



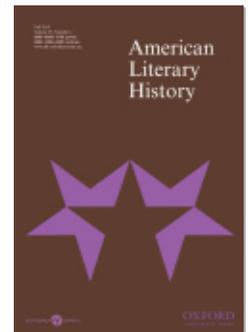
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Campus Novels and the Nation of Peers

Travis M. Foster*

Happy, happy college-days! When are friendships so ardent, so unquestioning! When does the wine of life sparkle so brightly, so enticingly!

Mark Sibley Severance, *Hammersmith: His Harvard Days*

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's 1893 *Donald Marcy* begins, as do many postbellum campus novels, with the annual freshmen–sophomore football match. Unlike her genre cohorts, however, Phelps uses the sporting event—and, indeed, her narrative as a whole—to reenact the horrors of slavery, the Civil War, Emancipation, Reconstruction, and, ultimately, white sectional reconciliation. During the match, Southerner Lee Calhoun, “white with rage,” strikes down George Washington Clay, “[a] colored student,” who “played quite fair, and dealt no foul blows” (28–29). Calhoun provides a simple and, for him, sufficient explanation: “He is a nigger, and I knocked him down” (29). The northern white students react swiftly and punitively. Trouncey O’Grian, a prizefighter’s son, knocks Calhoun “flat upon the ground” and instructs him in the ways of northern justice: ““This is a free college and a free country”” (29–30). Reconstruction proceeds apace: “Calhoun was subjected to almost every indignity that Harle”—Harvard + Yale = Harle—“Sophomores, in those long-past days, ever inflicted upon an unpopular Freshman” (44). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Calhoun’s resentful threat to “shoot every man of you down as I would so many niggers” fails to win him any reprieve (45); nor does a letter from the elder Calhoun to Harle’s President (“My son complains to me that he is required to sit by the side of a negro student” [32]). Calhoun’s actions, we’re told, constitute not merely

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racism but “snobbishness,” “the last fault which a college full of sturdy young democrats will overlook,” and we’re led to believe that he will endure continued punishment until he can thoroughly reform his ways (38).

As a sophomore, Calhoun reforms his snobbish ways, losing “most of the swagger with which he had ornamented Freshman year,” while retaining his racist ones (137). Nevertheless, the hazing ceases and he begins to relate more easily to his white northern compatriots. Then, in the novel’s junior-year climax, a dramatic near drowning gives Calhoun the opportunity to team up with his former adversary, O’Grian, to save the popular Donald Marcy. Within the novel’s historical allegory, this is 1876, the moment that secures sectional reconciliation without demanding racism’s reformation: “The three principles in that memorable event looked at each other with something of the curious tenderness of reconciled sections after civil war. . . . It is the delightful thing about college friendships, that they easily override grudges and trifles, and gather together all sorts of sympathies and loyalties, from all kinds of natures; each bound to many by that young glow and fervor of feeling which adoration for his Alma Mater, and nothing else in life, can give a man” (148–49). Historian David Blight persuasively argues that “sectional reunion” occurred through the “resubjugation of many of those people whom the war had freed from centuries of bondage,” and here Phelps emphasizes the metamorphosis of white feeling that naturalized and affirmed such resubjugation (3). She foregrounds the tremendous appeals of white affinity—“tenderness,” “glow,” and “fervor of feeling”—which overwrite lingering commitment to antiracist or radical Republican principles (including, if we recall the novel’s 1893 publication date, attempts to reinstate Reconstruction, such as the 1891 “Lodge Force Bill,” which would have restored Federal supervision of Southern elections).¹ Phelps records a newly reconciled world in which opposition to resubjugation finds itself removed from political discourse, turned into so many “grudges and trifles,” overridden by “college friendships,” and neutered by the more potent force of “sympathies and loyalties.”

This essay aims to demonstrate that Phelps’s representation of “college friendships” usefully distills an entire generation of popular novels: campus fictions, focusing all but exclusively on homosocial scenes of undergraduate merriment, published between the Civil War and World War I. Centering on the camaraderie of fraternal sociality, the genre models friendship as a democratic ideal for dispensing with conflict, featuring plot lines that progress inexorably toward resolution in an intense affirmation of unity. As a new student in William Tucker Washburn’s *Fair Harvard: A Story of American College Life* (1869) puts it, campus novels pit “class feeling” against

By locating their impetus for national belonging . . . in the extracurricular activities of college kids, these popular texts help us to see the historical momentum toward white reconciliation in places we're not accustomed to look.

the “clique” (20). By locating their impetus for national belonging (“class feeling” writ large) in the extracurricular activities of college kids, these popular texts help us to see the historical momentum toward white reconciliation in places we’re not accustomed to look—the joyous cavorting of drunken Harvard students, say—rather than those more frequently studied vehicles of cross-regional weddings and interregional progeny.² This shift from heterosexuality to homosociality accompanies a shift in the form of reconciliation. If national union proceeds through “sympathies and loyalties” that make it a desirable and presumed outcome, rather than through the historical revision of conflict-producing differences, then reconciliation will manifest in settings and situations that fail to bring the previously warring parties face-to-face or even to address the fact of conflict in the first place.

