-Khac has argued, minority authors writing upward mobility narratives (which in many ways campus peripheries are) in the postwar period were creating fictional worlds that departed from an attention to individuals. Therefore, reading these fictions through a bildungsroman hermeneutics fails to see their "polycentric political consciousness." Afterall, it is not only Dana who is at risk here, but her whole family's lineage. See Le-Khac, *Giving Form to an Asian and Latinx America*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020), 30.

the wrong hands. And the scene depicting how she came to even bring the book in the first place stands out for how it mimics what a college student might be doing. Dana is returned to the future whenever her life is put at risk. In one of these instances, having already learned from her other travels, she quickly assembles a bag of necessities for whenever she is summoned back into the past. These include basic things like clothes, toiletries, and medicine that would not have existed yet but are necessary for a more comfortable experience. But at the very end "[she] stuffed another pencil, pen, and scratch pad into the bag…And [she] found a compact paperback history of slavery in America that might be useful. It listed dates and events that [she] should be aware of, and it contained a map of Maryland."[30] Standing alone, can we not imagine this scene as depicting a student preparing to go to their class on campus? Of course, there is a utilitarian aspect to this preparation because Dana, for as long as she is taken back into the past, must find ways to survive it and ease her time there. To be sure, the plantation is not a campus, but it is where Dana is engaged in the practice of teaching and learning.[31] In the absence of a more explicit campus, the campus periphery harkens to images and scenes of a college education, citing its influence. Dana and Kevin instinctively go to their home library when it becomes clear that Dana is being taken into an antebellum south, to learn about black history, but specifically to seek tools that might help her survive her time there.[32] Lacking real life "experience" of the past, they seek knowledge via texts, the site of their learning. Here and throughout the novel, debates

[30] *Kindred*, 114
[31] The plantation is not a campus, but there are some interesting comparisons to be made between *Kindred* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* beyond their slave narrative themes when it comes to thinking about how both use education in their novels, and how this theme is overlooked in both. As stated earlier, McGurl doesn't spend much time on Butler or *Kindred*, but he does spend quite some time discussing *Beloved's* educational themes in his subtitle "Plantations and Campuses," a key inspiration for this reading. See *The Program Era*, 346-360.
[32] *Kindred*, 48.

about what different forms of education can teach play out. What can "real life" experience teach that texts and reading cannot? What kinds of education are more valuable? The spirit of education lives in these novels even if the authors writing them choose to not show so explicitly.

Although *Kindred* is not a campus novel, and for this reason I'm choosing to read it as something different but adjacent to the genre, the study of a "minority" campus novel is helpful to understanding why it might not be one. That is, why Butler—and other campus periphery writers—might have not written ones. In a critical chapter, titled "J. Saunders Redding and the African American Campus Novel" Stephanie Brown reads *Stranger and Alone*, published in 1950, as the first African American campus novel.[33] She explains that she categorizes it as such because higher education—and its settings—are central to the novel, whereas while "other novelists had depicted life on historically black campuses…the setting had typically served purely as a backdrop for a plot aimed at presenting a moralistic story consonant with the basic premises of social realism and protest fiction. Unlike in these novels, the setting of *Stranger and Alone* is not incidental; instead, the colleges and their administration are central to the narrative."[34] Reading it in the context of the slow rise of postwar campus and academic novels, Brown argues for its unique departure from the historical form and genres of academic fiction. Instead of creating a world where the campus and university life reign supreme, divorced from the "real world," Brown argues that Redding's novel sees no distinction between the two spheres. For him, real life and campus life are one and the same. While academic fictions of the past (campus novels) created a nostalgic and romanticized vision of university life, or more contemporary novels poked fun at this way of life through their satire (academic novels),

[33] See, Brown. *The Postwar African American Novel: Protest and Discontent, 1945-1950*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 135.
[34] Ibid.

Stranger and Alone does not (but also cannot) do the same. As Brown argues, the conditions under which Redding was writing his novel made it difficult for him to create a pastoral or romanticized world of university life. And given the historical role of freedom education had played for African Americans, dating back to the push for literacy, it was potentially detrimental for him to write a book satirizing university life. Afterall, it was published in 1951, during Jim Crow and before the *Brown* decision. As Kenneth Warren has argued, African American authors during Jim Crow were writing with the understanding of how legal segregation loomed over them, and therefore "no writer of this period could operate indifferently…to the [expectation] that African American literature ought to contribute demonstrably to some social end…"[35]. The second half of the twentieth century represents a transitional period for students and persons deemed minorities as they become absorbed by the American university. Considering this transitionary period, campus peripheries can be understood as a cautious and apprehensive aesthetic of writing about campus life. Perhaps it was no longer the case that authors found it potentially detrimental, like Saunders, to write about the campus akin to their white and wealthy peers. But "minority" authors, it could be argued, certainly found it difficult to write within a genre whose literary force and appeal came from creating an enclosed world. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine having to separate oneself from the still prescient social struggles of the time, and of potentially leaving behind one's family and community, if even through the freedom offered by fiction. Instead, minority authors wrote fiction that dramatized their continuing social conditions while also being keenly aware of the role education and university life was beginning to play around them. Not feeling fully integrated with the institution of the university, but still being drawn by its gravity, authors like Butler instead chose to write something else that mixed

[35] *What Was African American Literature?*, 13.

and blended with other genres. But what does it mean for education as connected to the institutional force of the university to leave the bounds of the campus? Butler imagines just this, but in the most extreme of the senses. Dana's struggling student and authors life, seemingly boring and opaque, quickly becomes one about survival. Slavery, to be sure, is no longer a present issue for Dana (even if she might joke about it). But for the author Butler, her characters can't just be students—much like her peers at Pasadena couldn't just be students. They had to be engaged in an education that was potentially one of salvation.

How much education can achieve in this regard is a question that the novel raises, and one it answers in multiple ways. On the one hand, no education can spare Dana's most important ancestor, Alice, from death brought on by the conditions of slavery. And no education can keep Rufus from attempting to rape and hurt Dana at the end of the novel. And in fact, loss is so visceral and profound that Dana loses part of her arm in the process of this journey. But this realization of educations potential dead end is one that Dana makes much sooner than these events.

In one of her trips back to the future Dana accidentally leaves Kevin behind. Unfortunately, when Dana finally returns to the plantation, several years have gone by and Kevin is nowhere to be found. She decides to wait for him and has Rufus send letters to him to get him to return from the north. Eventually, however, she discovers that Rufus never sent the letters and has kept them instead, as a way of trapping her within the plantation. This acts as the catalyst for her escape. She doesn't get very far before Rufus and Weylin, Rufus's father, find her, and Weylin beats her. Hurt, broken, and angry, Dana comes to an epiphany about her situation through comparing herself to Alice:

> We were both failures, she and I. We'd both run and been brought back, she in days, I in only hours. I probably knew more than she did about the general layout of the Eastern Shore. She knew only the area she'd been born and raised in, and *she couldn't read a map*. I knew about towns and rivers miles away—and it hadn't done me a damned bit of good! What had Weylin said? That *educated* didn't mean smart. He had a point. *Nothing in my education or knowledge* of the future had helped me to escape. Yet in a few years an illiterate runaway named Harriet Tubman would make nineteen trips into this country and lead three hundred fugitives to freedom. (emphasis added)[36]

In this moment of defeat, Dana comes to the difficult conclusion that her education is meaningless insofar as it cannot save or help her from the actual experience of being a slave, which is to always be degraded and abused. This point is driven even further as she describes Tubman as illiterate, but still having accomplished major feats—feats greater than Dana can ever even wish to accomplish. As Robert Crossley notes in a "Reader's Guide" to the novel: "In her first trips to the past, Dana's literacy, her education, and her historical knowledge sometimes lull her into a false sense of security." And "Books had not taught [Dana] why so many slaves accepted their condition, nor had books defined the kind of bravery possible in the humiliating situation of being owned."[37] I would add to this the institution of the postwar university as another one of these educational mediators. The lesson here, to return to the scene of Butler's Pasadena City College experience, is a form of relativism. The Black Panther Party, perhaps the most visible faction of the black nationalist movement, despite their community organizing and closeness to "ordinary" citizens, had leadership who came from a university background. Indeed,

[36] *Kindred*, 177.
[37] Ibid, 277.

the co-founders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale first met while they were students at Merritt College. Connect the thread between them, and the angry college student, and Butler's *Kindred* appears to be a strident rebuke of a mentality that sneers at older generations from a perspective of the present. But it is a refutation of "education" as received on a campus that ironically, *Kindred,* as a narrative product influenced by the campus—a campus periphery—seeks to correct through its own pedagogical logics.

Dana is no better than Alice even if she is more educated and literate—formal skills she obtained from her college education. Dana's loss, and her inability to ultimately save Alice—her literal kin, but also a representative of a distant community—shows that there is no contemporary education she can receive that can help her in the world of slavery. So, to ostracize those that came before is to not fully understand their struggles. The fantastical way in which Dana is returned to the past also offers an answer to this problematic. One could only ever know what it was like to go through what one's ancestors went through if only there was a way to travel time. So, in other words, it might just be impossible to know. However, if we were to pull the focus away from the text and into the act of writing, performed by Butler the author, it would reveal an appreciation for knowledge-making, in the form of creative writing. And this knowledge-making is a testament to Butler's desire to educate, through fiction, that which we cannot know from a perspective in the present.

A Lesson Before Dying

If *Kindred* is somewhat coy about its character's relationship to education and the campus, *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines, per its title, is not. In fact, a potential flaw of the novel is how much importance is placed on the protagonist's university education—at times overtly representing him as a savior and consequently coming off as elitist. Published in 1993, *A*

Lesson Before Dying tells the story of an intellectually challenged black man, Jefferson, who is sentenced to death after being wrongly accused of murdering a white store owner in conspiracy with two other black men who died at the scene of the crime. Set in the late 1940s in the fictional town of Bayonne, Louisiana, the response to Jefferson being at the wrong place at the wrong time is met with little sympathy by the white jury and judge. The novel begins with this sentencing and in this way "accepts" the outcome of the decision. Its focus isn't so much on whether there is justice in the decision. Jefferson, as a black man in the Jim Crow south, is born guilty. The novel, instead, is about how to cope with this cloud of injustice that hovers over the town and its black residents, in the face of explicit death. And since there is no "life" to be saved, as that decision has already been made, the novel seeks to discover whether dignity, the soul, or the hope to keep going can be salvaged for the community that must live through this death. What is additionally painful, however, are the defensive statements made on behalf of Jefferson by his attorney during his trial. Attempting to appeal to the sympathies of the white jury the defense attorney calls Jefferson—a 21-year-old man—a "boy," a "fool" and even compares him to an animal: "This skull here holds no plans. What you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn. That is what you see here, but you do not see anything capable of planning a robbery or a murder…Mention the names of Keats, Byron, Scott, and see whether the eyes will show one moment of recognition."[38] These remarks, that go on for

[38] Ernest J. Gaines. *A Lesson Before Dying*. (New York: Vintage Contemporaries), 8. A strange question to ask. Surely, the general public wouldn't know who Keats, Byron or Scott is? But in this court scene, knowing these names increases ones "humanity." In this way, the novel is already making being educated carry a particular importance. Although for Jefferson it is better that he be seen as an "animal" if his life is to be spared. It is also noteworthy that Jefferson's age is 21—the approximate age around which one might be graduating from post-secondary education.

many more paragraphs, are so hurtful that Jefferson's godmother, Miss Emma, makes it her mission to prove them wrong. Is she capable of making a "man" out of Jefferson—and in doing so returning his humanity—before his death? Is the local priest? The community? The person enlisted for this teaching role, and lesson before dying, is Grant Wiggins.

