SHINY LITTLE THINGS, GOTHIC CASTLES, AND REDWOOD FORESTS:
THE AMERICAN COLLEGE CAMPUS AESTHETIC

by

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INTRODUCTION
Ivy Brisbin is a twenty-nine-year-old orthodontic resident at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her car is plastered with stickers displaying her affection for the University of Michigan, the school some of her closest family members went to. Ever since she graduated from high school in 2008, she has lived a “campus life” at an American university. Eight years later, on August 21st, 2016, she posted this photo on her Instagram account. In the caption, she exclaimed that she still “love[s] being on a college campus.” For Ivy, the college experience has transcended being just a temporary state; it has become more like a permanent lifestyle. For me, the idea of the American college campus carries similar emotional weight. Ever since I lived on such a campus—or perhaps even before that—the quad, dining hall, and dorm room aesthetic has intrigued me. Without being aware of the significance of my own behavior, I excitedly visited four colleges—the University of Virginia, Charleston College, UNC Asheville, and Duke University—during a two-week road trip through the American South last summer. Only recently, I have started to realize just how powerfully the iconic images of campus landscapes have nestled into my brain. I would be remiss to ignore the significance of my personal American college experience in relation to this project. Without my own impressions of the vibrant, distinct, and physically imposing character of the college campus and its surrounding culture, I would not have developed the curiosity to pursue a better understanding of the profound, complex, and dynamic relationship between the American college campus and its aficionados.

The outside-looking-in quality of my college experience has influenced the scope, tone, and method that characterize this dissertation. After graduating from high school in the Netherlands, I received a partial “inter-cultural scholarship” through Fulbright’s Campus Scholarship Program, allowing me to spend my freshman year of college at Augustana, a small

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1 The underlined phrases are hyperlinks in the digital version.
liberal arts school in Rock Island, Illinois. Subsequently, I spent two semesters as an exchange student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. During these exchanges, I circumvented many of the painstaking attributes of the American college experience. The stress of the application process was mostly alleviated by the decidedly temporary nature of the exchanges and the security of a guaranteed place by my home university. Even though exchange trips are expensive and Augustana College’s partial tuition was a financial challenge for my family, I did not accumulate the life-altering debt that many American college graduates grapple with. Moreover, my status as an exchange student—a visitor with the idea of pro-actively and deliberately experiencing the culture of American college life as his prerogative—encouraged me to be hyper-aware of the setting I was in. Assessing, comparing, and evaluating what it meant to attend college in the U.S. was inherent to my being there. In that sense, I write this thesis about the American campus from a place of privilege. The otherness of the non-academic quirks of college life—Greek life, athletics, pick-up basketball, house parties, and endless hours of dining hall fun—was perhaps the main object of my attention during my time there. For me, college was more explicitly an “attraction” than it was for any of my American peers, and the campus was my theme park.

When Anne Martínez, my American dissertation advisor, voiced her concern that I might look at the “shiny little things” of American college life through rose colored glasses, her warning rang true in ways that I could not change. Of course, the expensive American higher education system was never my only path towards a college degree. Of course, I was not part of a society in which large segments of the population grow up learning they do not belong in a university setting because of its social and economic exclusivity. Of course, detached from normalcy, the pop cultural symbols of “college life” loomed larger in my

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2 Fulbright Center is a non-profit organization whose mission is to “promote mutual understanding between Dutch and American citizens by providing financial assistance for study, research, and teaching and by providing information and advice about study in the US” (Mission of the Fulbright Center).
imagination than in those of my American peers. Instead of letting my outsider status discourage me from writing about this subject, however, I realized that by zooming in on precisely that showy, outward, and visual side of the campus with a critical eye, this dissertation approaches the American college experience from a foreign, unusual, and productive angle that is unfamiliar in the current climate of U.S. higher education scholarship. Because I had been so aware of the novelty of my visual environment, I noticed the incredibly rich, careful, and fascinating cultivation and curation of a campus aesthetic that takes place at American universities.

The institution of higher education is responsible for—forgive me for the platitude—the future of America’s youth. Therefore, it is unsurprising and understandable that writers have primarily focused on its most obvious challenges: improving the quality of education, the problem of surging tuition costs, and the inequality of access. These three enormously complex and multifaceted issues invite an infinite number of additional questions: What is the purpose of education? How important is preparation for the job market vis à vis educating young adults to become “good citizens”? How much is a college degree worth? Is a college education still the best strategy in a rapidly changing society? What role does race play in the current system of higher education? In this maze of educational challenges, the “shiny little things” of American higher education have, exactly as this somewhat condemning phrase suggests, mostly been regarded as cutesy, but superficial and extra-curricular characteristics of American higher education.

This dissertation makes the case for the relevance of the visual tradition of the American college campus. While it is hardly controversial to claim that the campus is a recognizable symbol of American culture, the specific mechanics behind the development of that symbol have been insufficiently explored. More importantly, the significant connective tissue between the seemingly trivial visual culture of the college campus and the major issues facing higher
education has not yet been appropriately mapped. By interpreting the aesthetic identity of the campus through a postmodern lens, I argue that the deeply flawed, yet unmistakably intriguing and rich character of the American college is the result of a very specific national history and ideology. Theoretical perspectives from Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, Herbert Marcuse, and others offer a framework that help to understand the college campus as a dynamic, complex, and ideologically divisive consumer product. Since the early development of higher education in the United States in the late seventeenth century, I propose, the college campus has manifested itself profoundly as a hyperreal, ultra-visual, and deeply American material practice.

The biggest initial challenge of this project has been to appropriately define the scope of my research. The overwhelming majority of college campus scholarship deals with the educational, functional, or architectural development of one specific campus, but my proposition is to treat “the college campus” as a universal entity in the Platonian sense of the word.³ When Paul Turner was working on a comprehensive history of the architecture of the “college campus” in the 1980s, he ran into a similar scope problem. He noticed that historians “have given little attention to American college planning. Except for studies of the architecture of individual schools and portions of books written by planners on how to design colleges, almost nothing has been published on the history of the campus” (4). In this observation, Turner treats “the campus” linguistically congruously to the way I propose to write about it. In his attempt to produce a comprehensive study of the American college campus, he realized that he needed to write about it as a singular, self-contained symbol. Although he never specifically mentions it, the fact that he discusses the overarching unity of such a large, multifaceted, and diverse subject is in large part what drove his book. In the introduction of his book American Places: In Search of the Twenty-first Century Campus, Perry M. Chapman disagrees with

³ See e.g. Moore and Russell for examples of such specific college campus scholarship.
Turner’s proposition. He claims that “[n]o two campuses are alike,” and argues that when we look at campuses around the country “to find tangible expressions of what it is that makes the American campus a special place, we are confronted with a staggering range of campus forms and settings” (xxvii). While the “archetypical images that people associate with the traditional American campus—broad green quadrangles, Gothic archways, bell towers, grand library reading rooms—can be found in abundance in all parts of the country,” Chapman posits that “the physical forms of the country’s 4,000 college campuses follow no single formula” (xxvii). Chapman astutely highlights the enormous variety that exists in the spectrum of college campus architecture, but I object to his notion that there is no overarching sameness between campuses; even between those that are situated in a completely different climate, state, and overall setting. Instead, I maintain that American college campuses speak a common aesthetic language. This dissertation introduces the American college campus as a complex, but uniform entity, and elaborates on the friction between inclusion and exclusion, beauty and reality, sameness and difference, uniqueness and uniformity, and between the individual and collective experience that campus discourse initiates.

This dissertation has three chapters. The first chapter introduces the peculiar relationship between the college campus and “history.” Going back to the colonial college, this chapter discusses some of the historical forces that have helped to shape the visual college to what it is now. In addition to these historical connections, I introduce the idea that American campus planners have often tried to add a fascinating artificial layer of “history” to the campuses they design, making the American college doubly “historical.” In chapter two, I present the college campus’ visual identity as a product of America’s specific natural-geographical, socio-economic, and cultural infrastructure. Through an exploration of America’s physical geography and its tradition of transcendentalist philosophy, I untangle the complex relationship between the college campus and the American landscape. In the final
chapter, I connect the previously established characteristics of the college campus template to the challenges of higher education in the United States today. I argue that the aesthetic environment of the college campus is a symbolically explosive, emotionally ambiguous, and highly impactful setting that feels safe, connective, and rewarding to some, but dangerous, detached, and alienating to others.
CHAPTER ONE:

THE CAMPUS HISTORICIZATION PRINCIPLE
“There is no spell more powerful to recall the memories of college life than the word Campus.”