Put differently, the genre’s other participants remain no less in tune with “the delightful thing about college friendships” for leaving out scenes between their own Calhouns and O’Grians. To be sure, almost all the novels under consideration here do feature at least one Southerner, and they rarely miss an opportunity to reference the mutual nobility of the blue and the gray. (Lest he be misunderstood, for instance, the narrator of Owen Wister’s *Philosophy 4: A Story of Harvard University* [1903] hastily clarifies that his compliment, “true son of our soil,” applies equally to sons “Northern or Southern” [66].) And those campus novels that take their student-heroes to the Civil War—Frederic Loring’s *Two College Friends* (1871), Mark Sibley Severance’s *Hammersmith: His Harvard Days* (1879), and John Seymour Woods’s *Yale Yarns: Sketches of Life at Yale University* (1895)—do so in order to demonstrate the overwhelming power of collegial feeling to undo sectional animosity.

Yet I will propose that the genre’s representations of camaraderie constitute a more effective agent of reconciliationist sentiment than its representations of any particular exchange between North and South. Indeed, as we’ll see, camaraderie manifested an extraordinary ability to accommodate multiple social tensions, a quality that allowed campus novels, over four decades of prominence, to widen and adjust their ameliorative scope to multiple sources of potential disruption. So even though I’ll be arguing that reconciliation remained a recurrent concern and effect of campus novels into the twentieth century, I am not claiming that the novels didn’t also attend to other strains.³ If the genre is most notable for taming conflict and proliferating fraternal feeling, then sectional reconciliation and white cohesion comprised merely the most urgent demands on its attention.

To make this argument, I survey almost 30 novels, from Washburn’s *Fair Harvard* to Owen Johnson’s *Stover at Yale* (1912), all of which focus primarily on extracurricular, undergraduate

merriment—a fact that sets them in stark contrast to the academic novels and depressive professors populating recent bookshelves of literary fiction.⁴ An import from England, campus novels trace their conventions to immensely popular school boy works such as Cuthbert Bede's *Mr. Verdant* prankster narratives (published serially in the US during the 1850s) and Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861), a novel so popular in the US that booksellers kept advertising it by title alone until at least 1932 (Hogwarth). Campus novels track their hero from her or his freshman to senior year, recording the trials and subsequent maturation that ensue, ultimately ending with graduation, followed occasionally by marriage to the sister or brother of a friend. The novels are thus bildungsromans, in the sense that they trace a young person's emergence from the family into the social world and, as Franco Moretti puts it, negotiate "the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialization*" (15; emphasis original). Yet, collectively, they work to render socialization anything but imperious—as, instead, the very apex of fun, a vehicle into the more aspirational ideal of fraternal belonging. Throughout, the momentum of narrative arc and moral development thus cedes ground to the picaresque verve of the chapter as the novels relocate their energy to episodes—pranks and good times—that comprise for their student-characters and readers not merely the university's foremost pleasure, but also its affective richness.

In their eager production and reproduction of these pleasures, postbellum writers and readers pushed the form, as Jeffrey J. Williams has recently argued, "into the mainstream of American fiction" and presented a remarkably consistent vision of college life across regional difference (562).⁵ Distinctions do emerge: L. L. Jones's *Oberlin and Eastern School Life* (1889), for instance, paints a stark contrast between Ivy League tomfoolery and the hard-working seriousness of the rugged Oberlin undergraduate; Anson Uriel Hancock's *John Auburntop, Novelist: His Development in the Atmosphere of a Fresh-Water College* (1891) demonstrates the same with 275 pages featuring University of Nebraska students discoursing on Hawthorne, Emerson, Ambrose Bierce, and the like; and Princeton novels such as the anonymously published *His Majesty, Myself* (1880) and James Barnes's *A Princetonian: A Story of Undergraduate Life at the College of New Jersey* (1886) all tend to be somewhat less rollicking than their Harvard and Yale counterparts. Nevertheless, the genre remains largely consistent across time and place, as though in implicit support of Washburn's subtitle declaring his Harvard novel "a story of American college life." We thus find the social life and narrative structure that characterizes Ivy League novels replicated in novels set on women's campuses, such as Helen Dawes Brown's *Two College Girls*

(1886) and Caroline Fuller's *Across the Campus* (1899), and those set at mid-western and western public institutions, such as Joy Lichtenstein's Berkeley novel, *For the Blue and Gold* (1901), and George Fitch's *At Good Old Siwash* (1911), set at a fictionalized Knox College. Taken together, these novels comprise a self-consciously nationalizing genre that provided readers with training in the feelings and practices of citizenship.