Grant Wiggins, in this world of the novel, is Jefferson's foil. As the novel progresses, we learn of how Grant was able to leave the town and receive a college education. Crucially, we get little to no depiction of his college life, which begs the question of what "education" is supposed to mean in the novel if it is not being dispersed by an institution of higher education. As the narrative progresses, we learn that an education is being received away from a college setting, while still being connected to it through one of its graduates. After having had the option of moving to California to be closer to his parents, and away from the oppressive Bayonne, Grant decides to return and teach the local children basic arithmetic, reading, and writing, as well as manners and home skills. Because of this return to his community despite having the option of leaving, the local black people look up to him, while the white ones view him with suspicion. But this isn't a decision that Grant has taken easily, nor is it one he has fully accepted or come to terms with at this starting point of the novel. Indeed, upon being first asked whether he can "teach" Jefferson "to be a man", he replies "What do you want me to do?...What can I do? It's only a matter of weeks, a couple of months, maybe [before his death]. What can I do that you haven't done the past twenty-one years?"[39] To which Miss Emma replies, "You the teacher." Already the novel is cementing the notion that having a college education grants someone a certain wisdom and superiority. The defense attorney certainly believed so when invoking the romantic poets that Jefferson would not have known, whom we can associate with a certain

[39] *A Lesson Before Dying*, 13.

college learnedness, and which others have highlighted as examples of the "tradition of literary creation from which African Americans were excluded because they were forbidden to read and write."[40]And Miss Emma believes it as well as she believes that Grant is capable of teaching Jefferson something no one else can, because he is "the teacher." To be sure, Grant himself is suspicious of these implications as he replies to her that he is only capable of teaching reading, writing and arithmetic—basic tools and teachings of pedagogy, and not tools meant to address a man's humanity or their soul. And in fact, his relationship to teaching is negative, as he claims to have told his aunt many times how much he hates the town and living and teaching in it: "I had told her I was no teacher, I hated teaching, and I was just running in place here."[41] What lessons can an unwilling teacher teach? Or, more to the point, what can a college education teach that goes beyond reading, writing and arithmetic? Like *Kindred*, this is a question the novel implicitly mulls over through its entirety as we get closer to its end and the end of Jefferson's life. But what about for Grant? What has a college education granted him? And what is he supposed to do with it after *electing* to return to Bayonne, however unwillingly?

For starters, the novel does not shy away from highlighting the importance of him having received a college education. It is a marker of difference, though not of economic wealth or mobility since Grant still lives with his aunt (though perhaps we can assign this more to family structures rather than economic resources). After being guilted into agreeing to "teach" Jefferson, Grant accompanies his aunt and Mis Emma to their past decades'-long workplace, a plantation

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[40] Frank W. Shelton --, et al. *Critical Reflections on the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 252.

[41] *A Lesson Before Dying*, 15. Grant chose to stay, but he clearly does not like being in the town because it reminds him of his "inferiority." At the same time, it's clear that Grant's decision to stay stems from his desire to be there for his community—and "give back" to them—even if this means sacrificing his personal freedom.

where Grant himself worked at as a child alongside these women. There they hope to talk to Henri Pichot, the owner of the place, who also happens to be the brother-in-law of the sheriff, in order to receive permission for Grant to visit Jefferson in his final weeks at the prison. While they wait for him, Grant thinks about his last time there, and how "before [he] left for the university, [his] aunt sat [him] down at the table in [their] kitchen and said to [him], 'Me and Em-ma can make out all right without you coming through that back door ever again'."[42] The separation Grant is beginning to achieve from his working-class black community begins in these moments. The status of a university education offers him a pathway out of having to humiliate himself by having to re-enter the backdoors of the plantation house. Similar to how Butler's mother wanted her to receive an education that lifted her beyond the humiliation and poverty of manual labor, Grant's aunt has set him on a similar path by encouraging his education. So, it is ironic that the person who told him he no longer has to walk through those doors because he is "different" (read: educated and thus distinguished), ten years later, in a moment of crisis, is the one forcing him to do so. These women created a path for him to reach a college education, through their decades of labor in this house, but now they need that repaid. And the stakes are seemingly so high that Grant's aunt is backtracking on her words from a decade ago. To the black townspeople, at least the few of them we've met so far into the novel, Grant's collegiate education is of great importance. For the white people, it is also significant as it separates Grant from the others, and as Grant himself puts it "[Henri Pichot] looked over her head at me, standing back by the door. I was too educated for [him]; he had no use for me at all anymore."[43] This scene is juxtaposed with the one where Jefferson's defense attorney compares

[42] Ibid, 19.
[43] Ibid, 21.

him to an animal. Whereas Jefferson, because he is purportedly unintelligent, is "useful" for fulfilling the physical labor of the white people and owners, and is seen primarily as a tool, Grant is not because he is "educated."

Similar to Octavia Butler's educational path, Gaines attended a community college in California before earning a degree in literature from San Francisco State University, and later attending Stanford University on a writer's fellowship. And up until his death he taught at The University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette, the site of teaching where he first came up with the idea to write *A Lesson Before Dying*.[44] In the same way we can attribute the educational themes of *Kindred* to Butler's collegiate experiences, we can also think through *A Lesson Before Dying* as mobilizing a specific form of university ideology that accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century. For this reading, it is worth considering Gaines' use of the G.I. Bill to fund his degree in literature from SFSU. The G.I. Bill, alongside other postwar conditions and policies enacted, enabled an influx of American college attendance at levels that had not previously been seen. In a significant way, the G.I. Bill, as a governmental policy, was the harbinger for how the second half of the twentieth century would begin to frame college attendance due to its upholding of individual self-determination. In his recent study on the topic, Jon Shelton traces the thought and policy that shaped and prioritized higher education as a form of "human capital" during this period. He reads the G.I. Bill as one of these proto-policies, and it is one of its significant characteristics that would later shape the more widely impactful Higher Education Act of 1965. The G.I. Bill did not only give veterans the right to a tuition-free college education, it also allowed them to choose freely as to where they could receive this education: "Though unemployment and reemployment provisions and housing spoke to security, the push to allow

[44] Ernest J. Gaines. "Writing a Lesson Before Dying." *The Southern Review*, Vol. 41, P.770-777.

veterans to decide where to access their education, in contrast, enhanced the notion that *education equated to an opportunity that veterans were best able to determine how to use*. And, this structure of paying for higher education became the model for later expansions of access with the Higher Education Act of 1965 and its amendments, which would also *build consent for the notion of education as economic opportunity*" (emphasis added).[45] As Shelton later adds, though the G.I. bill was meant to be colorblind, racist southern democrats overlooked its administration in the south, preventing black veterans living in that region from accessing well-funded schools. Gaines, crucially, did not face this barrier as he lived in California and exercised the bills freedoms in that state.[46] His exercise of this governmental policy allows us to retrospectively read him as belonging to the legacy of the shift in American higher education that increasingly saw college attendance as a route of economic opportunity, as opposed to one of citizenship training. Gaines himself has often commented on the impact of moving to California and being placed in a position to receive an education and these benefits: "But I think if I'd have stayed in Louisiana for another five years until I was twenty or twenty-one years old, I think I could have been destroyed as so many of my contemporaries were. They no longer went further into education…At fifteen years old, [my parents] took me to California to be educated. I went to school in a completely integrated area."[47] And elsewhere: "I had discovered [that I wanted to be

[45] Jon Shelton. *The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy*. Ithaca [New York]: Cornell University Press, 2023), 42.
[46] It is also worth noting that although black veterans did not attend college at the same rates as their white counterparts, this was not solely due to the restrictions imposed on them by the existing postwar racist structures. Instead, this lack of enrollment can be better understood as the already little education they had received prior to this moment, which, to be sure, was a consequence of racial discrimination. Still, even if these veterans did not use the G.I. Bill to fund their collegiate education they did use it to fund other forms of pedagogy such as trades and vocations. See, Mettler, "The Only Good Thing Was the G.I. Bill."
[47] Gaines, Ernest J., et al. *Ernest J. Gaines: Conversations*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019), 39.

a writer] when I went to California at fifteen and went into a library when I was about sixteen years old. It was the first time I had done that because I was not allowed to go into the library in Louisiana, in my town. The library was for whites only."[48]

The G.I. Bill as one of the roots of the ideology of individual educational success becomes magnified with the passing of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Both Jon Shelton and Melinda Cooper have shown how "human capital," as an economic theory, began to influence policy makers in Lyndon B. Johnson's democratic administration. As Cooper writes regarding one of the leading figures in this economic thought: "Theodore Schultz exerted an unusual influence on governmental policy, thanks largely to the enthusiastic translational work of Walter Heller, a public finance economist who served as Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers under Kennedy and Johnson."[49] And thanks to Heller, "the idea that the federal government should play a much more direct and generous role in financing higher education became a mainstay of neo-Keynesian public finance economics." Through the representatives of the Council of Economic Advisers, this economic thought and policy culminated in the passing of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which "gave the federal government authority over almost every aspect of the nation's higher education system, doubled the federal budget for higher education, and imparted a coherent vision of democratic inclusion to the sector as a whole…pumped federal aid into impoverished black colleges, oversaw creation of student recruitment programs and bridging courses for disadvantaged students, increased the number of grants available to low-income students, and created a program of guaranteed student loans to be subsidized by the federal government."[50]

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[48] Ibid, 41.
[49] *Family Values*, 221.
[50] Ibid, 223.

Although the novel's setting is chronologically placed much before these laws came into effect, it is worth noting Gaines's initial desire to have its setting be more contemporary. He originally imagined the novel to be set in 1988, "however, unable to receive an answer from the warden of Angola Prison regarding whether a teacher could visit a death-row prisoner, he turned back in time to write a different novel, set in a period when racism was open and casual."[51] Pushed further on this decision to set the novel back in 1948, Gaines's answer suggests that the choice was somewhat arbitrary but also meant to give the catalyst of the plot (the aunt pursuing redemption for Jefferson) legitimacy: "That book would have been a totally different book had that book been written in 88 instead of 48. For one thing, Grant would not have had the same problems. In 88 Miss Emma would not have had to gone up to the place to talk to Pichot. They would have gotten an attorney to step in and do all that."[52] Gaines needed a historical context upon which his character Grant's unique status would have granted him exceptional "power," yet this power could only have been imagined in a period where higher education discourse—"the education myth"—reigned supreme. As John Marsh has argued, people who benefited from higher education often view their academics paths into the middle class as the correct (and sole) ones to take, and thus encourage its reproduction.[53] These insights offer further evidence in support of reading Gaines, and consequently his novel, as a product influenced by the postwar higher education boom, despite his character Grant's implied attendance at an HBCU, or its chronological placement in Jim Crow.