- Henry J. van Dyke Jr., 1879 (The Princeton Book 375)
In *America*, his unique philosophical dissection of the U.S., Jean Baudrillard claims that Americans maintain a difficult relationship with the concept of history. He suggests that although the “charm and power of American (un)culture derive precisely from the sudden and unprecedented materialization of models,” many Americans attempt to “fashion a set of ideal values and a history for themselves.” While Baudrillard readily admits that “America has never been short of violence, nor of events, people, or ideas,” he maintains that “casting a nostalgic eye” towards Europe’s “history, its metaphysics, its cuisine, and its past” is a case of “unhappy transference.” Instead, he emphasizes that “America was created in the hope of escaping from history, of building a Utopia sheltered from history,” and through that, it found itself in a unique situation of “radical modernity.” For Baudrillard, the unique quality of America is that it is the only place where “modernity is original” and where “[e]ccentricity is stamped on [its] birth certificate” (77-78). His reflections convincingly establish the idea that the U.S. has a very peculiar and specific relationship with history. In this chapter, I argue that this sentiment translates especially well to the physical organization of American higher education: the tension between history and modernity is inherent to the visual character of the college campus setting, and the peculiarity of this tension makes the college campus an organism that is very specific to the culture of the United States. The historical college campus in America is a double entendre. On the one hand, it is certainly a product of the country’s national history. The development of a distinctive collegiate architectural style is intrinsically connected to—and shares the exclusivist flaws of—historical processes such as manifest destiny, the struggle for American independence, and the arrival of the first Puritan settlers. On the other hand, America’s perceived lack of a long western history has engendered a discourse in which campus planners have perpetually tried to make their campuses *be* historical through the artificial, problematic, and hyperreal construction of historicalness.
Because it offers the best theoretical framework for my overarching argument, I investigate this “campus historicization principle” partially through a postmodern, Baudrillardian lens. Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson’s analyses help to explain why the *visuality* of the college campus template is such an important actor in the cultural script of American consumer society. A brief comparison of Baudrillard’s outlook on consumer society vis à vis Guy Debord’s notion of the spectacle illustrates why Baudrillard’s position, specifically, is such a productive point of reference for this dissertation. First and foremost, the postmodern focus on the image makes the match with this project’s emphasis on the showy, outward, and visual side of the college campus a compelling one. My focus on the image suggests that Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* would provide an excellent framework as well, but Baudrillard’s more hegemonic understanding of the postmodern hyperreal world is a better position from which to establish what the college campus template is, and how it is a specific symptom of America-ness. In *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord does highlight—more explicitly than anyone—that in our media-dominated society, “[e]verything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (7). The spectacle, he explains, is “a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (7). Interactions do not occur between people, but constantly occur via images. Debord, however, was a much more radical Marxist than Baudrillard. In “Debord and the Postmodern Turn,” Steven Best and Douglas Kellner explain that “[d]espite the pronounced emphasis on the artificiality of the spectacle, Debord refused to abandon the attempt to interpret and change social reality.” Baudrillard, au contraire, embraced the image-dominated society of the spectacle as “a new stage of abstraction, a dematerialization of the world through semiological (re)processing in which images and signs take on a life of their own and provide new principles of social organization” (Best and Kellner). He suggests we “bid farewell to modernity and its regime of production, and enter the postmodern society of the simulacrum, an abstract non-society devoid of cohesive relations, shared meaning, and
political struggle” (Best and Kellner). It is not the point of this dissertation to fit the notion of the college campus template seamlessly into Baudrillard’s version of America. The primary objective is to reveal the mechanisms that have created the dominant visual language of the American college campus, and Baudrillard’s image-dominated framework provides a terrific platform for that enterprise.

Although it is certainly corny to rattle off the etymology of a central term at the beginning of a chapter, spending a little time on the word “campus” helps to illustrate how the specific history of the U.S. is, indeed, embedded in the visual organization of the college grounds. In his history of the American College and University, Frederick Rudolph writes that in the nineteenth century, the early days of expansive college-founding, educational construction projects were “undertaken in the same spirit as canal-building, cotton-ginning, farming and gold mining … All were touched by the American faith in tomorrow, in the unquestionable capacity of Americans to achieve a better world” (48-49). While American college builders mostly followed English precedent in terms of architecture, this spirit manifested itself most visibly by the innovation of placing colleges “in the countryside or even in the wilderness, an unprecedented break with European tradition. The romantic notion of a college in nature, removed from the corrupting forces of the city, became an American ideal,” and the image of Americans conquering wilderness and illiteracy presented them as both trailblazing and fearless, yet educated and self-sufficient (Turner 4). While English universities were traditionally dense clusters of buildings in an urban setting, the quintessential American university ought to emit a sense of purity connected to the transcendentalist notion of nature, and was supposed to provide a spacious experience commensurate to the vastness of the American landscape. According to Paul Turner, the ideal of the college in nature “has persisted up to the present time and has determined the locations of countless institutions” (18). The industrious construction of colleges in the nineteenth century became part of a larger manifest
destiny narrative along with far more Davy-Crockett-esque notions such as gold mining and canal-building. In the process, the American college became a double signifier: Higher education was a vivacious and rapidly growing institution during a formative period of American self-actualization, and in addition, the near-immediate distinctive setting and design of many college campuses created a physical collegiate aesthetic that exuded values such as independence, purity, and self-reliance: symbols of an original, national American identity.

The early adoption of an aesthetic template prescribing visual ground rules of what a college should look like made the American university instantly visible, resonant, and ideological. The symbolic force of this collegiate template became so influential that “even those schools located in cities, where land is scarce, have often gone to considerable expense or inconvenience to simulate a rural spaciousness,” most commonly by centering buildings around a green field in the middle of the grounds, for example by forming the shape of an open quadrangle. When a Princeton student described this green enclave in a letter to his brother in January 1774, he used—for the first time in documented history—the word campus to encapsulate exactly its literal Latin meaning: a field (Matthews). During the construction of Princeton’s first “Front Campus” in 1756, Nassau Hall was “purposely set far back from the road, creating a large greensward … to which the building acted as a defining backdrop” (Matthews; Turner 21). This pattern had “no precedent in the British universities,” and would be used as a blueprint for many subsequent American colleges (Turner 21). As much as the campus presented American higher education with an identity of its own, it simultaneously and explicitly detached U.S. collegiate architecture from the English roots it had inevitably started from. In a way, the coming of age process of the American college became a compelling

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4 The first mention of the benefits of such an open quadrangle stems from the mid-sixteenth century. When physician John Caius refounded Gonville and Caius College in 1557, he built a new courtyard that was open on one side. The doctor’s reason for leaving it open was health. Caius forbade buildings on the open side “lest the air, from being confined within a narrow space, should become foul.” This philosophy would not spread until the open quadrangle was re-introduced in American collegiate architecture in the 19th century (Turner 12).
metaphor for the maturation, identity formation, and growing independence of the United States as a sovereign nation. The student who incidentally coined the term “campus” chose this phrase only to describe the quad he saw out of his dormitory window, but the “green expansiveness” he defined rapidly became a feature “distinctive of American schools” (Turner 4).5 Although the word “campus” is now used globally, its genealogy shows that it is a concept deeply embedded in the semiotic history of American identity-making.6 The initial meaning of campus was the first design element that made the college meaningfully and distinctly American.

It took until the nineteenth century for American colleges to develop a distinct architectural identity, but it was immediately evident that the first generations of Puritans in New England highly prioritized the development of higher educational facilities in the American colonies. According to the earliest mention of Harvard College in a pamphlet called “New Englands First Fruits” from 1642, as soon as “God had carried us safe to New England, and wee had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our liveli-hood, rear’d convenient places for Gods worship, and settled the Civill Government: One of the next things we longed for, and looked after was to advance Learning and perpetuate it to Posterity.” After the construction of a roof to sleep under, a place to worship, and a location from which to govern, the introduction of a college was next on the to-do list. The high-priority status of this endeavor and the extraordinary speed with which the first educational facilities sprang from New England’s soil indicate the importance that the founders of the English colonies in North-America attributed to education. As soon as 1640, only ten years after the settling of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, when its population was only about 12,000, a college was already

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5 The view on this engraving by Henry Dawkins (1764) is closer to what the student actually saw than the first photo in this paragraph. A funny detail of this engraving is that the “fence partially surrounding the campus, in this view, was probably a creation of [Dawkins’] imagination” (Turner 49).
6 For example, University College Groningen even uses the word “campus” to describe the single academic building the program organizes its classes in.
established and fully operating (Morison, “Seventeenth Century” 361; Turner 17). In addition, during most of the colonial period, “the biggest buildings in the colonies were educational, a fact that reveals a commitment to education—and to its physical needs—that was to be a particularly American trait” (Turner 17-18). The early and prominent presence of brick and mortar collegiate facilities in the New England colonies establishes the idea that the “college” was an immediate presence in American culture. It became one of America’s first physical “national” symbols; collegiate buildings represented the Puritan ambition to recreate meaning and to reset the cultural agenda in the New World.

It should be noted, however, that the dominant historical narrative of the college campus is an exclusive, incomplete, and western concept. Because the American university has been an institution dominated by white men, its symbolic tradition is also dominated by their discourse. Ultimately, the birth of the American college campus aesthetic is the result of a small group of white men trying to distinguish themselves from another small group of white men. Although it requires an active, activist, and critical eye, it is possible to unravel an alternative, more inclusive history of the college campus. This adjustment starts primarily with reconfiguring some of the previously established symbols that have connected the campus aesthetic to American historical events.

The idea of nature as an important element of campus design, for instance, is an illustration of the European gaze. It became prominent partially because it symbolized the generally esteemed manifest destiny attitude. The idea that Americans had been able to survive and cultivate absolute wilderness gave the country a distinct symbolic character that was promptly incorporated in campus designs. The narrative behind this symbol becomes immediately problematic, however, when you consider the heavily marginalized role of Native Americans in this discourse. The presence of Native American peoples in the “New World” diminishes the notion of absolute wilderness and turns manifest destiny into an oppressive and
negligent philosophy. Although it is not part of the dominant symbolic history of the college campus, the patronizing attitude that characterizes much of the colonial interactions with Native Americans is visible in some of the older colonial colleges’ symbols, as some of them started as Indian missionary institutions. Dartmouth University’s official motto for example, is “vox clamantis in deserto,” which crudely translates to the condescending sentiment of Dartmouth being “a voice crying out in the wilderness.” An alternative history that accurately reflects the role of Native Americans radically rewrites the way in which “natural” campus designs reflect the American historical narrative.

The hegemonic whiteness of American college campus design is, in totality, much more invasive than the insensitive appropriation of the “wilderness” trope alone. Although segregation had already left the institution of higher education with an intellectual history of racism, discrimination towards people of color is also visible through collegiate architecture. While Jim Crow laws have technically been overturned, the bricks of marginalizing university design remain unmoved. In 1902, for instance, Princeton president Woodrow Wilson praised the effect of Princeton’s historical architecture when he stated that “[b]y the very simple device of building our new buildings in the Tudor Gothic style we seem to have added a thousand years to the history of Princeton by merely putting those lines in our buildings which point every man’s imagination to the historical traditions of learning in the English-speaking race” (qtd. in Meyer). For Wilson, the historicist style of the campus was effective specifically because it exuded Anglo-Saxon elitism. Whereas arriving at the hegemonic origins of the wilderness trope in campus design requires a couple of steps, the racist intentions of Princeton’s design were articulated with blatant specificity. Whether you follow the dominant historical narrative of the college campus or support the ongoing construction of a more aware and inclusive history, the conclusion is inevitable that the majority of American college campuses were designed with the intention to exclude, and to cater to a very limited, elite, and privileged
portion of the American people. No matter how beautiful, successful, and impressive the college campus aesthetic has become, the notion that these spaces inherit a tradition of exclusion puts a significant strain on the concept. In the current social activist agenda, challenging privilege and reconsidering the non-existence of class in American society are priorities. Therefore, the realization that these concepts are present in the way students experience their physical educational environment is timely, relevant, and invites a lot of questions: how can we modernize an institution that was designed with exclusion in mind? To what degree are its aesthetics inseparable from an elitist, racist, and outdated ideology? How do we preserve its positively iconic parts while working on eliminating its atmosphere of privilege?