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[51] Karen Carmean and Kathleen Gregory Klein. *Ernest J. Gaines: A Critical Companion*. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1998), 117.
[52] Ernest J. Gaines, et al. *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 306.
[53] John Marsh. *Class Dismissed: Why We Cannot Teach or Learn Our Way Out of Inequality*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011), 21.

To be sure, the novel does not envision higher education's savior qualities as ones tied to economic opportunity as the educational ideologies of the period imagined them. For Jefferson, Grant's educational gnosis cuts deeper, offering him a path towards a redemptive "manhood" that he has failed to acquire due to a lack of proper teaching. Yet the ideal of self-actualization via collegiate/academic pursuit—even if vicarious—does resemble educational ideologies of the period, and ones which Gaines would have certainly been influenced by, however implicitly, given his participation in government programs which he was a beneficiary of, and given his ongoing residence at a university. That a form of freedom—that is, a freedom of spiritual growth in the face of death—is imagined as being achieved through the influence of a college-educated person, can be read as symptomatic of higher education's grasp on the second half of the twentieth century. Mary Ellen Doyle, in her framing of this teacher and student relationship, touches upon how the novel asks it to be read: "Jefferson is the shadow side of Grant—uneducated and unambitious, without honor in his own black community and without imagination of anything beyond it, a pupil who never learned, much less came back to teach, victim of socially encouraged ignorance rather than dangerous achievement."[54] As Doyle highlights, Grant's importance as a teacher is amplified through his juxtaposition with Jefferson. And not only is this association embraced, but "teaching" of other kinds, from other teachers, is pushed away, further elevating and distinguishing Grant's unique gnosis. Initially, Miss Emma, Jefferson's aunt, plans to visit the prison with both Grant and the local priest, as a sort of triad of uplift, but Jefferson only responds to Grant. Miss Emma, representative of family, and the priest,

[54] Mary Ellen Doyle. *Voices from the Quarters: The Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 207.

representative of the church, are pushed away in the presence of Grant, the representative of the institution of education.

But the novel's view on education is more complex than a blind acceptance of it. Much like how Dana's relationship to education in *Kindred* is often characterized by skepticism about its liberatory possibilities, Grant is continuously calling to question what he can achieve as a college-educated black man in charge of teaching the black youth of his town. This feeling of being stuck, to be sure, is attributable to the Jim Crow conditions Grant and his fellow peers and family found themselves in. And education—despite its potential—fails to cut through that barrier. One scene in the novel encapsulates his ongoing frustration with his situation as someone who sees the other side but cannot leave due to a sense of responsibility to the town. After a group of older men drop off some wood at the school, Grant has the older boys of his class saw and chop the wood. Soon he notes similarities between the older men who left and his students, since they both joke and laugh amongst each other, causing him to reflect to himself: "What am I doing? Am I reaching them at all? They are acting exactly as the old men did earlier. They are fifty years younger, maybe more, but doing the same thing those old men who never attended school a day in their lives. Is it just a vicious circle? Am I doing anything?"[55] At first glance, this seems like an overreaction to witnessing a group of boys having fun with each other. Afterall, children will play amongst each other, and this does not need to be indicative or foreshadowing of a dark future. But Grant is in the melancholic position of having to lead the seemingly meaningless education of Jefferson as well as having lived through the "vicious circle" of schooling himself. He goes on to reflect on his own history as a student and how most of his peers he grew up with went to prison, were murdered, or "simply died slower." That he was able

[55] *A Lesson Before Dying*, 62

"get out" and receive an education that set him on a different path is presented as the exception to the rule. Furthermore, while the white citizens of the town certainly reinforce manual labor as synonymous with black labor, and thus as unskilled and of low worth, in this moment, Grant does the same. Would Grant have had the same reaction were the older men teachers? Why does their livelihood as manual laborers invoke within Grant a feeling of aimlessness? In a troublesome way, the novel succumbs to the "human capital" logics of placing more value in certain forms of labor over others. Grant does not question what forces might dictate manual labor as unskilled and therefore deserving of a low-wage path that causes financial stagnancy. Instead, by reacting in the way that he does, he adds to the seeming economic aimlessness attached to these professions, augmenting the narrative that envisioned higher education as the preferential mode of getting economically ahead.

While it is initially confusing that the novel presents Grant's role as a teacher as one both characterized by pessimism and salvation, the novel offers a precedent for the former. Following the scene where Grant is observing the similarities between the older men and the group of boys, Grant recollects his experiences with his own teacher, Matthew Antoine, "the big mulatto from Poulaya," who told Grant and his peers that "most of [them] would die violently, and those who did not would be brought down to the level of beasts. Told [them] that there was no other choice but to run and run. That in him—he did not say all this, but [they] felt it—there was nothing but hatred for himself and contempt for [them]."[56] This teacher and mentor figure is not very optimistic about their role of teaching, and it is something that has translated to how Grant sees the work that he does. Yet despite this clear meanness, the teacher is still upheld by Grant, who

[56] Ibid.

has in the past asked him for something akin to what others expect of him in his present role as the teacher of the town:

> "What's wrong with that university?" [Matthew] asked. "Don't they tell you?" "They tell me how to succeed in the South as a colored man. They tell me about reading, writing, and arithmetic. I need to know about life." "I can't tell you anything about life," he said. "What do I know about life? I stayed here. You have to go away to know about life. There's no life here. There's nothing but ignorance here. You want to know about life? Well, its too late. Forget it. Just go on and be the nigger you were born to be, but forget about life. You make me tired, and I'm cold. The wine doesn't help."[57]

This seemingly misplaced and abstract desire to obtain something from teacher figures in the novel that goes beyond a formal education is present elsewhere. Even when Grant and his peers go back to their family to complain and raise issue with Matthew's clear contempt for them, they receive little sympathy, and instead are told to "go back and learn all [they] could." Others, as Grant recollects, go back, but few learn, and "having no place to run, they went into the fields; others went into small towns and cities, seeking work, and did even worse."[58] Yet Grant proves to be the exception to this predestination of suffering. And it is because his aunt encourages his scholarship: "But she told me that I would not be one of the others, that I would learn as much as [Matthew] could teach me, then I would go away to learn from someone else. But that I would learn as much as he could teach me."[59] Defying the path the white elites of the town have imagined for Grant, and defying the pessimism that Matthew teaches, Grant chooses to "learn"

[57] Ibid, 65.
[58] Ibid, 63.
[59] Ibid.

and in doing so angers Matthew, who grudgingly accepts to "teach" his student: "You want to learn, I will help you learn. Maybe in that way I will be free, knowing that someone else has taken the burden. Good, good, you want to learn? Good, good, here is the burden."[60]

And if burden is what Matthew imagines to be passing onto Grant, burden is certainly what Grant receives as he is tasked with teaching life to a man sentenced to death. This burden appears on two fronts. The first is obvious and it is the absurd and pessimistic nature of the position. Teaching is often done at the beginning of one's life, not at the end of one, and the novel's awareness of this is demonstrated through the decision of having Jefferson be college-aged. Nonetheless, this is unimportant to Jefferson's aunt as a believer in both the afterlife and in dying with dignity. The second burden is that of teaching a student who refuses to learn. While those enlisting Grant as a teacher certainly see the benefit in doing so, Jefferson is skeptical. He has internalized white society's thoughts about him and at one point even goes so far as to eat from the ground like an animal, emulating the hog he was compared to, shocking Grant.[61] Nonetheless, over time, Grant and Jefferson—teacher and student—begin to form a bond. And this bond's climax is highlighted by juxtaposing Jefferson's initial conforming to the image the white elites have placed on him to a scene of him eating the food his aunt has prepared for him. But before this moment of breaking bread occurs, Grant's conversation with Jefferson highlights an epiphany akin to that experienced by Dana in *Kindred.* When Dana is captured after attempting to escape, she cites Harriet Tubman's superiority over her even as an "illiterate slave." In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant invites the same inversion, by telling Jefferson that he is the real hero of the town and of their people, even as a prisoner sentenced to death:

[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid, 83.

> I could never be a hero. I teach. But I don't like teaching. I teach because it is the only thing an educated black man can do in the South today…A hero does for others. He would do anything for people he loves, because he knows it would make their lives better. I am not that kind of person, but I want you to be. You could give something to her, to me, to those children in the quarter. You could give them something that I never could. They expect it from me, but not from you. The white people out there are saying that you don't have it—that you're a hog, not a man. But I know they are wrong. You have the potentials. We all have, no matter who we are. [62]

While Grant might understate his role as a teacher, he nonetheless accomplishes the task his aunt and Miss Emma originally enlisted him for as it is through him that Jefferson reaches dignity in the face of the death. Still, embedded in this exchange is also the realization of formal education's limitations, as it cannot teach anything about "dignity, nothing about identity, nothing about loving and caring." While much of the novel positions Grant as the leader of the community, as one of the few college-educated black citizens, Grant understands another side of the lesson being taught before death, and it is one which positions Jefferson as the true teacher. Jefferson, by facing unjustified and cruel death with dignity, as someone viewed as expendable and non-threatening, will do more for the community than Grant can as a martyr.

The novel's ending scenes—depictions of the days leading up to the execution and the execution itself—are narrated through focusing on the lives of the community members of Bayonne: "Sidney deRogers was on his way to George Jareau's house to mow the lawn…[;]My aunt did not sleep at the house the night before…[;]Vivian and I sat in a corner of the Rainbow

[62] Ibid, 191.

club that night…[;]The minister did not sleep at all that night…[;]At six thirty, the sheriff sat down at the table in his dining room to eat his breakfast… [;]Melvina Jack was sweeping off the sidewalk…[;]During the month that he was in jail, Fee Jinkin's duty was to clean the sheriff's office and the white men's and ladies' rest room…" and so on.[63] This does the work of demonstrating how this death affects not only Jefferson's immediate family, but all those who he might call extended kin under the umbrella of racism, as well as the white members of the town. Additionally, a segment is dedicated to showing the journal entries of Jefferson as he symbolically goes on to "graduate" to a manhood of dignity through the pedagogy of Grant. In one of these entries, Jefferson thanks Grant for helping him find his dignity: "I cry cause you been so good to me mr wigin an nobody aint never been that good to me an make me think im sombody."[64] Through these journal entries—that Grant had asked Jefferson to write in as a form of "homework"—the novel suggests that while an education that universities cannot teach is the ideal, there is also a need to show this through more formal measures such as the written word. In the end, Jefferson does indeed stand tall, with his last words being "Tell Nannan I walked." But this isn't a victory. For even when this is revealed, Grant still refuses to acknowledge his role in this "salvation," ultimately representing the uneasy nature of being positioned as the "leader" of a community who in many ways remains far from free.