Furthering the actual process of rewriting campus history is not within the scope of this dissertation, but these reconfigurations are examples of how this project’s method of culturally analyzing campus design can be applied: A deep dive into the semiotic links between the campus and U.S. history concretizes the invasiveness of exclusion and spells out exactly how disenfranchisement is a feeling that is physically traceable to the actual design of a material institution such as the college campus. It shows how the American collegiate aesthetic is loaded with a rich, but covert history of local meaning, tension, and complexity.

The recent controversy surrounding statues of confederate soldiers suggests that the American public is ready to consider the idea that marginalization exists in the design of shared

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7 There are a number of initiatives that do specifically function as reconfiguration tools for the histories of university campuses. UNC’s Slavery and the Making of the University project has, for example, attempted to map the contribution of slave labor in the construction of the campus. La’Tonya Rease Miles’ essay “Space Matters: Rethinking University Spaces for and with Underrepresented Students” introduces a framework of initiatives that ought to improve the architectural historical narratives put out by university administrations. Through “counter-storytelling,” alternative campus tours, and “disorientation guides,” Miles invites students and administrators to “de-code and navigate the physical environment” of the college campus.
spaces and proves that the college campus is an excellent case study to investigate the intricacies of this notion. In the summer of 2017, several protest groups called for the removal of statues commemorating confederate soldiers in public locations. Activists, stirred up by Donald Trump’s divisive presidency, the growing Black Lives Matter movement, and a seemingly increasingly polarized political climate, argued that the celebration of these confederate figures was a clear case of institutional racism that should be eradicated. Not incidentally, a significant portion of these protests occurred on or nearby college campuses. The activist inclinations of college students combined with the very deliberate and active design of the campus turn these spaces into explosive cultural hotspots where the semiotic activity of physical structures is relatively on the forefront. Even though the statue controversy is only the tip of the iceberg, it introduced a line of thinking that this project elaborates on extensively.

Despite the fact that the actual history of the American college campus is a rich, dynamic, and complex phenomenon in its own right, college planners have, in addition, systematically sought to add layers of simulated history to their campuses. I argue that the general, non-specific principle of campus historicization itself helps to frame the cultural specificity of the American college campus template. Likely because of the wide variety of architectural styles through which campus historicization has manifested itself, architectural historians have not yet focused in on this specific thematic similarity. The non-linear eruption of stylistically heterogeneous colleges made it nearly impossible to construct a coherent timeline of architectural fads to begin with. Shaped by this stylistic eclecticism, historical overviews of U.S. campus development inevitably read like the Book of Genesis on steroids:

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8 In addition, several of the statues in question were located on campus grounds. For example, UNC’s Silent Sam and Duke’s statue of Robert E. Lee.
In the beginning, there was Georgian … characterized by axially, symmetry, low-hipped roofs, robust columns, and pavilions … The Federal and Greek Revival styles were also throwbacks to the classical … [and] thrived for some 20 years during which the United States regarded itself as the aesthetic heir of ancient Greece … Then the artistic sands shifted … [and] the Victorian ebullience of the Gilded Age marched joyously through the rest of the nineteenth century. (Gaines 8-9)

In the span of one paragraph and half a century, Thomas Gaines captures the ephemeral ebb and flow of a Georgian, Greek, and Victorian Gothic period in American collegiate architecture; and this was just about universities on the East coast. On the West coast, a “pronounced regionalism” had started to develop as well (Gaines 108). Colleges adopted a style Gaines loosely calls “California mission,” which he describes as having “stucco, brick or stone rooftiles (usually red) and arches … gardens and open courts, tile roofs, arcades, and intricately carved openings contrasting with plain undecorated walls showing the Moorish influence of Spain as transplanted to California” (108). The possibilities with this rich pallet of revivalist architecture were endless. On one end of the spectrum is Duke University, “whose uniform Gothic paraphernalia overwhelms with its relentless homogeneity” (Gaines 6). On the other end is Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, which houses “specimen examples of all architectural styles” (Gaines 6). The aesthetics of these different revivalist styles are vastly different, and the historical referent varies, but college planners collectively wanted their campuses to breathe history.

The principle of campus historicization concretizes the dialectical interplay between sameness and difference that characterizes the American college campus experience.

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9 The links are illustrations to collegiate examples of each style. The Georgian building is at the University of Saint Joseph in Connecticut, the Greek building is Girard College’s Founder’s Hall, and the Victorian Gothic photograph is from Bryn Mawr College.

10 The photograph depicts a mission-style building at the University of San Diego.
Architecturally, being on a mission style campus like the University of San Diego is a very different experience from being on a medieval looking Gothic campus like Duke or Princeton. Surely, their shared functionality elicits obvious parallels, but their overall “feel” is decidedly distinct. In fact, having a special individual character is “among the most valuable assets of an institution, and [its] preservation ought to be a prime goal of the planning process” (Turner 305). One of the objectives of this project, however, is to show that the relationship between colleges is more diffuse, and to substantiate the strange co-existence of sameness and difference in the campus setting. The omnipresent propensity to historicize the campus is a useful notion in that regard: it is an abstract and symbolic principle that has firmly monopolized the culture of American college campus design, but its physical manifestation is everything but a monoculture. In its endless architectural variation, the historical campus suggests difference where there is actually uniformity.

Moreover, a Baudrillardian reading of the campus historicization principle offers a postmodern interpretation of the faux-historical character of the college campus and reinforces the idea that the manifestation of this phenomenon was a deeply American process. Baudrillard writes that “America ducks the question of origins; it cultivates no origins of mythical authenticity; it has no past and no founding truth” (“America” 74). During the rapid expansion of American higher education in the early nineteenth century, there were “widespread doubts in America about the value of higher education” (Turner 90). Behind the façade of a boundlessly optimistic and forward-looking nation in progress hid a shaky foundation of institutional inexperience. College founders often lacked a substantive, proven, and practical educational philosophy, and they knew it. As early as 1816, American scholar George Ticknor complained that we “build new colleges in abundance, but we buy no books” and “we think too much of convenience and comfort and luxury and show; and too little of real, laborious study” (qtd. in Hofstadter and Smith). “In this embattled position,” Turner writes, “the
American college reacted by creating a kind of mythology to sustain itself” (90). Without “mythical authenticity” to fall back on, however, college designers created this mythology out of thin air. The institution of higher education in America compensated for its underdeveloped intellectual history by pushing a showy, overdetermined, and faux-historical material identity forward.

The development of the campus historicization principle was partially a function of good ol’ American bravado, but at the same time, it was also an early sign of the college campus’ inevitable movement towards hyperreality. Postmodern theorist Fredric Jameson has not written about the college campus himself, but I argue that the campus historicization principle, which thrives on its loose appropriation of revivalist architectural styles, is a prime example of what Jameson describes as the “random cannibalization of all the styles of the past [and] the play of random stylistic allusion” (23). Alexander Jackson Davis, one of the most successful and prolific collegiate architects of the nineteenth century, rose to prominence not in the least because he “showed an unabashed eclecticism” (Turner 124). Like “a pallet of paint colors at home depot,” he presented “alternate schemes from which the school authorities could choose” (Turner 124). One of the consequences of his unbridled versatility was that the colleges he built never really followed the rules and minutiae of one particular style. This is typical of the American college campus. In his article on Gothic architecture in the collegiate setting, for example, Robinson Meyer describes that “even as buildings began to aspire something ‘Gothic,’ then, it was a decidedly ahistorical ‘gothic.’” While college planners tried to copy a sense of history, they generally built copies without originals. Fredric Jameson calls this phenomenon “pastiche,” and describes it as one of the problematic symptoms of our age. According to Jameson, we have lost our connection to history. We imitate “a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style,” but it is “blank parody,” “amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction” (23). Our “historical deafness” manifests itself through “a
series of spasmodic and intermittent, but desperate, attempts at recuperation” (5). The ideology behind the visual culture of the college campus is a profoundly accurate representation of this “cultural logic of late capitalism” (13).

In an attempt to put his finger on the elusive sameness of the American college experience, Thomas Gaines uses a fascinating analogy: “Indeed,” he writes, “the college campus has an ambience all its own. Like the historic village, the world’s fair, the theme park, it is a place we want to go to, be in, identify with; there is a there there” (x). Gaines’ thought-provoking comparison directly calls for a discussion of the connection between the college campus and Baudrillard’s evaluation of America’s unique, singular embrace of what he calls “hyperreality.” In America, Baudrillard explains his position towards the “sweet madness of meaninglessness” that postmodern capitalism invites. For Baudrillard, America is “hyperreal in its vitality, it has all the energy of the simulacrum. It is the world centre of the inauthentic” (100). This might come across as an insult to American culture, but he does not mean it that way. Baudrillard finds America’s “reversal of our values” refreshing:

[I]t is Disneyland that is authentic here! The cinema and TV are America’s reality. The freeways, the Safeways, the skylines, speed, and deserts – these are America, not the galleries, churches and culture… Let us grant this country the admiration it deserves and open our eyes to the absurdity of some of our own customs. (101)

America is the only place that is capable of fully incorporating hyperreality into its culture. In postmodern society, the superficial image is hegemonic, and Baudrillard repeatedly uses the “theme park” to articulate this sentiment. In Simulacra and Simulation, he reiterates that “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the
hyperreal order and to the order of simulation” (10). It is not a coincidence that Thomas Gaines has compared the American college campus to a theme park. The aesthetic template that characterizes the college campus has thrived in the same center of inauthenticity in which Disneyland has flourished; the organization of the American college campus is rooted in a culture and infrastructure that has embraced the hyperreal.