While both *Kindred* and *A Lesson Before Dying* set out to show the importance of a college education and its formal lessons, this objective is in constant tension with other avenues of teaching and learning that are found outside of the campus and within marginalized communities. Furthermore, being formally "educated" and receiving these benefits, as these

[63] Ibid, 235-245.
[64] Ibid, 232.

novelists imagine it, is anything but glamorous. Indeed, receiving the distinguishment of an education also comes with the burden and guilt of having to "lead" a community whom your education does little to help. The novels suggest this as the disenfranchised figures the protagonists, who are themselves representative of the community's they inhabit, seek to save/help—Alice for Dana, and Jefferson for Grant—are destined to die from the start of their narratives. At the same time, in concert with these losses, there is also individual growth and learning, ultimately reflecting postwar higher education's promise of individual uplift. It will probably hurt to move beyond your community—but you'll be okay.

Expelled: On the Outskirts of the Ivory Tower

At the end of this dissertation's first chapter, the brief close reading of *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros argued that the novel contained a campus periphery moment that envisioned a campus future with a character who was not yet at an American university. Furthermore, the ending lines of the novel promised the character's return to help their community after graduating from said university (We can think of this character, Esperanza, which in English translates to Hope, as a "pre-undergraduate" or "graduate-to-be"). Although the narrative is told from the perspective of a child, this foreshadowing offers an instance of authorial intrusion that we can read as the real-life position of Cisneros, who as a product and beneficiary of a university education, was invested in replicating the opportunities made available to her by this experience and reproduced this inclination, even if briefly, through her fictional character Esperanza. The second chapter offered two different accounts of campus periphery novels that positioned their protagonists, Dana Franklin in *Kindred* and Grant Wiggins in *A Lesson Before Dying,* as graduates of the university—specifically an American university and higher education system that was becoming increasingly understood as ensuring *the* path towards economic security (We can think of these characters as "graduates"). Within this socio-economic landscape, their degrees, it could be argued, were mobilized as tools to "give back" and help the communities they "left" behind, thus fulfilling the act of return—only to face the ambivalent nature of that "help" and whether their individual success could fix the ongoing effects of historical and structural wrongs. If the end of Cisneros' novel imagines an optimistic future and return, the novels of Butler and Gaines engage the complexity of that "future" and "return" and in doing so, as Chapter two showed, the limits of their individual success as an agent against "community"- wide challenges. Both texts define campus peripheries. And despite

the fact that the characters of these novels never set foot on a college campus (beyond some brief flashbacks), I've argued that they do the work of campus novels in expanding our understanding of the genre and, in turn, of American higher education's role in the postwar period. Indeed, these characters might never set foot on a college campus during the course of the novels but they can still be understood as graduates-to-be or graduates as they allude to their enrollments in their respective offsite campuses.

There is another path/space that campus periphery moments relate as they depict their fluid relationship to the university as nonconventional academic fictions. In these stories, the characters are not foreshadowing enrollment in a university, and they are also not graduates of university (even if their author's biographies often betray these fictional depictions). Rather, the characters in these novels are expelled from the university, depicting its exclusionary nature as a, in this instance, racially discriminatory American institution. Yet despite being exclusionary, despite forcing these characters out of its campus havens, the university is still depicted in a positive light—continuing the feelings of optimistic ambivalence felt towards these institutions similar to that of other campus periphery authors. Indeed, as I'll argue in this chapter, the continued embrace of this educational institution—even in the face of literal expulsion—attests to the growing gravity and appeal of the university in its "Golden Age."

While this chapter highlights this form of campus periphery—noting the "un-graduate" nature of the characters it focuses on—it ends by turning to argue that the stylistic impetus of the "campus periphery" erodes, or is replaced, at the turn of the twenty-first century through overt depictions of college and campus life. In other words, it could be said that a kind of "minority" campus novel does emerge and is no longer written as peripheral but rather comes to emulate the "proper" content of the traditional genre. There is no clear explanation for why this is the case,

although an obvious one might lie in the fact that racial "minority" student enrollment increased as the twentieth century came to an end—thus smoothing out the sharp edges of felt exclusion.[1] Although it took minorities more time to become integrated with and within the university, both at the level of feeling and actual demographic numbers, it eventually did happen, and the fiction being produced began to reflect these changing demographics and accompanying (albeit imperfect) sense of inclusion.

Another explanation might lie in the fact that enough distance began to be felt between the struggles of Jim Crow segregation—the apex justifying force of discriminatory practices—that emerging authors no longer felt attached to the same struggles that had kept others from writing explicit academic fiction. On this line of argumentation I'm influenced by Mark Anthony Neal's writing on "the post soul intelligentsia," a group comprised of "writers, visual artists, musicians, poets, independent scholars, and academics."[2] For Neal, this black intelligentsia was characterized by their temporal distance from the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement and its leadership: "the generation(s) of black youth born after the early successes of the traditional civil rights movement are in fact *divorced from the nostalgia* associated with those successes and thus positioned to critically engage the movements legacy from a state of objectivity that the traditional civil rights leadership is both unwilling and incapable of doing." (emphasis mine)[3] I'm less interested in the specifics of this group, as Neal argues for and goes on to further

[1]Hispanic and Latino enrollment has increased by 264.8% since 1976, and Black/ African American enrollment by 125.5% since the same year. While in 1976 15.39% of students enrolled were from a racial/ ethnic minority, that number, as of 2021, is 44.34%. See Melanie Hanson. "College Enrollment & Student Demographic Statistics." EducationData.org, January, 10, 2024, https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics

[2] Mark Anthony Neal. *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-soul Aesthetic*. New York: Routledge, 2002), 105.

[3] Ibid.

describe, and more interested in the insight of how time's passing can change understandings of one's relationship to histories of struggle. So, not only might contemporary academic fiction reflect society and the university's changing demographics, but the time it took for this to happen also plays a role in how this fiction is written. For the texts that I'm reading through, the affect that is left behind is not "nostalgia" but rather a form of "anxiety"—as it relates to one's attachments to community—that is shed through the passing of time. Neal's influencing logic, then, could be applied to the contemporary author Junot Díaz and his novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* which I highlight at the end of this chapter, even as, in some instances, his public facing commentary contradicts the content of his fiction.

In the sections that follow I'll attend to campus periphery moments that showcase the ambivalently felt exclusion in *No-No Boy* by John Okada and *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. I'll then turn to Junot Diaz's novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, as it reflects a growing comfort with the university as a fictional setting that "minority" characters can now imagine existing within. To begin, however, I lead with a reading of John William's now classic academic novel, *Stoner,* to demonstrate just how wedded traditional academic fiction is to its fictional campus setting as an integral part of its overall structure—showcasing its "inclusion"—and how a campus periphery novel fails to replicate this. This failure comes to show how these "campus periphery" academic fictions written by minority authors are largely imagined outside of the conventional tropes of academic fiction as they attend to the more pressing matter of racial discrimination and its detriments. Still, even as they work on the outskirts of the campus their allusion to, and often romanticization of, campus sites mark their longing for its promises.

Tenuous Havens

> As often as [Stoner] could, after his classes were over and work at the Foote's done, he returned to the University. Sometimes, in the evenings, he wandered in the long open quadrangle, among couples who strolled together and murmured softly; *though he did not know any of them, and though he did not speak to them, he felt a kinship with them*. Sometimes he stood in the center of the quad, looking at the five huge columns in front of Jesse Hall that thrust upward into the night out of the cool grass; he had learned that these columns were the remains of the original main building of the University, destroyed many years ago by fire. Grayish silver in the moonlight, bare and pure, *they seemed to him to represent the way of life he had embraced, as temple represents a god*. (emphasis mine) [4]

> But certainly, this much is true in the United States: it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment.[5]

The novels *Stoner* by John Williams (1965) and *No-No Boy* by John Okada (1957), despite attending to quite different themes and topics, share similar scenes in which their central characters approach a university campus with a sense of awe and apprehension. The difference is found in what shapes and follows these encounters. By comparing these scenes of encounter, and the larger novels in which they occur, I hope to demonstrate the "exclusion" that a campus periphery novel highlights in contrast to the "inclusion" of a traditional campus novel. In *Stoner*, this scene comes early in the novel, as the novel's protagonist, William Stoner, first sets foot on

[4] John Williams. *Stoner*. (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006), 15.
[5] Stefano Harney, Jack Halberstam and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. (Wivenhoe ; New York ; Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

the university campus that will become his home and workplace for the remainder of his life. As mentioned in the first chapter of dissertation, John Williams' *Stoner* stands out as an academic fiction due to how it occupies both the campus and academic novel, though it ultimately favors the latter. That is, while it begins as a campus novel (the coming-of-age narratives that coincided with a liberal-arts understanding of the university), its plot only spends a brief period there, as it is more concerned with narrativizing the middle-class life of a male English Professor as he encounters career troubles, marital woes and other familial afflictions such as the growth and estrangement of his daughter. Other academic novels begin with their faculty characters amidst their career—Mary McCarthy's *Groves of Academe*, Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, or Phillip Roth's *The Human Stain,* for example—but *Stoner* does not.

What is perhaps most interesting about *Stoner* as an academic fiction*,* then, is that before William Stoner can become the tragic academic figure the novel unravels, he must first enter the halls of academia through the positionality of a student, and within the confines of the campus novel. By attending to this origin and subsequent shift in this novel as significant—as representative of its inclusive nature—we can begin to see just how invested academic fiction is to the campus settings and sites it relies on at the level of its organizing structures. Indeed, the very nature by which *Stoner* evolves into an academic novel is indicative of this investment as it paints the haven of the campus as limitless and unshakeable. This functions in addition to the affection its characters show towards its fictional campuses.

William Stoner, "born in 1891 on a small farm in central Missouri near the village of Booneville" doesn't apply to university, nor is he seeking to leave his family and community as a way of escaping his life of poverty and mediocrity, to then return as a savior. The desire to escape this life only comes after attending the university for some time and getting a taste for the

life of the mind. It is telling that he does *not* want to return but instead wants to form and curate his own life's path within the haven the university space provides. Prior to being introduced to higher education (and academia) as a life path, Stoner's schooling is banal. He does "his lessons as if they were chores only somewhat less exhausting than those around the farm." Seemingly, his only aspiration—and the only future he imagines for himself—is one in which he helps around his parent's farm, because "it seemed to him that his father grew slower and more weary with the passing months," so it was only a matter of time before he needed to take up more of farm's labor.[6] This predetermined fate quickly collapses as his father sits him down one day at the family table to tell him about a "county agent" who came by with information about the "College of Agriculture" at the "University in Columbia." His father—whose name we never learn, an omission which serves to further represent the severance between Stoner and his family's working-class background that undergirds the narrative—believes that he should go, as Stoner could learn novel agricultural techniques that might help the family farm's recent poor performance.

This exchange between Stoner and his father is odd, however, as it appears a bit early in the history of American higher education's relationship to the notion of human capital. Stoner's father laments that he himself didn't receive an education beyond middle school and thus lacks a type of "human capital" the shifting economic landscape demands. Yet the notion of higher education (or even just education) as a human-capital-giving institution only strengthens later in the midcentury. Indeed, as it was the case for college-aged men at the turn of the twentieth century, it is arguably more likely that Stoner's father would have wanted him to stay and work as he would have been more useful for the farm in the immediacy of the moment due to the

[6] *Stoner*, 5.

potential "income foregone."[7] A distant relative with the similar background to Stoner's family scoffs at him going off to college because they presumably see it as a waste of time and resources, therefore reflecting, perhaps more honestly, the feelings of the time. Because of this anachronism, we might be better suited reading this scene as John Williams inserting his own views of the university as shaped by his personal experiences with it. Although not autobiographical, Williams personal life mirrors much of Stoners, and at the time of the novel's publication was a university professor himself.[8] And as Charles Shields has written in a recent biography of Williams: "None of his [John Williams'] people had ever attended a university. He had grown up poor, and had received mediocre grades in junior college because he had been too busy with his own plans to care. He thought of himself as 'the most unlikely person possible to enter an academic setting."[9] Coincidentally, *Stoner* was published in the same year as the Higher Education Act of 1965, and Williams was also a recipient and beneficiary of the G.I. Bill—two policies that would shape higher education's relationship to the notion of "human capital" (the G.I. bill was so prominently used at the University of Denver, Williams' Alma Mater, that it was referred to as GI Tech by unwelcoming neighbors).[10] Rather than Williams being "the most unlikely" archetype of a person to enter a university at the moment he did, he was in fact *the* most likely due to his status as a veteran and the welfare nature of the G.I. Bill that paid his tuition and housing. Stoner's father thus stands as a representative of this push for human capital

[7] Colin B. Burke. *American Collegiate Populations: A Test of the Traditional View*. New York ; London: New York University Press, 1982), 240.
[8] Williams also came from farm working family before going to university.
[9] Charles J. Shields. *The Man Who Wrote the Perfect Novel: John Williams, Stoner, and the Writing Life*. First English-language edition. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2018), 57.
[10] *The Man Who Wrote the Perfect Novel*, 56.

as tied to higher education—a recurring element we see in postwar novels with moments of a university's presence.

Quickly, his parents come to the decision that Stoner will go off to university to study and stay with a distant relative, paying them for food, room and board through manual labor around the house. Stoner thus leaves his home to attend college with the promise that he will return one day to help his parents and their farm after receiving the university's pedagogy and knowledge. This is a promise not unlike the one made by Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street*, but the main difference is found in that it is a promise that is partially actualized (we see Stoner go to and attend college) on the pages of the fictional world of the novel instead of just being gestured towards or alluded to. Belonging—which is to say "inclusion"—is represented through the literal presence of university content. It is also worth emphasizing that it is not Stoner's decision, but rather his fathers, for the betterment of the familial unit. After a long day of travel, Stoner arrives at the outskirts of the town where the University resides, and the driver who offered him a ride points towards some buildings, telling him that they are where Stoner will go to school:

> For several minutes after the man had driven off, Stoner stood unmoving, staring at the complex of buildings. He had never before seen anything so *imposing.* The red brick buildings stretched upward from a broad field of green that was broken by stone walks and small patches of garden. Beneath his awe, he had a *sudden sense of security and serenity* he had never felt before. Though it was late, he walked for many minutes about the edges of campus, only looking, as if he had no right to enter.[11] (emphasis mine)

[11] *Stoner*, 9.

Continuing the tradition of campus novel's college scene setting, this moment romanticizes the space and architecture of the university through a depiction of its "imposing" buildings and awe-inspiring surrounding nature. Although not a "dappled quad" in the campus novel tradition of depicting the American Ivy League or British Oxbridge, as it is a state school, the university Stoner will attend cannot help but astound a person with his humble beginnings who has known no life beyond his family's farm. Overcome by the feelings growing within him, Stoner feels "security and serenity" as he faces the campus, yet still chooses to not enter and remains on the edges for fear of being an intruder to this unknown entity. Whereas a campus periphery novel's character might never enter the campus, the remainder of *Stoner* juxtaposes this moment as it is dedicated to displaying his life immersed in the university, and even if Stoner briefly believed that he did not belong, he eventually comes to realize that it is the only place in the world where he belongs. Indeed, he belongs so much that he forms a career and life on the campus. This continuing education occurs as a necessary part of the plot's development, but it can also be understood as the university's welcoming nature that the novel is invested in showcasing.

Once a graduate student at the same university—after coming to realize his love for literature through an inspiring teacher and subsequently abandoning agriculture—Stoner and his fellow graduate student peers contemplate the university's nature and its relationship to the outside world. One of Stoner's friends, Dave Masters, describes it as a "hovel" for the "dispossessed of the world," a space where people like Stoner, who would not survive in the outside/real world, thrive. Addressing Stoner, Masters tells him that he is among the "infirm" the university houses because "You think there's something *here,* something to find. Well, in the world you'd learn soon enough. You, too, are cut out for failure; not that you'd fight the world.

You'd let it chew you up and spit you out, and you'd lie there wondering what was wrong."[12] The irony of this scene is that Stoner does not have to leave the university to be chewed up and spit out by the world, as the place he idealizes as his temple—his "*here,*" the university—fails to meet his idealistic expectations in the face of the petty faculty and academic drama that ensues once he rises to the ranks of faculty.

Indeed, the rest and majority of the novel follows William Stoner as he receives tenure (but never rises beyond an Assistant Professor), marries, has a child, enters into an affair with a younger woman (a bright graduate student), and faces Departmental retaliation for refusing to pass a student underserving of advancement. Stoner dies a lonely and unremarkable death, a death that is framed in the first few pages of the novel as forgettable: "Stoner's colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers."[13] Given that the novel begins with this morbid transparency, and perhaps even a warning that to read it means committing one's time to nothingness, it is worth asking what it means to read it in full. A possible answer, for those who will find themselves sympathizing with the protagonist, is that it's about the tragic hero Stoner's expectations of what university life can be never materializing—but that within this unrequited love there is something worth celebrating.

Still, rather than belonging to an academic institution where knowledge is pure and merit is celebrated, Stoner is instead academically destroyed for standing up for his ideals the

[12] Ibid, 30-31.
[13] Ibid, 3.

university helped him develop. He is stripped of any serious teaching positions and is relegated to teaching introductory courses for the rest of his teaching days. Despite the depressive nature of this stunted academic career, however, the university nonetheless houses (read: provides refuge) Stoner and never threatens expulsion from its campus or abandonment—a key feature of it as an academic novel committed to its setting. Even in a contentious moment when Stoner must decide whether or not he will enlist to fight in the first World War and in doing so fulfill his patriotism, the university acts as a haven for him when he chooses to stay and continue his academic career. As he notes, reflecting on his decision: "he thought of his life at the University for the past seven years; he thought of the years before, the distant years with his parents on the farm, and of the deadness from which he had been miraculously revived."[14] To leave the place that revived him would mean to return to death, so he chooses to stay despite the warnings against it from his friends and the subtle scorn his colleagues and students meet him with. All of this is forgotten—and the brief threat of estrangement with it—when the war ends, and the campus returns to a liveliness with the returning veteran students. In fact, the outbreak of the war and his refusal to participate in it is rewarded as they serve to get Stoner a job at his university because of the teacher shortages occurring around the country. Although representing a troubled home, the University of Columbia is a home nonetheless that subsists Stoner throughout his adult life. It is also a newfound home that has replaced and is contrasted with the gray one of his childhood, a point Stoner stresses with some condescending comments following the death of his parents, whose lives, in his view "had been expended in cheerless labor, their wills broken, their intelligences numbed."[15] Although Stoner might believe this to be the case for his parents due to

[14] Ibid, 38.
[15] Ibid, 108.

their poverty-stricken life, marred by manual labor, and what he sees as a consequent lack of intellectual depth, it would be hard for any reader to not see this as describing the same fate of Stoner despite his newfound status within the walls of the campus. Though arguably better off culturally, socially, and financially, Stoner's life—as the narrative presents it—also fails to live up to anything worth remembering (the novel draws further parallels by showing how both Stoner and his father die alone and while in the act of work, the only difference being the form of labor performed as Stoner was reading in bed and his father toiling the earth). But again, even as the novel upends the upward mobility promised by the postwar university, specifically its accompanying middle-class gifts and riches, through this morose end, it nonetheless affirms Stoner's place within the campus. Akin to the events that unfold in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, *Stoner*'s status as a "proper" academic fiction also comes to reveal that the grass isn't always greener within the confines of the university—nor within the confines of the campus novel. Despite one of the goals of this dissertation to draw out the differences between academic fictions that rely heavily on the university setting, and others that don't, this does not mean that it views one type favorably over the other.

What Stoner comes to see as his life's calling on the University of Columbia campus, despite all the turmoil he faces, the character Ichiro in John Okada's *No-No Boy*, can never imagine beyond a memory of the past that has been broken by the second World War and subsequent ostracization of Japanese-Americans following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. *No-No Boy* tells the story of a Japanese-American (Nisei) man, Ichiro Yamada, who has returned to his hometown of Seattle after being imprisoned by the United States for refusing to serve in its military in World War II against the Axis Powers (of which Japan was a member). Contrary to Stoner's refusal to enlist to fight—albeit for a different American involved war and moment—

Ichiro is imprisoned and repelled from society for his actions, a society of which the university belongs to. The title, *No-No Boy*, alludes to the double negation some Japanese American men founds themselves making when posed with questions regarding their loyalty to the United States.[16] Much of the story revolves around Ichiro attempting to re-immerse himself—with plenty of trouble—into the Seattle community, family, and friendships that were put on hold during his imprisonment. The preface of the novel begins with the revelation that Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor unleashed a racist fervor towards Japanese Americans because they became "by virtue of their ineradicable brownness and the slant eyes which, upon close inspection, will seldom appear slanty, animals of a different breed."[17] This fictional depiction affirms what historians of this moment have shown was part of a longer history of anti-Asian bigotry that affected the American West Coast, where "Anti-Asian activists, who had first mobilized against Chinese immigrants when they began arriving in California in the 1840's, employed the same 'yellow peril' imagery to attack Japanese immigrants in the late nineteenth century." Years later, "The attack on Pearl Harbor…rekindled the embers of anti-Japanese sentiment" resulting in the creation and justification of internment camps.[18] Notably, for the purposes of my argument, the first snapshot we see of the community's reaction to this attack in the novel occurs on a college campus, therefore placing the university at the forefront of this book and its character's preoccupations:

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[16] There's been some controversy about how the title does not actually reflect the "resister" status of the protagonist. See Martha Nakagawa's "False Constructions of Loyalty" in Frank Abe, Greg Robinson, Floyd Cheung, and John Okada. *John Okada: The Life and Rediscovered Work of the Author of No-no Boy*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018.
[17] John Okada. *No-No Boy*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979),vii.
[18] Peter Irons, Michi Weglyn, Gary Y. Okihiro, Valerie J. Matsumoto, Alice Yang Murray, and Roger Daniels. *What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?: Readings*. Boston, Mass.: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 6).

> The college professor, finding it suddenly impossible to meet squarely the gaze of his polite, serious, but now too Japanese-ish star pupil, coughed on his pipe and assured the lad that things were a mess. Conviction lacking, he failed at his attempt to be worldly and assuring. He mumbled something about things turning out one way or the other sooner or later and sighed with relief when the little fellow, who hardly ever smiled and, now, probably never would, stood up and left the room.[19]

Despite his "star pupil" status, the university, by proxy of the "worldly" college professor, can no longer house a suspected traitor, so Ichiro leaves. As Ichiro notes in the first few pages of the novel, he was gone for "four years…two in camp and two in prison."[20] This comment, as the preface and later moments in the text attest to, is a nod to the four years of time of education he would have received as an undergraduate that he instead received in a camp and prison. The education he receives is thus one outside of the haven of the university—and it is one that teaches him to doubt his place in the United States as the son of Japanese immigrants.