In its early stages, the purpose of campus historicization was to visually compensate for an underdeveloped educational strategy. Since then, the role of the visual and symbolic collegiate apparatus has not only subsisted, but it has expanded: the imagery of the college campus has indeed become Disneyland-esque, but its reputation has remained deceivingly sincere. With the “turreted, crenelated, and machicolated Collegiate Gothic style that permeated American campuses,” the Disney comparison is not at all farfetched (Gaines 128). The fairy-tale architecture of some colleges evokes the idea of knights, castles, princes, and princesses as much as Disneyland does. In the collegiate setting, however, historicity is a more cunning mechanism than it is in a theme park. Princeton’s “stone tracery, heraldic shields, trefoils, bosses, crockets, and other medieval paraphernalia” do not exist for the sake of beauty and entertainment alone, nor are they just distractions (Gaines 126). As Gaines astutely points out, Princeton’s “aura of richly decorated architecture … bespeaks the luxury of budgetary latitude” (126). The campus historicization principle has become a widely used institutional strategy that bolsters the sign value of university brands all over America. Although Baudrillard has praised America for its embrace of the hyperreal, Robinson Meyer cautions for the commodification of the beautiful and historical college campus. He writes that “the American college campus, and its Gothic filigree, seem timeless, pristine constructions,” but “[n]othing could be farther from the truth.” He encourages his readers to be aware that “they are historical eruptions, made possible by philanthropic economics, continental envy and racism.” The historic college campus is just as imaginary as Disneyland, but until now, it has generally
avoided such self-reflexive treatment thanks to the serious reputation of higher education. This postmodern analysis of the campus historicization principle, however, suggests that the American college campus is an institution that—like the theme park—is held firmly in America’s “inauthentic” grasp.

This chapter has illustrated that America’s dialectical relationship with history has been instrumental to the development of the visual identity of the college campus. On the one hand, the campus has inherited important physical traits from symbolic representations of America’s lived history. On the other hand, America’s unique “radical modernity” has incited the hyperreal ubiquity of the campus’ faux-historical aesthetic (Baudrillard, America 78). I have also addressed the problematic elements of these dominant historical narratives, and I have established why tracing the symbolic genealogy of campus structures can encourage the construction of a more conscious, inclusive (campus) environment. The historicalness of the college campus is hugely important to its visual character, but it is not the complete picture. The cultural script responsible for the overwhelming sign value of the American college campus is broader than the historical processes outlined so far. The following chapter traces how the specific characteristics of the American landscape have shaped the visual identity of the college campus template and argues that the natural sites surrounding America’s colleges have had a similar aesthetic impact on the college campus as the campus historicization principle I introduced in this chapter.
CHAPTER TWO:

COLLEGE IN THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE
“I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,--to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.”

- Henry David Thoreau, 1862 (Walking 657)
The interaction between the college campus and the American landscape has played a pivotal role in the evolution of the collegiate template. In the first chapter, I outlined that the omnipresent symbolic inclusion of “nature” in American campus design sprang from two main semiotic sources: the materialization of the manifest destiny attitude and the transcendentalist notion that colleges should be “removed from the corrupting forces of the city” (Moore 4). In order to simulate the romantic imagery of American nature, college campuses of every locale—urban, suburban, and rural—have integrated an abundance of natural elements into their campus designs: quads of Kentucky bluegrass, extensive garden features, canopy curation, and more. This is an example of the powerful relationship between the American landscape and the college campus: The mere idea of “American nature” has shaped the visual organization of college campuses everywhere; even of colleges located in settings miles away from the natural landscapes their campuses are supposed to imitate. The fact that college campus designers have found aesthetic inspiration in American nature effectively captures the scope of its influence. Their inspiration, however, is drawn from an abstract and Platonian idea of what American nature ought to be. Consequently, this campus-environment relationship alone is too indirect and derivative to sufficiently illustrate how profound the connection between the college campus aesthetic and the natural infrastructure of the American landscape is.

To make that connection more tangible, it is instrumental to move beyond the campus itself. After all, for every individual college, there is a very direct relationship between the campus and its surrounding landscape. Different scholars have explored the individual intricacies of such relationships, and writers like Tomas Bender, David Perry, and Wim Wiemel have researched how some universities have contributed significantly to the development of their neighboring towns.11 I offer a contribution to this line of thinking by

11 E.g. Ted Moore’s “Creating an Idyllic Space” on Michigan State University, Peter Marcuse’s and Cuz Potter’s study of Columbia University, or Robert Russel’s “An Ornament to Our City” about the College of Charleston campus.
elaborating on the strong comprehensive relationship between the college campus template and the infrastructure of the United States: The evolution of America’s spatial organization, along with the cultural sedimentation of a transcendentalist ideology that first realized the aesthetic value of America’s natural environment occurred simultaneously with the early development of the country’s institution of higher education. This coincidental conjunction, I argue, has made the college campus and America’s infrastructure functionally, aesthetically, and culturally symbiotic. The college campus aesthetic has evolved specifically to fit harmoniously into the natural-geographical, socio-economic, and cultural features of the United States.

The spread-out distribution of colleges throughout the American countryside is a unique phenomenon. In the Western history of academia, universities have almost exclusively been urban endeavors. In the Urban University and Its Identity, Herman van der Wusten affirms that almost all “original European universities were situated in cities” (4). From the foundation of those early universities onward, governments mostly established colleges in their capital cities and “large individual cities sought to establish their own universities as part of their efforts to achieve glory, fame, and progress” (4). The organization of American academia was instantly divergent, as U.S. universities showed an immediate “impulse to withdrawal and an affinity with the purified, safe, and calm life of the suburbs” (Bender, “Scholarship” 18). America’s embrace of the peripheral college, mixed into a cocktail of laissez-faire capitalism, access to vast landscapes, and a continued interest in higher education instituted a virtuous circle: the success of the non-urban college encouraged the construction of more kindred universities, which, in turn, further improved the cultural status of the countryside-college and its spacious, green aesthetic. This cycle turned the country’s collegiate landscape into a complete and utter aberration. Today, the distribution of colleges in the U.S. is wildly different from the rest of the world’s. According to the National Center for Education Statistic’s (NCES) data from 2016-2017, only twenty-three percent of all 1714 degree granting, four-year
residential colleges in the U.S. are located inside an urbanized area inside a principal city with a population of 250,000 or more.\textsuperscript{12} This statistic stands out primarily because of two numbers: the singularly high percentage of non-urban colleges and the unrivaled quantity of total autonomous residential campuses. On a map, the 1700+ colleges that are sprinkled all over the landscape paint a colorful picture:

Although the college density is still significantly higher on the coasts and around urban hubs, and some of the most prestigious institutions (NYU, Harvard, UCLA) are in fact within major city borders, the overall distribution of colleges and the remarkable contribution of the non-urban college make the distinction between center and periphery unusually diffuse.\textsuperscript{13} When it comes to the college campus, there is no “flyover country” in the United States.

The side effects of this unique distribution pattern prompted college campuses to become independent, self-reliant, and culturally relevant. According to Ted Moore, the relative

\textsuperscript{12} The actual number of universities that border non-urban landscapes is even higher. The NCES data—understandably—do not account for the characteristics of the university’s direct environment. Duke university, for example, is located within Durham’s city borders, making it an urban university. Its surrounding landscape, however, has a decidedly non-urban “feel.”

\textsuperscript{13} In this \textit{GIF}, you can see the distribution of urban colleges and non-urban colleges separately.
isolation of many colleges required them to “be multipurpose institutions that supplied spaces for housing, dining, worship, recreation, socializing, institutional government, and, of course, education” (4). The romantic notion of a college in nature was initially an American ideal, but in the process of realizing that ideal, Paul Turner concurs, “the college had to become even more fully a kind of miniature city,” and “its design became an experiment in urbanism” (4). The concept of “colleges and universities as communities in themselves – in effect, as cities in microcosm” became “a basic trait of American higher education from the colonial period to the twentieth century” (Turner 3). The mutual acclimatization process between the college campus and American society was, as Turner here emphasizes, gradual. Slowly but surely, the college campus settled into the social fabric of the United States. Campuses adapted to the demands and opportunities provided by both their local and national environments, and Americans gradually grew accustomed to the college campus as a significant visual and cultural landmark.

As college developers successfully positioned their campuses as miniature cities throughout the American landscape, they utilized their campuses’ natural environments to cultivate a unique and poignant visual character. Although there was certainly a history of visually imposing universities before the rise of the American college campus, most of those universities lived in the shadows of the cities they were part of. According to Herman van der Wusten, “[u]niversities of whatever size drown in really large metropoles,” but “universities may completely dominate their urban environment if the city is smallish” (4). The United States facilitated the first and only large-scale infrastructure in which the college campus could really assert itself in such an aesthetically dominant way. In addition to a convenient vastness, the American landscape also offered a wide variety of beautiful natural sites. In the mid-nineteenth century, college officials started to recognize the potential value of those locations. This was the beginning of a practice that would quickly grow into a collegiate design trope: the
utilization of natural sites as a means to aesthetically enhance the image of a college. I call this custom “site commodification.” Turner describes how this turn towards the recognition of nature’s aesthetic qualities can be seen in the visual representation of colleges: “In the colonial period,” he writes, “views of colleges always showed them in ‘civilized’ settings, regardless of their actual locations. But in the nineteenth century a pictorial manner became common that emphasized the natural environment” (101). This shift permanently changed the way college campuses related to their surroundings. In *Campus Image and Identity*, Richard Dober describes how some colleges started to arrange their quads and trees to “form a panoramic view of a significant building” (83). According to Dober, the commodification of these natural elements bolsters what he calls the college’s “picture postcard institutional identity” (83). Although Dober introduced this term to describe the man-made design elements that fulfill this function, it is equally applicable to the natural sites that became the subject of a similar picture postcard mentality. At the University of Washington, for example, “planners took advantage of their site by lining up the main axis of the campus with Mount Rainier” (Gaines 113). Site commodification is now a widely used and cost-effective aesthetic strategy. In *the Campus as a Work of Art*, Gaines even goes as far as to directly criticize the University of Alaska and the University of Hawaii for their inexcusable under-utilization of the natural resources they have at their disposal: “What is agonizing about these aesthetically lost campuses,” he writes, “is the fact that it would have cost no more to have done it right” (119). Like the grass quad and the campus historicization principle, the aesthetic convention of site commodification is a major element of the college campus template that has put the college campus in an excellent position to thrive in an increasingly image-dominated society. Thanks to the practice, colleges have been able to absorb a wide variety of postcard-worthy sites—from beaches and ocean views to forest and mountains—into their “brands.”
The collegiate appreciation of nature’s beauty is a consequence of America’s transcendentalist tradition. In *Thoreau on Land: Nature’s Canvas*, Bill McKibben argues that writing about the qualities of nature “constitutes America’s great literary gift to the world” (ix). “[O]n these shores,” he writes, “human beings came to literary consciousness before they finished subjugating the wild natural world, not long after, as in Europe and the East. And so a grand and subversive tradition of writing about the land was born” (ix). The ideologies of American transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau propelled the dissemination of environmental consciousness and an appreciative attitude towards nature’s beauty. They were specifically adamant about the connection between nature and intellect. Thoreau, for example, repeatedly stressed “how important” it was for “the preservation of moral and intellectual health” to have “constant intercourse with nature and the contemplation of natural phenomena” (qtd. in Gross 58). It was no surprise, then, that transcendentalist sentiments trickled into the organization of higher education. In fact, Thoreau directly spoke out about what he considered the ideal setting for a college. In the 1830s, he said about Williams College—an isolated college in western Massachusetts—that “it would be no small advantage if every college were thus located at the base of a mountain” (qtd. in Turner 101). With this statement, Thoreau quite literally encouraged college planners to adopt the practice of site commodification.