Up until now the campus periphery characters I've focused on, despite not actually showing up on a campus, have been consistent about their place within one as graduates-to-be or graduates. They've made no dismissal about it is as an institution that shapes/d them, however ambivalent they are about this fact. In Ichiro's case, the same cannot be said as we see him be kicked out of his college early in the novel due to American xenophobia that viewed him as an outsider and used the pretense of war as an excuse for this expulsion. And yet, the novel also contains some striking scenes that highlight just how important the university was for Ichiro, scenes that mirrors Stoner's encounter scene and other lionizations we see of the college campus

[19] *No-No Boy*, vii.
[20] Ibid, 1.

in academic fiction (and Dark Academia). As Ichiro makes his way around town, he finds himself on a bus and by chance, almost as if returning home, on the same route that leads him to his former university. Still familiar with the layout of the campus, he locates the engineering building:

> As if he had come to the university expressly for the purpose, Ichiro went directly to the offices of the engineering school. He found the name Baxter Brown on the wall directory and proceeded up the stairs to the assistant professor's office in a remote corner of the building which was reached finally by climbing up a steep flight of stairs no more than twenty inches wide. By this very narrowness, the stairs seemed to avoid discovery by the mass of students and thereby afforded the occupant of the office the seclusion to which the learned are entitled.[21]

Following similar tropes of academic fiction, in this scene, the campus and its inhabitants are hard to reach and are depicted as belonging to a separate world, away from the "masses." Eventually, however, Ichiro reunites with his old professor, who laments what was done to him and welcomes Ichiro's, as well as that of other Japanese students, return to campus and schooling. Yet their exchange is brief, and the buildup of Ichiro finding his campus—and in the process remembering his days before the war when he was happy and excited about his education and future—end anticlimactically, as he is soon ushered out of his old mentor's office. Even in this moment of reunification, the process of removal—exclusion—is swift. Ichiro, commenting on the coldness of this exchange, questions why his expectations weren't met and

[21] Ibid, 54.

soon provides his own answer that he had "lost the right to see and hear and become excited over things which are of that wonderful past" due to his decisions at the start of the war.[22]

The memories and nostalgia that flood Ichiro as he makes his way to and arrives on his former campus are worth showing at length, as they display the optimism he had before the start of the war, as well his potential as a student. As he recalls:

> There had been such a time and he vividly brought to mind, with a hunger that he would never lose, the weighty volumes which he had carried against his side so that the cloth of his pants became thin and frayed, and the sandwiches in a brown grocery bag and the slide rule with the leather case which hung from his belt like the sword of learning which it was, for he was going to become an engineer and it had not mattered that Japan would soon be at war with America. To be a student in America was a wonderful thing. To be a student in America studying engineering was a beautiful life. That, in itself, was worth defending from anyone and anything which dared to threaten it with change or extinction.[23]

Ichiro even goes on to claim that he would have killed for this lifestyle via becoming a soldier, had he *really* known what he was giving up. For a novel that is ostensibly not about the university there is a density of importance placed upon it in this moment, that spans less than four pages. Indeed, what is so striking about this particular "campus periphery" moment is how the importance of the university is established through a character imagining killing for his ability to be a student. In stark contrast to one of the characters in *Stoner*, the Professor Archer Sloane, war is envisioned here as an act through which one stands up for and saves their

[22] Ibid, 57.
[23] Ibid, 53.

education. In *Stoner*, however, World War 1 and its aftermath slowly brought upon the death of Professor Sloane, as its brutality was shown to kill his inner idealism.

Ichiro's hyperbolic remarks are embedded within a romanticized description of being a student, and thus it's worth asking why being a student merits such a reaction. In a significant way, the university represents a pillar of belonging that Ichiro yearns for but repeatedly realizes he cannot obtain due to the shadow that continues to hang over him as an assumed traitor. Prior to arriving on campus, and while he's there, Ichiro daydreams about what the future holds for him now that the war is over: "In time, he thought, there will be a place for me. I will buy a home and love my family and I will walk down the street holding my son's hand and people will stop and talk with us about the weather and the ball games and the elections."[24] Seemingly benign desires, home ownership, participating in elections, and having a family (and to some degree enjoying the luxury of a sports game) are all markers of a particular American middle class ideal that as the century continued, the university participated in upholding and making possible as a pipeline towards it. On the other side of this middle-class image is the role academic fiction played in representing this budding middle class. To reiterate some of Jefferey Williams critical insights, as it pertains to the rise of academic fiction in the latter half of the twentieth century: "the academic novel has taken a more significant position [in the latter half of the century] because it has become a major vehicle for middle class, adult experience."[25] If we consider this campus periphery moment in *No-No Boy* as a yearning for a "middle class, adult experience" and as a form of academic fiction, then Ichiro's desire for an "education" can be read as his desire to belong to the wealth of white American citizens whose Americanness was

[24] Ibid, 52.
[25] Jefferey Williams. "The Rise of the Academic Novel." *American Literary History* 24, no. 3 (2012), 569.

not challenged. Racism, then, stands as the sole barrier between these dreams and his reality, and despite academic fictions tendency to provide refuge, in this moment it does not. These daydreams quickly end as Ichiro tells himself "no, it is not to be, and the castle tumbled and was swallowed up by the darkness of his soul, for time might cloud the memories of others but the trouble was inside of him and time would not soften that."[26]

As it has been the case for all the novelists this dissertation has thus far focused on, John Okada also attended an American university, and his novel reflects the impact of the institution on his sense of community and individual self-development. Like Ichiro, his time at the University of Washington was interrupted by the outbreak of the war as he was forced to leave during his first year due to the displacement of Japanese and Japanese American citizens out of the West Coast. After helping to reunite his father with his family—as the "writer" of the household—Okada applied and enrolled in universities outside of the West Coast that were admitting Japanese Americans. To be sure, given the context of the war, this was unlike what a "traditional" path towards and through post-secondary education resembled, as Okada was forced to show loyalty to the United States during the process as well as apply to places where local residents would not oppose his enrollment.[27] Even when he was able to spend a year in traditional schooling during the war, at an "austere" college, he later enlisted with the U.S. military as a Japanese translator—another institution, that while resembling an education, strayed from the typical collegiate path. After the war ended, he used the G.I. Bill to re-enroll in the University of Washington where he took creative writing classes, acquiring and sharpening skills that would later help him write *No-No Boy*. Reading these facts of his personal life, it is clear to

[26] *No-No Boy*, 52.
[27] Frank Abe. *John Okada: The Life and Rediscovered Work of the Author of No-no Boy*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 39.

see the disenchantment the jagged pursuit of education brought Okada—even as it still presented him with opportunities—and how his character Ichiro is a stand-in for some of these experiences. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the afterlife of the book's legacy depended on the university, as those who "discovered" it spread it on "campuses and communities."[28] Because the book had been originally published in 1957 through a Japanese publisher, its sales were modest and it would eventually go out of print. Its discoverers, driven by their desires to cultivate an Asian-American literature, sought to get it re-published in the United States and they did so through the University of Washington Press—a publishing role the university, Okada's alma mater, assumed until the recent 2017 controversial decision by Penguin Random House to publish their own version. In one final instance of rejection, however, the university first turned them down, unless they were willing to give it $5,000 to publish it for them. The organizers rejected this offer, figuring that they could raise that money and publish the book themselves—and they accomplished this by spreading the word about it through a community that was eager to read a book they had all heard about. Once the book began to receive attention, in the press and through sales, the university called back. Thus the "home" the campus offers was finally obtained, but unfortunately for Okada, he was not around to see his character Ichiro's inclusion into the canon of American characters who question, challenge and re-define American ideals and identity.

Just a couple of years before John Okada published his first and only novel, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) (also Ellison's first and only published novel), was similarly dramatizing the exclusion of an American university. To be sure, the representation of a learning institution in *Invisible Man* cannot be neatly placed alongside other postwar university representations, as its inspiration is derived from Ellison's experiences with an HBCU, the

[28] *No-No Boy*, iii.

Tuskegee Institute, which he attended during the 1930's—several years prior to the ideological forces of "human capital" that would come to define American higher education. The early part of *Invisible Man* offers an autobiographical sketch of what those years might have been like for Ellison, and although it is probably better to do away with reading it as such and instead focus on its fictionality, some of the biographical facts will inform my reading. The novel's first portion begins with a campus scene and setting that it must abandon once its unnamed protagonist is expelled. While this section of the novel can be largely understood as a satire on Ellison's own educational experiences and disillusionments, there is room to apply the optimist ambivalent lens I've employed in my other readings—that is, one that elevates notions of higher education while demonstrating its exclusionary natures. After the defining horrific boxing scenes of the first pages of the book we once again meet the unnamed character, but this time on campus. Here the unnamed character, now a college student in his junior year, is tasked with guiding and aiding the university's main white donor, Mr. Norton, around campus. This all ends in disaster for the main character when he accidentally exposes the donor to the non-college educated black people on the outskirts of the campus.[29] Ultimately, the black university president, Dr. Bledsoe, furious at the protagonist for this transgression on respectability, expels him and makes him leave for New York where he'll continue his journey towards realizing his invisibility as a black man under other groups and institutions.

[29] Ernest Gaines, one of the campus periphery novelists this dissertation reads, has his own commentary about this infamous moment in Ellison's novel that is revealing: "For example—and I've said this jokingly—well, half jokingly—I don't know how in the world that boy could have ever gone by Trueblood's house. Any kid, I don't know how naïve he is—and this is what Ralph was doing, showing how naïve he was—the most naïve person in the University wouldn't have done that." I found this commentary interesting, as Gaines, although he doesn't outright say it, is making note of the novel's tropes of academic fiction. See Gaines, et al. *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 312.

The most faithful readings of these 116 pages of the novel touch on how the structures of racism and power extend beyond white people and are present in black people who act as gate keepers at the top of segregated but nonetheless oppressive hierarchies. As "minorities" achieve socio-economic mobility in the postwar period—attending university is one of the avenues through which this is accomplished—these scenes of class and racial betrayal begin to appear in the work of minority authors.[30] However, this campus scene within the widely read *Invisible Man* takes on a different angle if we consider how it fits alongside the rising trend of the campus and academic novels in the postwar period. Around the same time Ellison was publishing his novel, the country was beginning to enter the "Golden Age of the American University," the period after World War II when the American university received major funding and expansion, as well as a more economically and racially diverse student population. As Christopher Newfield has argued, this expansion led to the creation, if not the promise, of a new "middle-class," that for him meant a college-educated "majority," though not necessarily an economic one.[31] Indeed, Newfield's definition of this middle-class aligns with Donna Tartt's representation of Richard in *The Secret History*, in that his modest background does not exclude him from belonging in the university even if just at the symbolic level, as he remains economically stagnant. Because of this wider context, we can read *Invisible Man* as a proto-example of a campus periphery given the novels interest in the role of education, its student character and its temporary campus setting. And even if it exists outside of the bounds of "human capital" it nonetheless exhibits some of the ideology's characteristics of personal uplift. After all, Ellison's unnamed protagonist

[30]Elda María Román. *Race and Upward Mobility: Seeking, Gatekeeping, and Other Class Strategies in Postwar America*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018.
[31] Christopher Newfield. *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-year Assault on the Middle Class*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 26-30.

quite literally fights his way into the "opportunity" of school when he receives a scholarship at the end of the infamous Battle Royale, symbolizing educations life or death role for those trying to make it out of poverty and Jim Crow South.[32] Furthermore, *Invisible Man* anticipates the theme of community service we see in later campus periphery texts, such as in *Kindred* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, as the reason why the unnamed character is expelled is because of the breach he commits with the "uneducated" black masses that exist outside of the university. We can therefore read these tensions, and their consequences, as ones between the "educated" individual and the uneducated community. In one moment, for example, the unnamed protagonist alludes to this separation as he: "[remembers] the short formal sermons intoned from the pulpit there, rendered in smooth articulate tones, with calm assurance *purged of that wild emotion of the crude preachers* most of us knew in our home towns and of whom we were deeply ashamed" (emphasis added)[33] The separation the campus creates between those who attend it and the community's they come from is crudely depicted here. For the unnamed protagonist, and presumably for his campus peers (as he uses "our"), the emotion of shame grows within them as their university attendance distinguishes them from the uneducated masses they originate from. It is telling that shame is the dominant affect here as opposed to the guilt we see in later campus periphery texts. This shame, I'd argue, aligns with the depiction of this campus as one that expels rather than provides refuge for its students, as it is guided by purity politics.

Some readings of *Invisible Man*, in contrast to the other campus periphery texts I've read, do understand the text as an academic fiction. Strong evidence of this is the novels inclusion in

[32] Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International, 1995),
[33] *Invisible Man*, 111.

John Kramer's comprehensive annotated bibliography of American academic fiction. It's worth questioning, however, if it merits an entry as, contrary to Kramer's own parameters, the novel's protagonist exists largely outside of a campus setting.[34] Still, as Lavelle Porter has argued in his study of black academic fiction, although the campus setting has a relatively minor role in the text, "reading [*Invisible Man*] as a college novel reveals the way that the narrator's college experience informs and shapes all that happens to him afterward, and the way that his identity as a college-educated black intellectual persists throughout the novel, even as he moves away from the campus."[35] For Porter, the campus continues to inform the rest of the text as the unnamed protagonist encounters groups representative of Marxism and black nationalism in New York City. While I don't necessarily disagree with Porter that the character's college education *might* inform how we read the remainder of the text, I think he overlooks other significant influences. Indeed, there might be more reasons to apply my campus periphery lens that draws parallels to the tradition of academic fiction—while still placing the novel in its own category. For example, Porter argues that "Ellison's language in his evocative descriptions of the campus are indicative of the aesthetic values of the black academic novel."[36] That is, to Porter's understanding, the "evocative descriptions" we get of the university in *Invisible Man* are due to its functioning as a black academic text, as Ellison was representing the unique nature of Tuskegee, a black college that was built by its students, and therefore: "The very physical structure of the campus is a monument to its pedagogy as an institute of industrial education. The buildings are a record of its mission to give students practical labor skills, and as such it stands in stark contrast with the

[34] John E. Kramer. *The American College Novel: An Annotated Bibliography, 2nd ed*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2004 .
[35] Lavelle Porter. *The Blackademic Life: Academic Fiction, Higher Education, and the Black Intellectual*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 87.
[36] Ibid 86

university built by the hands of nonacademic laborers where privileged students go to learn abstract knowledge."[37] Because of this history, the language Ellison uses to describe the campus stands as a homage to its unique nature as a campus literally built by and for its students. And indeed, the language Ellison uses to describe the campus is quite evocative:

> It was a beautiful college. The buildings were old and covered with vines and the roads gracefully winding, lined with hedges and wild roses that dazzled the eyes in the summer sun. Honeysuckle and purple wisteria hung heavy from the trees and white magnolias mixed with their scents in the bee-humming air…How the grass turned green in the springtime and how the mocking birds fluttered their tails and sang, how the moon shone down on the buildings, how the bell in the chapel tower rang out the precious short-lived hours; how the girls in bright summer dresses promenaded the grassy lawn. [38]

Although there is room to interpret this moment as Porter suggests, this scene also resembles many of the campus descriptions we've seen in both traditional academic fictions and some campus periphery texts that contain a university's presence (not to mention the fact that by the time Ellison was at Tuskegee, despite the schools vocational reputation, it had already been awarding liberal arts degrees—the "abstract knowledge" Porter points to).[39] These parallels aren't just coincidental. In fact, just a few pages back in this chapter, Porter discusses Stephanie Brown's article on J. Saunders Redding academic novel, *Stranger and Alone*, a novel that Redding wrote based on his research on his previous work, *No Day of Triumph*. Redding's novel is unmistakably a campus and academic novel as its black protagonist attends undergraduate and

[37] Ibid.
[38] *Invisible Man*, 34.
[39] Arnold Rampersad. *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 53.

even graduate school, and its campuses looms large. But the key insight embedded in Brown's discussion—an insight Porter alludes to but overlooks as essential his own discussion—is that Redding had shown interest in academic fiction during his career (even alluding to F. Scott Fitzgerald's campus novel, *This Side of Paradise*): "As a prolific book reviewer from the 1940's to the mid-1960s he extensively read fiction by and about African Americans, and his papers suggest that as a career academic, he had a particular interest in fiction dealing with college campuses."[40] Reading this, we can infer that *Invisible Man* belongs to a tradition of American academic fiction, as certain character's in Ellison's novel were heavily inspired by Redding's *No Day of Triumph*.[41] But similar to *Stranger and Alone*, there were barriers to how the fiction was able to move forward with its depictions of its student and campus. So, in the same way, to re-iterate a point I made in the previous chapter, Redding's campus could not partake of the joviality or satire of traditional academic fiction, so too does *Invisible Man* steer away from fully allowing his protagonist to partake of the collegiate experience. Instead, we are shown the unjust side of the institution of the university through a character that remains idealistic of the campus but is nonetheless expelled ("remains" is essential here, as the unnamed protagonist informs us of the nostalgia that overcomes him when he recalls his college days).

Akin to Ichiro, the unnamed protagonist of Ellison's *Invisible Man* is expelled for acts that are deemed treasonous to those in power. And like the development of Ichiro's journey, we can read Ellison's unnamed protagonist as an un-graduate of the university who had to learn life's lessons outside of its borders and without its refuge—but who often thinks of his time in college nostalgically: "[the people and things of the campus] were all such a part of that other

[40] Stephanie Brown. *The Postwar African American Novel: Protest and Discontent, 1945-1950*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 137.
[41] Ibid.

life that's dead that I can't remember them all."[42] While *Invisible Man* owes to many traditions and influences, it also represents an early campus periphery moment that acts as a harbinger for later novels that would depict, in their own way, the site of the university as a vessel for socio-economic mobility and progressive change in the postwar setting.

No Longer Peripheral?

In a critical review of Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* for the Los Angeles Review of Books, Kenneth Warren reads recent retrospective commentary made by Junot Díaz about the lack of diversity—and attentiveness to race—during his time in the creative writing program at Cornell University as additional evidence of McGurl's insights about the role MFA Writing Programs have had on postwar American Literature: "For the ethnic writer who initially believes that her experience lies well outside the boundaries of the literary, the MFA becomes, paradoxically, the mechanism by which the kinds of experience once deemed not fit for literature become instead its essence."[43] That is, even as Díaz bemoans the whiteness of his creative writing classes at Cornell that left him feeling isolated, he fails to fully reckon with how the institution of creative writing within universities in the postwar period shaped careers like his and that "Race, or racial difference, was an important component of the insider/outsider dynamic that has come to define the project of producing American writers academically." Warren goes a bit further by demonstrating that even as Díaz celebrates the recent hiring of Helena Maria Viramontes at Cornell, he overlooks her background and training from UC Irvine in a similar MFA program. So, even if the traditions of Chicana Feminism and resistance literatures shaped

[42] *Invisible Man*, 37.
[43] Kenneth Warren. "You Tell Me It's the Institution: Creative Writing and Literary History." Los Angeles Review of Books, 2015. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/you-tell-me-its-the-institution-creative-writing-and-literary-history/

her, so did her creative writing background as situated within the institution of the university. So much are the practices of creative writing engrained into Díaz, Warren continues, that he even goes on to co-find a writer's workshop at the University of Miami as a way of advancing his mission of fostering diversity in fiction.

Following a similar vein of critique, I'd like to make the case that Junot Diaz's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), acts as an exemplar of the turn in fiction written by "minorities" that begins to incorporate elements of the university more liberally.[44] That is, while Diaz complains of the "whiteness" of his college in the tail end of the twentieth-century, his novel contradicts this feeling and representation of exclusion when compared with other novels from writers with similar backgrounds who came before him, such as Sandra Cisneros. In my reading I'll even suggest that we can read novels like Diaz's as a form of academic fiction. Still, I don't call his novel a "campus novel" because its world extends beyond the bounds of the campus, but far from hiding the presence of the campus in the text, the university now acts as a comfortable backdrop to the narrative, therefore showing the former "minority" character as a belonging member.

One of the novel's key stylistic choices—the use of academic footnotes—make this point explicit. Right from the start of the novel, the first footnote signals that we are not going to read just any novel, but one that wants us to entertain its relationship to the academic discipline of history: "For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic

[44] John Kramer's second edition of his campus novel bibliography also notes the rise of "minority" academic fiction in the final quarter of the twentieth-century.

between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality."[45] The novel, in its early pages, calls out the mis-education its readers will have received as American citizens who would have only been "mandated" to entertain the history of an oppressed group for a brief moment, marking its unimportance. Yet, in the process of accurately pointing out this mis-education of American pedagogies, Díaz's novel (with its publication) comes to represent the positive and welcome change that has occurred in respect to diversity in higher education—an issue which was once a barrier to the representations of academia in "minority" literatures. Whereas authors of the campus periphery would have shied away from representing the university so confidently—recall Esperanza citing only papers and pencils in her allusions to the campus—Diaz's treatment of academia is so comfortable with the space of the university that he uses academic footnotes as an essential part of his narrative. And yet, Díaz' public facing commentary, as first pointed out by Warren, would lead one to believe that things have not changed and the circumstances that afflicted writers like Cisneros—another "minority" writer who also felt excluded by the whiteness of her college—a couple of decades earlier, continue to do so in the twenty first century. Although my reading does not dismiss these feelings of exclusion and isolation that continue to afflict racial "minorities" as they attend college—often and still as the first in their family to do so—I do wish to highlight how the stylistic choices of contemporary literature, such as *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, begins to tell a slightly different story.