Ironically, suggestions of this kind eventually became the inspiration for the aesthetic monetization of natural sites by colleges all across the United States. Initially, Thoreau’s transcendentalism comes across as harmlessly environmentalist. When, in a letter to his friend Harrison Blake, he wonders what the use of a house is “if you haven’t got a tolerable planet to put it on,” it reads as an unequivocal plea for the preservation of the earth (qtd. in Sandborn 360-361). A critical reading of Thoreau’s prose, however, reveals a consumerist, greedy, and subversively exploitative undertone in his attitude towards nature’s gifts. For instance, the
notion that he craves “constant intercourse with nature” exposes a surprisingly compulsive character (qtd. in Gross 58). In Walden, he writes that “[w]e can never have enough of Nature” (205). We must constantly “be refreshed by the sight of [its] inexhaustible vigor” (205). Although Thoreau’s work clearly conveys his reverence of nature’s beauty and purity, it simultaneously promulgates an inherent philosophy of aesthetic consumption: the relentless monetization and exploitation of natural sites as a pure means for human enjoyment.

This attitude goes beyond mere tonal conjecture. In the Maine Woods, Thoreau’s prose follows the ideological structure of Baudrillard’s consumption-focused Marxist critique:

Is it the lumberman, then, who is the friend and lover of the pine, stands nearest to it, and understands its nature best? Is it the tanner who has barked it, or he who has boxed it for turpentine, whom posterity will fable to have been changed into a pine at last? No! no! It is the poet; he it is who makes the truest use of the pine, — who does not fondle it with an axe, nor tickle it with a saw, nor stroke it with a plane. (62)

From a Marxist perspective, the lumberman’s use of the pine is easily the “truest.” What people are, for Marx, “coincides with their production, both with what they produce and how they produce” (2). By chopping wood, the lumberman adds clear value to the tree through his labor. As Baudrillard’s translator Mark Poster describes it in his introduction to Baudrillard’s the Mirror of Production, the lumberman “utilizes technology to compel nature to yield its riches for human enjoyment” (4). Marx’s valuation of labor as the main source of human self-fulfillment prompted Baudrillard to write a critique. “In Marxism,” Baudrillard writes, “man has learned to reflect on himself, to assume himself, to posit himself according to this scheme of production which is assigned to him as the ultimate dimension of value and meaning” (“Mirror of Production” 19). While Marx convinces “men that they are alienated by the sale of
their labor power,” Poster explains, he censors the much more radical hypothesis that men do not necessarily “have to be the labor power” (“Mirror of Production” 3). To whatever extent Marx was able to extract the notion of “labor” from the hegemony of bourgeois rule, “he still turned it over to the working class, imposed it on them, as their central means of self-comprehension” (3). Baudrillard wants to liberate people from “[t]his remarkable phantasm,” and proposes a reality “in which man becomes his own signified for himself and enjoys himself as the content of value and meaning in a process of self-expression” (Mirror of Production 20).

In this passage, Thoreau considers a similar argument. Instead of the lumberman’s production, he suggests that it is the poet “who makes the truest use of the pine” (62). In Baudrillardian terms, Thoreau believes that the poet, in relationship to the pine, “enjoys himself as the content of value and meaning.” By interpreting nature through a poetic eye, the poet liberates him/herself from the restrictive paradigm of labor power. Moreover, Thoreau’s use of the phrase “to make true use of” emphasizes that the poet’s relationship with the pine revolves around his/her immediate consumption of nature’s aesthetic qualities; Thoreau urges his readers to utilize the images that nature presents to us. As Ann Bermingham writes in the Consumption of Culture, Marx spent most of his energy on “an analysis of labor and production,” overlooking to sufficiently analyze the notion of consumption in the process (7).

By specifically lauding how the relationship between the poet and the pine is consumptive, Thoreau—unlike Marx—builds his evaluation of nature not on production, but on consumption.

The transcendentalist’s subversively consumerist interpretation of nature in the United States has enforced a national culture of site commodification. It has kindled the development of a counter-intuitive state of affairs in which the curation and foregrounding of “natural” sites helps to uphold the status quo of capitalist consumer culture. In his evocative article “The Wilderness in American Capitalism,” Charles R. Simpson argues that, symbolically, the
physical geography of the United States has been split into a binary opposition: the relatively strict division of the industrial landscape vis-à-vis the natural site. According to Simpson, American landscape elements with economic value have generally been aesthetically secularized, while “natural features suggestive of the picturesque and the sublime” have been sacralized (555-556). The “preservation of large and remote areas from lumbering and farming”—the national park system—became “a new basis for legitimating the cultural hegemony of corporate capitalism” (556). “Rather than alter capitalism in any fundamental way,” Simpson maintains, the desire of landscape reformers has been “to address the pernicious effects of the city—its industrial pollution, communicable diseases, and cultural chaos—through the provision of enclaves of rest and recreation” (558). “In this emergent attitude toward nature,” he concludes, “scenic portions of nature were severed from the rest and sacralized as retreats” (558). In Baudrillardian terms, the natural site in America became another Disneyland. Demarcated by entrances and exits, magnified through marketing strategies and tourism bureaus, and framed in images by photographers and landscape painters such as Thomas Cole, Fredric Church, and Albert Bierstadt, even “nature” took its place in the “world centre of the inauthentic” (“America” 100).

College planners have been remarkably proficient at incorporating the post-transcendentalist sign value of the natural site into campus narratives. Catalyzed by the success of the peripheral college and the strong transcendental connection between nature and the development of the mind, colleges were among the first American institutions to latch on to the newfound valuation of nature. Today, after more than a century of semiotic connotation, the natural site has become such an engrained characteristic of the American college life myth that the quality of surroundings has become a significant variable in the collegiate pursuit of

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14 For an extended exploration of how nature has been “framed” by art, read Gina Crandell’s *Nature Pictorialized: “The View” in Landscape History* (John Hopkins UP, 1992).
differentiation. Online platforms such as Best College Reviews, The Best Colleges, and The Princeton Review, for example, have created lengthy lists of the most beautiful college campuses in America. According to the Best College Reviews, “the benefits of a beautiful campus shouldn’t be underestimated. Working to an aesthetically appealing backdrop,” the article states, “may provide that welcome touch of inspiration when hitting the books, and relaxing is arguably easier and more fun when you have lush green areas, elegant buildings and serene lakes to explore.” College administrations themselves have, likewise, adopted site commodification as a fundamental element of their marketing campaigns. In order to visualize the overwhelming presence of the natural site in the college campus template, I have compiled a playlist of promotional content from official university YouTube channels. In each of these videos, site commodification plays a prominent role. This visual evidence works best as a playlist, because watching a few of these videos in sequence illustrates how site commodification—through a mechanism that is eerily similar to the campus historicization principle—suggests individuality through thematic homogeneity.

Even though these videos exist to highlight the very uniqueness of each university’s setting, this playlist runs over with common themes. Because site commodification is such a sensory trope, a lot of these themes are audiovisual: wide aerial drone shots show the college campuses surrounded by their luscious natural landscapes; cinematic tricks such as time lapses and tracking shots highlight specific sites such as lakes, mountains, and beaches; seasonal footage hyper-highlights the impact of the natural environment; and soothing piano music seeps through the speakers, creating a serene atmosphere for the viewer. In addition to these cinematic motives, the rhetoric strategies used by some of the videos’ screenwriters reveals their struggle to appropriately frame the exploitative message of site commodification. For example, The University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of California at Santa Cruz, and Rollins College use apophasis—a rhetorical device wherein the speaker or writer brings up a
subject by denying its importance—to sell their landscapes. Boulder’s video applies a textbook example of this: it urges its viewers to “be inspired,” but goes on to clarify that this inspiration should be initiated “not by a place,” “not by a symbol,” and “not by a lifestyle,” but “by the promise of your own potential.” The three negations, however, are visually juxtaposed with beautiful imagery of the Rocky Mountains Foothills the university is surrounded by, a fierce charging buffalo that symbolizes the university’s natural setting, and skiers that take advantage of the possibilities offered by Colorado’s mountain slopes. Clearly, the video exists to highlight—not negate—the value of Boulder’s surrounding landscape. Similarly, the UC Santa Cruz video emphasizes that “the beauty of UC Santa Cruz is not just the postcard.” Before the narrator clarifies what he means by this, however, he first elaborately lists the “redwood forests, the seaside town, ocean, and starry skies” that make up that beautiful postcard. Before the video continues beyond the natural imagery of the college’s setting, it is already halfway over. Rollins College, finally, admits that “[t]here is plenty to admire” around the campus: “from the shimmering waters of Lake Virginia, to the distinctive Mediterranean architecture.” 15 “Zoom in though,” the video commands, “and you will discover that our campus is beautiful for dozens of reasons beyond its stunning lake-side location and sunny weather.” Again, this video feigns to be about values beyond mere visual glamour, but goes out of its way to elaborately show off exactly the images it supposedly deems of secondary importance. Despite the showy visual style of the videos, the repeated use of apophasis suggests that colleges find it difficult to completely own the sheer visuality of the college experience.

The dialectical treatment of the American landscape in these videos is a useful segue from this chapter to the next. In this chapter, I have argued that the identity of the college campus is, fundamentally, a product of America’s physical and cultural characteristics. The

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15 In one sentence, this video brings attention to both site commodification and the campus historicization principle.
country’s transcendentally informed spatial philosophy encouraged the university to become a self-reliant mini-city, and the aesthetic qualities of the periphery were central to the success and particularity of the visual college campus template. Certainly, colleges have not thought twice about commodifying their natural environments in their marketing strategies. Like they do in these videos, they capitalize on their most aesthetically pleasing attributes by serving them up “in a disfigured, meaningless form, with an added Disneyland glitter” (Baudrillard, “America” 99). Shaped, again, by the transcendental turn, the American colleges from this playlist have learned to effectively capitalize on the aesthetic qualities of the natural site. Like the campus historicization principle from chapter two, site commodification is a powerful visual tool that has boosted the sign value of the colleges campus to such a degree that its visual identity and recognizability has become one of the institution’s finest achievements. For Baudrillard, the college’s mastery of creating social meanings through the commodification of signs would be just another example of how, more than any other culture, America—and the college campus specifically—has been able to embrace the hyperreal and “domesticate modernity” (“America” 77). For Americans themselves, however, the dominance of the college campus’ sign value is much more consequential. For them, the primary value of higher education lies not in its success as a meaningless sign, but in its function to teach American teenagers to become happy, accomplished, and economically independent adults. Certainly, sign value plays a role in that process, but that role ought to be minor at best. When the sign value of college is not in balance with its functional- and exchange value, problems ensue. By using tricks like apophasis, the creators of these promotional videos circumvent the suggestion of such an imbalance while still benefitting from the sign value of the natural sites their colleges commodify. In the previous chapters, I have illustrated how America’s specific socio-economic, natural-geographical, and cultural infrastructure have occasionally steered the college campus towards the prioritization of sign value. Next, I will connect the seemingly
trivial visual peculiarity of the college campus directly to the major issues facing higher education in the United States.
CHAPTER THREE:

DEMARcation OF DIFFERENCE
“[I]n the end, does it matter whether students toil in homely vineyards? I think it does.”

- Thomas Gaines, 1991 (The Campus as a Work of Art 11)
In 1954, Martin Heidegger wrote an essay on architecture called “Building Dwelling Thinking.” In this text, the German philosopher points out that “[t]he truck driver is at home on the highway, but he does not have his shelter there [and] the working woman is at home in the spinning mill, but does not have her dwelling place there” (1). Heidegger denotes a distortion in the relationship between building, home, and function. On the American college campus, however, this distortion has disappeared. For the American undergraduate student, the college campus is, quite straightforwardly, many different beings at once: it is home, shelter, dwelling, work, and free time altogether. Americans have widely accepted the notion that the college campus is a completely all-round entity. Beyond a school, the college is a city, an amusement park, a safe haven, and everything in between. Both culturally and physically, the American college campus has been recognized as a somewhat mythical enclave: it is so functionally different and complex that it is supposed to stand out in its landscape as an “other.” Ever since American social psychologists “invented the modern concept of adolescence” in the early twentieth century, for example, “the peculiarly American notion that higher education is as much about adolescence as it is about formal learning has been institutionalized” (Moffatt, College Life 50-51). As Perry Chapman asserts in American Places: In Search of the Twenty-first Century Campus, this means that it is up to “the campus, and therefore its architecture” to “fulfill a purpose unlike any other entity, which is to quicken the intellectual, sensory, and experiential capacity of its students in the special process of making the transition from adolescence to adult citizenship” (50). Earlier in his book, he asserts that “[f]ew constructed environments are as meticulously composed to achieve beauty and order as are campuses” (xxvi). It seems that for Chapman, it is beauty and order that stimulates the mind of the adolescent. The college campus can, ostensibly, achieve its extraordinary omni-functionality by virtue of advanced sign value: its exclusive, clean, and deliberate aesthetic of lavish cultivation. Because of this conflation of showiness and productivity, the otherness of the
college campus has become largely a function of its overwhelming visual composedness. In this chapter, I argue that, at best, this aesthetic environment creates a relaxing, socially accessible, and intellectually stimulating setting for ideas, knowledge, and dialogue. At worst, however, the American college campus in its current state is an overwhelmingly alienating setting which discriminates against, repels, and scares away people who do not grow up surrounded by images of wealth. This symbolic ambiguity is the tension that connects the visual template of the college campus to some of the most pressing issues of contemporary higher education in the United States.

Colleges compose their otherness through a process I call “the demarcation of difference.” The most obvious and direct elements that help build up this feeling are physical structures such as walls, gates, fences, banners, and plaques. With the help of such physical markers, college planners on campuses of all sizes and locales clearly identify the area where university property begins and the outside world ends. Through the use of demarcation structures around the edges of the campus, along with the continuous appropriation of collegiate logos, mascots, and color schemes on banners and other markers, universities have made it virtually impossible to enter a college campus without being made abundantly clear that you are. Whether it is in the form of a relatively subtle low wall, such as here at the crossing of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill campus and the adjacent popular leisure strip of Franklin Street, a prominent car-oriented gateway, or some fence in between, the perimeters of a campus usually have clear portals. Demarcation of difference as a whole, however, is a much more complex phenomenon. The construction of collegiate otherness goes way beyond the mere physicality of that first material layer of gates, banners, and fences: the entire college campus template—with all its faux-historical architectural quirks and post-transcendental

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16 This scene from Monsters University (2013) vibrantly introduces the movie’s college campus setting. The movie uses a gate, fencing, and banners to successfully paint a collegiate picture. Evidently, these structures immediately evoke the idea of college.
elements—participates in the construction of that feeling of difference. The range of connotative interpretations of demarcation of difference signage is wildly ambivalent. On the one hand, you can easily imagine how collegiate demarcation of difference can make students feel safe, connected, and rewarded. On the other hand, those same symbols can feel equally dangerous, detached, and alienatingly privileged.

For example, the construction and conservation of a reputation for being a safe, secure, and protective environment is of paramount importance to college administrations. Traditionally, the demarcation of difference strategy has helped colleges to build such reputations, but a reconfiguration of people’s understanding of safety and danger challenges this notion. Although perceived safety is important in every setting, colleges are extra motivated to be associated with it: campuses house large groups of relatively vulnerable young adults who live semi-independently for the first time in their lives, and the parents and caretakers who, in most cases, invest heavily—financially and emotionally—in their children’s college trajectories care deeply about leaving them in an environment they consider safe. Walls, entrance gates, revivalist buildings, and suburban settings all help college campuses to come across as fortresses: institutions that fiercely protect their inhabitants from outside threats, and places that can clearly identify the people who belong versus the people who intrude. Additional symbols such as designated campus police and initiatives such as UNC’s safe walk further strengthen the association between the college campus and safety. This particular functionality of the college campus template, however, works only with an outdated, limited, and privileged understanding of security: one that assumes that the student body is a uniform, monochromatic group that only requires protection from external forces. The connotation

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17 This paragraph does not discuss the actual safety of colleges; its primary concern is to analyze how demarcation of difference makes a college campus feel safe or unsafe. An actual analysis of safety on college campuses requires a much more elaborate discussion.

18 According to a study by Charles P. Wilson and Shirley A. Wilson, 74% of the 750 law enforcement agencies serving four-year universities and colleges with 2,500 or more students employed sworn law enforcement officers.
between safety and the collegiate aesthetic completely inverses when university employees call the police on black students having lunch on campus, or when you realize that acquaintance rape is the most common violent crime on American college campuses today (Victor, Sampson). For victims of power- and privilege-related abuse, the “protective” features of collegiate demarcations of difference become threatening. For them, the walls that are supposed to keep criminals out become the structures that shield their abusers; the gates that welcome those who belong signify that there are people who do not; the towers that make people hold their breath in awe seem as if they were made of ivory; and the peaceful quiet of the suburban setting becomes an alienating silence. The documentary The Hunting Ground, for example, uses an abundance of beautiful campus imagery as the visual background of its central argument, which states that colleges all over the United States actively obstruct and bury reports of on-campus sexual assault. Those images function as juxtapositions—“how can such horrible events occur in such beautiful places”? —but they also create an image of the college as a claustrophobic, image-obsessed, and cultish institution that handles all its unlawfulness internally, and does everything to protect its carefully polished brand. Even within the context of America’s already image-dominated society, colleges are especially fixated on the preservation of their image. At times, this obsession with “standing out” actually stands in the way of efficient, moral, and pragmatic policy-making.

Ironically, the hegemonic image of the college campus as a strictly enjoyable, near-utopian enclave has forced college administrations into such an untenable brand-protection position that the sword of dysfunctionality now cuts on two sides. As Laura Kipnis argues in Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus, there are “plenty of cases where unequivocal sexual assaults happen and the system fails to deal with it—especially when it

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19 See e.g. Michele Antoinette Paludi’s Sexual Harassment on College Campuses: Abusing the Ivory Power or Peggy Reeves Sanday’s Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus for detailed explorations of power abuse on the college campus.
comes to athletes and frats—even as there are shocking prosecutorial excesses in other instances” (16). The aesthetic tradition of the American college campus has heavily contributed to the idea that going to university ought to be a holistically pleasant experience. Because the brand of the campus is fundamental to the success of an American college, protecting the sign value that comes with an unrealistically spotless image has become disproportionately important in U.S. higher education discourse. Both visually and culturally, the college campus has become an inflated extension of “the cocoon of adult protection,” and as Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt suggest in “The Coddling of the American Mind,” the ultimate aim of colleges today is to turn their “campuses into ‘safe spaces’ where young adults are shielded from words and ideas that make some uncomfortable.” Instead of serving as “a refuge for complexity” and “a setting for the free exchange of ideas,” the college campus has crumbled under the unbearable weight of appearing pleasant, unique, and omni-functional (Kipnis 9). Consequently, many liberal arts professors in the United States experience their working environments as “totalizing, simplistic, unworkable, and ultimately stifling” (Schlosser).