It's easy to make the case for "minority" academic fiction by simply showing the number of novels that have been written under this category in more recent years. Indeed, returning to John Kramer's comprehensive (but imperfect) annotated bibliography, we see that campus

[45] Junot Díaz. *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 12.

novels written by minority authors begin to rise at the end of the 1980's and during the 1990's. During the span of a decade there are about sixteen campus novels written by minority authors, whereas in the last thirty five years that preceded this moment there are only three. Kramer's study, however, has its limitations as it ends at the start of the 2000's. But if the trends that were beginning at the end of the twentieth century continued, we can safely assume that "minorities" have caught up in having their own take on the campus novel genre. Still, what would it mean to attend to novels that continued to have the university as "peripheral," but were no longer treating it as an inhospitable site—or depicting it as separate from the community?

In significant ways, for example, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* feels like a campus periphery novel, in the ways I've described them, as much of its narrative exists outside of the bounds of a campus while sporadically alluding to it throughout its length. But unlike other campus periphery texts, these allusions appear much more often and are not treated as asides but are instead woven into the plot of the text. The academic footnotes are the most obvious example of an academic presence—all 33 of them—but some of the main characters are current college students and graduates at one point or another throughout the progression of the novel. Furthermore, the narrative only exists because the omniscient narrator—Díaz's famous Yunior—met some of the key figures of the narrative, Oscar and Lola, while he was an undergraduate student at Rutgers. In other words, the university quite literally makes the fictional world of the novel possible because without it acting as meeting space, the novel would not have existed and we would not be reading it today (this is also true in the sense that Díaz received his training on a college campus and creative writing program, as many postwar writers have, therefore placing him on the path to be a writer).

The novel can be read with consensus as an intergenerational family saga that has as its backdrop the authoritarian regime of the Dominican Republic's Rafael Trujillo. Because of this backdrop, a convincing way to read the novel's footnotes is through understanding them as an academic rebuttal of the regime's history its outlining. They figure as essential variables in the developments of the plot, as at one point, a footnote questions "What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? Since before the infamous Caesar-Ovid war they've had beef…they seemed destined to be eternally linked in the Halls of Battle. Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy."[46] And later, when telling of the tragic end of Oscar's grandfather Abelard at the hands of the Trujillo dictatorship, it is suggested that Abelard met his fate because of a book he was writing about Trujillo. The footnotes—as an explicit stand in for academic pursuits—are a continuance of this "truth" telling of writers who are faced with challenging authoritarian regimes (even if the "truth" telling of Abelard is that of Trujillo's supernatural powers). "Academia" as an antagonist to dictatorships—and to some extent ignorance—can be all that the footnotes are, yet they are not the only presence of the university we get throughout the novel.

The omniscient narrator Yunior, Oscar, and Lola (Oscar's sister) are all college students at Rutgers at one point of the novel (this is where they all meet) and graduates of it towards its ends. Because of this, the novel takes on some campus novel characteristics. The depictions we have of their time on university are brief, but contrary to its campus periphery predecessors, they are not ridden with a sense of economic anxiety or the feeling of responsibility towards their family or communities. In fact, its depictions suggest quite the opposite as they showcase the comfort of inhabiting the university. Oscar, one of the many tragic figures of the text, but its

[46] *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, 97.*

main one, embodies a nerdy kid archetype who is destined for college: "his interest in—Genres!—which nobody had said boo about before, suddenly became synonymous with being a loser with a capital L. Couldn't make friends for the life of him, too dorky, too shy and…too *weird*…"[47] Not only is he a stereotypical nerd who might well be suited for a life of the mind, and therefore would feel welcome in the university, he also tells us as much: "In April he got his second set of SAT scores back (1020 under the old system) and a week later he learned he was heading to Rutgers New Brunswick. Well, you did it, hijo, his mother said, looking more relieved than polite. No more selling pencils for me, he agreed. You'll love it, his sister promised him. *I know I will. I was meant for college*" (emphasis added).[48] If Oscar ever felt as though a college education was out of bounds for him it was only as it pertained to what kind of university he would attend,: "In October, after all his college applications were in (Fairleigh Dickinson, Montclair, Rutgers, Drew, Glassboro State, William Paterson; he also sent an app to NYU, a one-in-a-million shot, and they rejected him so fast he was amazed the shit hadn't come back Pony Express) and winter was settling its pale miserable ass across Northern Jersey."[49] The only rejection from college Oscar experiences is the rejection from an elite private education, New York University. But, critically, he does not get denied the ability to participate in the collegiate experience altogether, and to participate in the "human capital" pursuit that would come to define mass education in the postwar period. This is not to say that the novel participates in a form of complete colorblindness, as Oscar does experience discrimination on his college campus from the "white kids" and from his "kids of color" peers who question his racial authenticity.[50]

[47] Ibid, 17.
[48] Ibid, 41
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid, 49.

The real problem Oscar faces in college—that follows him from his youth and teenage years and extends into his life after he graduates, to the point that it eventually kills him—is his inability to lose his virginity due to his nerdiness and "weirdness." In this way, the novel harkens to the joviality of the early campus novel that relished in having fun and chasing girls—and wasn't necessarily about "academics." Yunior—the face of having fun and chasing girls—admits to this: "At college you're not supposed to care about anything—you're just supposed to fuck around…"[51] And later: "For fuck's sake, we were at Rutgers—Rutgers was just girls everywhere…"[52] And, finally: "Rutgers was always a crazy place, but that last fall it seemed to be especially bugging. In October a bunch of freshman girls I knew in Livingston got busted for dealing coke…On Bush, the Lambdas started a fight with the Alphas over some idiocy and for weeks there was talk of a black-Latino war but nothing ever happened, everybody was too busy throwing parties and fucking each other to scrap."[53] In an amusing set of events, Yunior makes it his mission to get Oscar "laid" by giving him advice, having him hang out with him and his friends and putting Oscar on an exercise regime. This montage-like set of events defines a significant part of the college experience depiction we get in the novel. Not all the events are jovial, however, as the depression that imbues Oscar due to his lack of luck with girls leads him to a dark place of self-pity, causing him to attempt suicide. But even in this way the novel imagines college life—for a "minority" student—as one in which "normal" college experiences happen, even if they are of the poor mental health variety. Again, Oscar, nor Lola or Yunior, ever show that their role as college students is to come back to their community to help raise it from poverty or to help alleviate other ailments afflicting those of low income. Instead, what we are

[51] Ibid, 169.
[52] Ibid, 177.
[53] Ibid, 197.

shown are college scenes that resemble those of the popular imagination—young adults having fun and coming of age.

On some level the novel has a sense of self-awareness of itself as a college product that knows that things have changed for the "minority" college students it depicts, in addition to showing this in its depiction of their collegiate experiences. After graduating from Rutgers, and finding himself in a full-time teaching role at his former high school, Oscar notes the changes that have occurred in the demographics of the school: "Certainly the school struck Oscar as smaller now, and the older brothers all seemed to have acquired the Innsmouth "look" in the past five years, and there were a grip more kids of color—but some things (like white supremacy and people-of-color self-hate) never change: the same charge of gleeful sadism that he remembered from his youth still electrified the halls." Although there is a welcoming change to the diversity of his school, the force of white supremacy continues despite it. Still, in a moment of awareness of the shifting power structures that come with changing demographics, Oscar reveals that "Every day he watched the "cool" kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the femenino, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself. *In the old days, it had been the white kids who had been the chief tormentors, but now it was kids of color who performed the necessaries*."[54] (emphasis added). The role of the "oppressor," as this moment reveals, is not relegated solely to those of white skin, but can also be taken over by the "kids of color." Because of this observation made by Oscar, we can extend its logic to other moments of the novel to see how former campus novel scenes of joviality can be taken over by "kids of color." One answer for why this is the case is the fact of changing demographics in the

[54] Ibid, 264.

United States and its universities. Another, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, is the fact that the affects guiding former campus periphery scenes are being seemingly shed, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* stands as an example.

"Campus peripheries" of the postwar period, as I've identified them throughout this dissertation, are worth attending for how they expand our understanding of academic fiction and of the role higher education was beginning to play. Yet it's also worth asking if their apprehensively defined way of depicting and alluding to the American university will continue as the United States inches towards becoming a minority-majority nation. Time will tell, but this much is clear: to better appreciate the reaches of academic fiction during the "Golden Age" of the American university means attending to the peripheral, even if just for a sentence.

Coda

This dissertation argues against restricting our attention to campus and academic novels if we wish to categorize and understand other novels—or portions of these novels—as academic fictions. In fact, failing to do so would certainly cause us to miss insightful depictions of the postwar American university—as largely shaped by its now long-gone "Golden Age"—and its social-democratic promises of economic security accomplished via individual success. Although this dissertation all but argues that "campus peripheries" are written primarily by racial "minority" authors—like, for example, Sandra Cisneros, Octavia Butler, Ernest Gaines, John Okada, and Ralph Ellison—I take seriously the possibility for this to not be true. Further reading of novels written during the postwar period, with the campus periphery lens, however, are needed to ascertain whether white, low-income authors were depicting the university in a similar fashion. Richard, in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* certainly sees the university as offering a path towards upward socio-economic mobility—but this is arguably not central to his experience as a student. Can we say then that economics don't matter to the novel? No, but we can say that they don't matter much to Richard's understanding of his time at college.

When I first began to think and write about this dissertation's topic I set out to look for academic fictions that were about the first-generation college experience. Given that this was personal to me—and to many of the dear friends I made during my time at my undergraduate alma mater, UC Santa Barbara—I was invested in producing a literary study that took these narratives seriously. However, it became quite clear, early on, that if I wanted to look for these types of narratives I had to think beyond the conventions of academic fiction, and beyond the favoritism devoted to the "academic novel" and faculty experiences. Perhaps ironically, the novel that came closest to representing this first-generation experience I had personally felt as an

undergraduate was John William's *Stoner* as it depicts the class and cultural estrangement with one's family brought upon by attending university. This was ironic only in the sense that Williams is white and up until this point my understanding of being "first-gen"—admittedly myopic—had been shaped by my understanding of myself as a racial "minority." When Stoner receives his undergraduate diploma, his modest parents come to campus to celebrate this accomplishment. This is also the moment that Stoner tells them he will not be returning to their farm to help them as he intends to stay at the university (ultimately forever) to go into graduate studies. At first his parents are confused by this decision, but eventually his father tells him "If you think you ought to stay here and study your books, then that's what you ought to do. Your ma and me can manage."[1] Soon after Stoner's mother cries and Stoner "found his way up the narrow stairs that led to his attic room; [and] for a long time he lay on his bed and stared with open eyes into the darkness above him" exhibiting the sense of guilt brought on by this separation.[2]

To be sure, I no longer share Stoner's guilt about attending university and leaving his family behind, nor do I feel a separation from my working-class family's background. This is not to say that I don't believe that there are no cultural and class factors that distinguish me from them as shaped by my decade long institutional attendance, but that I don't think that they should exist. I envision a society that makes the "bad jobs"—the dishwashing and low-wage Walmart jobs my parents hold—good ones, which is to say good paying ones.[3] In the same way my college degree(s) will invariably give me access to "better" jobs, and therefore financial security,

[1] John Williams. *Stoner*. (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006), 24.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Walter Benn Michaels. "The Trouble With Diversity." Lone Star College-Kingwood. May 8, 2019. Educational video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uoBNBuYYgCA

this should be true for all regardless of ones commitment to “the education myth” of American higher education.

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