Although the visual singularity of the campus template has made the American college pop-culturally successful, it has also blunted its ability to be edgy, provocative, and intellectually challenging.

Ideally, of course, demarcation of difference in the collegiate atmosphere actually leads to a productive, creative, and societally involved environment. Certainly, college administrations sell their aesthetic innovations with this ideal in mind. In her article about “the Innovation Campus,” Alexandra Lange writes that “[w]here once the campus amenities arms race was waged over luxury dorms and recreation facilities, now colleges and universities are building deluxe structures for the generation of wonderful ideas.” Cornell University officials, 

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20 For more on the notion of “vindictive protectiveness” on college campuses, see e.g. Robert Shibley’s “Vindictive Protectiveness on Campus,” Peter Gray’s “Declining Student Resilience: A Serious Problem For Colleges,” and Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning’s The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars.
for example, describe the staircase of their new $100 million Bloomberg Center as “[a] sculptural staircase” designed to add “friction to people’s work lives, as unexpected encounters (with people, with different spaces, with art) are supposed to lead to unexpected ideas” (qtd. in Lange). Although colleges deserve to be criticized for their problematically image-obsessed, materialistic, and superficial focus on sign value, it is equally obtuse to completely devalue the power of the image. American historian Helen Horowitz, author of Campus Life and Alma Mater, captures this power of the campus when she writes about her own experience at Wellesley College: “I never got over the sense,” she commemorates, “that when I entered Wellesley I stepped on special ground.” For Horowitz, the demarcated space of the Wellesley campus “made new demands” on her that, as counterintuitive as it may sound, actually “opened the unknown worlds of knowledge and adulthood” (Alma, xxi). It is not at all farfetched to believe that the purposeful creation and maintenance of a differentiated setting that has knowledge, education, and personal development as its core values could—as transcendentalist thinkers have previously suggested—produce a singularly productive, innovative, and stimulating environment.

Recently, however, both students and scholars have been especially critical of the isolationist inclinations of the college campus. Although colleges remain hubs of social activism, critics claim that the secluded nature of the college campus endangers decreased societal and political activism and involvement. Students from Michael Moffatt’s anthropological exploration of American college life readily recognized that college is “not exactly the real world;” one student even conceded that he thought his life on campus was actually “a step away from” it (“Coming of Age” 1279). In her blog post on “how to burst the college ‘bubble,’” Stanford University student Gwynn Lyons even warns her peers for the “distorted sense of reality” they are in danger to develop because the college setting “misrepresents the world.” According to Lyons, the confines of the campus condition students
to “luxuriate in laziness,” and the “detached, intellectual approach that students learn to take to real-world issues may not jive with” the approaches of communities outside of college. American historian Thomas Bender shares Lyons’ concerns. In “Scholarship, Local Life, and the Necessity of Worldliness,” he is deeply worried about the commonalities between the university and the suburb. Both of these settings, he argues, “are privileged locales with the feel of wealth and security of self-containment; and they are characterized by diversity of the most benign sort” (“Scholarship” 18). According to Bender, “[t]here is a great danger in [the] suburbanization of the intellect. Both vitality and relevance are at risk” (18). In his argument against the suburban otherness of the college campus, Bender turns to Adam Ferguson, an eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher who claimed that “[m]en at a distance from the objects of useful knowledge, untouched by the motives that animate an active and vigorous mind produce only the jargon of a technical language, and accumulate the impertinence of academic forms” (qtd. in Bender, “Scholarship” 18). For Lyons, Bender, and other campus-critics, the otherness of the college campus does not lead to a distraction-free, stimulating, and extra-productive environment. Instead, its difference alienates students, and disconnects them from the community outside of its gates.

The mixed assessment of the college campus’ connectedness is philosophically reminiscent of the equally dissentient postmodern evaluation of consumer culture. Participants in that dispute disagree on the degree of self-reflexivity the consumer possesses. According to Herbert Marcuse, member of the Frankfurt School and one of the more pessimistic-leaning theorists of post-WWII consumer culture, consumer products such as “the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry” indoctrinate, manipulate, and “promote a false consciousness” that completely alienates the subject (14). The consumer becomes so “swallowed up by its alienated existence” that for him/her, “[t]here is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms” (13). According to more optimistically-inclined scholars like
John Fiske, the consumer can re-claim agency by participating self-reflexively in the products they consume. The prosumer school of thought does not think that people “behave or live like the masses, an aggregation of alienated, one-dimensional persons whose only consciousness is false, whose only relationship to the system that enslaves them is one of unwitting dupes” (23). Instead, Fiske maintains that “culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry” (24). Although consumer theory typically pertains to traditional media like television and radio, its discourse is remarkably applicable to the college campus. Especially because this dissertation very deliberately presents the American college campus as a showy, overdetermined, and templated consumer product, it is sensible to consider the college student’s ability to have agency over his/her campus experience.

Assessments of the college campus’ connectedness issues range from Marcuseian pessimism to Friske-esque beliefs in student agency. In the previous chapters, I have framed how America’s specific natural-geographical, socio-economic, and cultural infrastructure has required the college campus to become a pop cultural commodity. As such, campuses started to differentiate themselves by adopting a visually distinct, other, and eye-catching aesthetic. After all, in Baudrillard’s hyperreal, image-dominated, and ultra-modern America, the success of a college campus is largely dependent on its sign value. One reaction to this status quo has been to condemn the system responsible for the disconnectedness of the college campus and suggest a radical overhaul. Thomas Bender, for example, suggests we deal with the lethargy, irrelevance, and seclusion of the self-contained suburban college campus by giving up on its otherness and by completely dissolving the university into the nation’s major cities. According to Bender, universities need the “descriptive, concrete, [and] more immediately useful knowledge” of the urban hub to compensate for their “abstract, highly focused, rigorous and internally consistent forms of knowledge” (“Scholarship” 19). Without the course-correction qualities of the city and left with the “meaningless form” and “Disneyland glitter” of the college
campus template, this Marcuseian position postulates, college students steer straight towards inevitable alienation (Baudrillard “America” 99). Although Stanford student blogger Gwynn Lyons certainly recognizes the college campus bubble’s potential as a multi-headed monster of civic disengagement and detached elitism as well, her response to this danger is more Fiske-esque. She prescribes self-reflexivity as an antidote, suggesting that “transitioning to the real world will be a lot simpler if you keep in mind that you’re not in it yet.” “Just the realization that there is a bubble,” she adds, “makes a lot of progress toward bursting it.” By combining the elevated artificiality of the college campus template with a healthy dose of self-reflexivity, this evaluation of the campus’ connectedness issues suggests that students can benefit from the hyperreal, showy qualities of the college campus setting without losing their footing in the world outside of college.

Both Bender and Lyons’ responses to the apparent disconnectedness of the college campus setting are departures from Baudrillard’s understanding of America as the only radically modern nation and the position of the college campus therein. They consider the college campus setting to be a hard break from what they consider to be “reality,” and their resolutions are focused on finding ways to bridge that problematic rift between the hyperreality of the campus and the harsh realness of the world outside. For Baudrillard, however, America in its entirety is “no longer real,” but already “belong[s] to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation” (“America” 10). Consequently, the showy hyperreality of the college campus is not a break from reality, but merely a unique, refreshing, and truly self-reflexive embrace of the hyperreal. Indeed, for Baudrillard, “real” self-reflexivity lies not in a student’s realization that the campus is not real, but in his/her understanding that in our consumer society, really nothing is real. The philosophical ambiguity that characterizes the college campus template’s demarcation of difference strategy contextualizes its highly contentious position in American
society and demonstrates that the success or failure of the college campus system is anything but straightforward.

The third and last ambiguous connotative interpretation of collegiate demarcation of difference is that the curated beauty of the college campus can feel both earned and uninviting. In the previous chapters, I have established that the strength of the American college campus’ identity is, in large part, a consequence of its powerful visual character. As Thomas Gaines puts it, “[t]he well-planned campus belongs among the most idyllic of man-made environments” (ix). In the image-dominated, materialistic narrative of American consumer society, this idyllic character of the college campus serves as an intermediate reward for being on the right track of pursuing the American dream. Deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of the United States is the idea that if you work hard and diligently, do well in high school, and focus on the “right” things in life, you deserve to go to a beautiful college for four years. The college-as-an-reward trope is a major theme of movies such as Rudy and The Spectacular Now, the pure excitement of high school seniors reacting to college admissions decisions is a genre on YouTube, and the collegiate brochure language cliché that college is the place where “Big Dreams Come True” and where you “Invent Yourself” inspired Steve Kolowich to write a subtly critical poem consisting of 88 such tacky college taglines.21 The beautiful college campus is an elaborate, ideological carrot on a stick: the college experience is the culmination of a micro-American dream that governs the first twenty-two years of American lives, and, ideally, resonates vibrantly for many years after. In theory, the image-focused mythology that has formed around the American college incites a sense of pride, excitement, and productivity about the institution of higher learning that countries like the Netherlands—where admittance to university is generally greeted with boredom, reluctance, and entitlement—lack completely.

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21 Rudy’s American dream is literally to be part of Notre Dame’s “most beautiful campus in the world.” For Sutter, the main character from The Spectacular Now, his focusing on college application is the sign that his life has been “yanked out of neutral.”
Although the reality of the American college experience is not quite as rosy, in theory, the concept of the beautiful college campus as a citizen’s reward has a legitimately appealing, valid, and coherent ideological backbone.

There are many reasons, however, why the “beautiful-college-as-a-reward” concept promotes a one-dimensional, fantastical, and false picture of the status of higher education in America. Its most glaring flaw is that the “reward-theory” conceals the reality that for upper-middle class WASPs, the prospective of going to college has never really felt like a “reward” that they had to earn. As one student from Michael Moffat’s study puts it: “college is a place where suburban brats come to hang out for four years” (“Coming of Age” 1279). More than anything, this demographic of “suburban brats” feels exceptionally entitled to spend time on campus. Students from low-income families and minority backgrounds, on the contrary, see college not as a realistic reward, but as an otherworldly fantasy. In a series of tweets, Mexican-American author Shea Serrano effectively captures the thought process of someone who grew up in an environment where going to college was not the norm. He writes that for him, “it’s crazy to think that places like Harvard or Yale or Princeton or whatever are real places that actual people actually attend.” “I honestly don’t even know what cities Harvard and Yale and Princeton are in – they just exist as these mythical inaccessible places in my head.” Serrano’s relationship to America’s most prestigious colleges exemplifies how the aesthetic narrative of the college campus completely disregards the polarized complexity of American society. Theoretically, the prospect of living on a beautiful college campus could function as an appropriate social stimulus. In reality, however, the disparity between different cohorts of the American people and their radically unequal access to economic resources, their disjointed networks of social capital, and their disparate self-judgement on whether they belong on a college campus at all convincingly problematizes such an oversimplified and binary evaluation of the college campus template. The actual fraction of the American population for whom the
clean, faux-historical, and green aesthetic of the college campus template is an appropriate trigger—neither a pre-acclimated given nor a completely alienating experience—seems too small to justify the means necessary to sustain the beautiful campus narrative.

Although it seems incredibly counter-intuitive to condemn the cultivation of a clean, lush, and green environment, the Disneyland qualities of the college campus template actively perpetuate the exclusivist tendencies of American higher education by promulgating an aesthetic that is inviting to affluent Americans, but alienating to those who are not used to see wealth visualized so exuberantly. In her compelling article “Space Matters,” for example, La’Tonya Rease Miles suggests that “physical space, including architecture and landscape, [can] serve as a barrier to underrepresented college students” (16). In addition to cultivating an alluring, attractive, and enchanting atmosphere, a faux-historical and physically imposing campus setting can also repel. According to Miles, “many students of color feel alienated from a university’s Eurocentric symbols that reflect opulence, affluence, grandeur, or insularity. The physical environment reinforces the message that these students do not belong in the space” (17). College campuses often feel “too dissimilar from one’s home community, or the buildings may be considered too perfect, stiff or ornate” (15). The carefully curated, nearly artificial cleanliness of the college campus template exists to draw students in, to encourage them, and to create a productive environment, but for one student from Miles’ article, the “cleanliness of the campus is what really frightened me since I am used to seeing trash and dried grass everywhere” (qtd. in Miles 18). The collegiate aesthetic visually promotes upward mobility by offering students an environment that is “meticulously composed to achieve beauty,” but at the same time, the campus environment looks “steeped in a tradition that preserves the power of the elites” (Chapman xxvi, Miles 18). The sterility of the college campus remains a sweeping visual antonym to those who are used to the less rigid aesthetics of blue-collar America. In
order to achieve an environment that feels both rewarding and inviting, campuses might benefit from seeking a visual balance between showy garishness and inclusive accessibility.

In the introduction of this dissertation, I wrote that the field of higher education in America is dealing with three major challenges: decreasing the inequality of access, improving the quality of education, and fixing the problem of surging tuition costs. In this chapter, I have identified the ambiguous, complex, but cogent relationship between the showy, outward, and visual side of the American college campus and each of these challenges. Furthermore, this chapter helps to explain how one single aesthetic template can be radically symbolically ambivalent; how the curated otherness of the college campus reminds some Americans of a beautiful, youthful, and carefree existence, whereas for many others, it is the face of their seemingly unredeemable stuckness in America’s stringent socio-economic hierarchy.
CONCLUSION
As an American Studies scholar in the self-proclaimed “direct,” “no-nonsense,” and “authentic” culture of the Netherlands, you better be ready to defend yourself—especially since president Trump’s election—on why in the world you would be interested in the fake, over-the-top, and self-absorbed culture of the United States. After countless conversations, I have learned, reluctantly, that the best answer to this kind of sweeping, presumptuous, and, honestly, maddening statement is to explain that I find America’s slightly less rigid appropriation of the real/fake binary simultaneously refreshing and stifling, and that this contradiction makes for a fascinating research subject. Although I do not particularly like the rhetorical blandness of this answer, I admittedly caught myself experiencing similar feelings throughout this project. I found myself wondering: Why does the faux-historical campus aesthetic come across as both outdated in its old-fashioned elitism and ultra-modern in its hyperreal visuality? How does the college’s natural setting appear both pristinely organic and commercially orchestrated? How is it possible that I seem to grow both more optimistic and more cynical of the long-term success of America’s larger than life campus aesthetic? As it turns out, it is not unusual for outside observers to discuss the aesthetics of the American college campus with a confused double articulation of admiration and critique. When the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier traveled through the United States in the 1930s, for example, he noticed how American colleges and universities build “[e]verything in the interest of comfort, everything for the sake of calm and serenity” (135). He saw the American university as “a world in itself, a temporary paradise, [and] a gracious stage of life” (135). Le Corbusier marveled at the beauty of America’s collegiate setting compared to the “seventh floor, attic, faucet on the stair landing, Venetian heat in the summer, Siberia in the winter” dread of European student life (135). At the same time, however, he doubted whether it is “a good thing for students to pass four years of happiness in a paradise” (139). Would it not be better, he wondered, for students to “know the whole face of life, with its flaws, its misery, its anguish, its greatness?” (139). Along with
endorsing its beauty, Le Corbusier diagnosed the American college with a tendency to hide reality from its privileged youth: “This effortless existence of the young members of the tribe sheltered from contrary winds, this all-pervasive cleanliness, this exceptional domestic comfort, such are the opportunities on the credit side of the American ledger” (139). By identifying an intricate, invasive, and unique connection between the elevated aesthetic of the college campus and America’s unique cultural negotiation of the concept of “reality,” this dissertation has located the source of Le Corbusier’s—and my own—ambivalence towards the visual organization of the American university.

In order to link the college campus template to America’s singular understanding of reality, this dissertation offered a post-modern and post-Marxist reading of the college campus as a material cultural practice in the context of contemporary material U.S. consumer culture. Aided especially by Jean Baudrillard’s reflections on *America* and the hyperreal, but also supported by theoretical concepts provided by theorists like Fredric Jameson, Henry David Thoreau, and Herbert Marcuse, I presented some of the historical, natural-geographical, and socio-economic forces that have shaped the American collegiate aesthetic through a consumer-theory-infused lens. This specific framework presents higher education in America as an institution that has prioritized the optimization of its sign value by pushing a showy, overdetermined, and image-focused identity forward. Furthermore, it contextualizes this tendency not just as a characteristic of higher education, but as a symptom of American culture altogether.

This project is useful for a number of reasons. First of all, this dissertation illustrates how uniquely, deeply, and exclusively American the college campus template really is. Due to the global success of American companies like McDonalds and Disney, U.S. institutions have the reputation of being thoroughly invasive, naturally hegemonic, and endlessly replicable cultural parasites. Although some would say that the ideological emptiness of consumer society
is responsible for America’s alleged reputation of being entirely transferable, I present the United States’ deeply rooted knack for hyperreality as one of the unique conditions that, along with America’s specific history, infrastructure, and landscape, function as the one-of-a-kind building blocks that make up the college campus aesthetic. Although there have been many attempts to translate the American college campus template to universities outside of the United States, this dissertation establishes, in detail, how the college campus template came into existence through a very specific process of cultural erosion, finetuning, and embedding. Shaped by these particular forces, the college campus became—in both its strengths and weaknesses—an exclusively American institution.22

When I started with this project, I imagined that I would be interacting with an abundance of pop cultural primary sources. For example, I fantasized about how I would dynamically analyze David Fincher’s *Social Network* campus introduction scene, which I had watched a hundred times in advance. Initially, my main objective was to unravel the mechanisms behind what I thought to be the college campus’ most obvious qualities: its unbelievable recognizability, its powerful symbolic force, and its undeniable visual charm. If I figured out how pop cultural texts utilized these qualities so effectively, I reasoned, I would get to the core of this enigma. Although the argumentative focus of this project has shifted quite a bit since that initial fantasy, I do think that this dissertation has still successfully framed the esoteric visual appeal of the American college campus. The application of a postmodern theoretical framework to the aesthetic history of the college campus helped to contextualize how the institution of higher education in America developed a showy, overdetermined, and faux-historical material identity, the discussion of the transcendental turn explains how

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22 In *The Journey of Utopia*, for example, Pablo Campos Calvo-Sotelo relates the fascinating story of a group of Spanish architects who, in 1927, visited the U.S. to study American universities; an expedition that led to the design of Europe’s first American-style college campus in Madrid. In the Netherlands, there has been a recent development of prestigious *university college programs* that attempt to replicate the atmosphere of an American college campus.
colleges started to become aware of the campus’ potential sign value, and the dialectical analysis of the demarcation of difference strategy reveals how college campuses have managed to become both visually memorable as an architectural genre while preserving seemingly singular, original, and unique individual characters.

Lastly, this dissertation has advanced the timely and relevant notion that today’s problems in higher education—and arguably in American society as a whole—do not exist in a vacuum of imperfect policy making. Instead, my analysis of the visual tradition of the American college campus revealed that (prospective) students interact complexly and consequentially with the seemingly trivial showy, outward, and visual side of the campus that is at the forefront of this project. The notion, for example, that the majority of campuses were physically designed with the intention to exclude, and to cater to a very limited, elite, and privileged portion of the American people, has a significant effect on young men and women who do not belong to that limited category. Hopefully, this dissertation can add transparency to the previously underreported, but deeply rooted tendency of American colleges to fixate excessively on the preservation of an overly clean, inaccessible, and alienatingly different image. From a more general perspective, this investigation of the college campus aesthetic might also be useful as an enlightening case study for the idea that feelings of exclusion are invasive beyond imagination, and that disenfranchisement is a condition that is physically traceable to the brick-by-brick design of material institutions such the American college campus.

This brings me, finally, to the ultimate testament of the strange, complicated, yet unrelenting charm of the college campus setting. Despite my awareness of its inherent inauthenticity, alienation, and hyperreality, I am still willfully enchanted by its uniquely pronounced otherness. In the end, I remain unabashedly grateful to have walked the steps of Augustana College’s pristine slough path, to have run up and down the historic hardwood floor
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