1. Somewhat of a Text-book

An early reference in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920) targets the oddness of associating campus novels with training of any sort, let alone something as ostensibly austere as civic pedagogy. Running through a list of literary texts that influenced his hero, Fitzgerald cites Johnson's *Stover at Yale* as "somewhat of a text-book" (30). The sardonic quality of Fitzgerald's term, "text-book," which he underscores with the winking "somewhat," points us toward a central irony of the entire genre: these are books that detest books in general and "text-books" most of all; they're novels set within set within institutions of higher learning that position themselves entirely in opposition to instruction. The genre deals with formal education either by ignoring it entirely or assuming an actively hostile stance toward the faculty who so rudely impose it. In valuing "college life" over book learning and native intelligence over rote memorization, campus novels suggest the civic qualities of a college degree come about through relaxed sociality rather than the acquisition of any particular knowledge. As such, the genre aims to produce a very particular reading experience that, in turn, aims to reproduce the merry loafing of "college life." To borrow from Michael Warner's description of uncritical reading, campus novels value "unsystematic and disorganized" practices such as "identification, self-forgetfulness, reverie, sentimentality, enthusiasm, literalism, aversion, [and] distraction" over any "cultivated and habitual disposition" to read *for* something (15). Not only, then, do they insist on being read as "generic" rather than "literary"; they also insist that it is only by doing so that readers will glean anything at all.

Wister's slender *Philosophy 4* devotes itself entirely to this idea. Wister features two young men, Bertie Rogers and Billy Schuyler, preparing for the eponymous course's final. They do so first with the aid of a tutor so serious he "never yet had become young" and then, more successfully, with a day of play—the partial catalog of which includes skinny dipping, driving about town, locating a famously out-of-the-way tavern, feasting, and drinking themselves far beyond tipsy—before finally returning home in the early morning hours and, as readers have all along known they would,

easily outperforming their grind of a tutor (23). Acing the exam is not the only confirmation of their decision to bypass study for leisure. Throughout their outing, spectators look upon the two with great pleasure: “Pleasantness so radiated from the boys’ faces . . . that a driver on a passing car leaned to look after them with a smile and a butcher hailed them with loud brotherhood” (52); and, later, when the two head back to Cambridge in the early morning hours, they’re sighted “by the street-car conductors and the milkmen, and these sympathetic hearts smiled at the sight of the marching boys, and loved them without knowing any more of them than this” (83). The boys become beacons of American democracy, through whom a Whitmanian cast finds hope for the future. Bringing together the glowing representation of idleness and loafing and the multiple appeals of radiant college boys—productive, as they are, of pleasure, brotherhood, sympathy, and love—Wister’s novel reflects on the entire genre, suggesting that national citizenship stems far more effectively from following the lead of campus novel characters than it does from undertaking a course of formal instruction.

Secondary evidence suggests that most readers of the time not only agreed with Wister’s high esteem for the edifying value of student life, but also saw campus novels as significant opportunities to experience it. Muckraker Lincoln Steffens, for instance, reported that campus fiction prepared his entire cohort of peers for 1880s University of California customs: “The stories and the life are pretty much the same for any college” (qtd in Horowitz 51⁶). Yet campus fiction was not merely a prep school; it also constituted a key activity in the merry life such fiction aims to represent, and campus publications frequently mention the novels in ways that assume readers’ familiarity. Hence after Tucker’s *Fair Harvard* received a handful of scornful reviews for its scandalous portrayals (per a letter from William James to little brother Henry, complaining about its popularity: “[n]othing but drinking & ‘going to Parker’s’ which are spoken of as if they were the highest flights human freedom cd. soar to” [61]), sales rapidly increased and “the work became required extracurricular reading for the Harvard undergraduates of the period” (Kramer 3).

If undergraduates and preundergraduates learned in part how to become college students and interact within college social networks precisely by becoming familiar with a novelistic genre, then a feedback loop finds itself completed when contemporaneous reviewers praise the novels’ verisimilitude. One reviewer lauds Severance’s *Hammersmith* for its “faithful description of college life” (“Rev. of *Hammersmith*”). The *Atlantic Monthly* similarly praises Brown’s *Two College Girls* because “[o]ne may by means of it get a glimpse into the interior of a girl’s college” (“Books of the Month” 718), and the *New York Times* refers to Charles Macomb Flandrau’s *Harvard*

Episodes (1897) as, simply, “an accurate picture of college life” (Rev. of *Harvard*). We can understand this attachment to the novels’ striking accuracy as an effect of what, for readers, constituted their appealing conventionality. The novels participated in an emergent mass print culture that Thomas Augst traces to the 1850s, when interactions with “technologies and institutions of mass literacy” gave readers “a taste for conventionality—what we might call a feeling for social forms, an attachment to normative patterns” (111, 104). Fitzgerald, it turns out, was exactly right. Campus novels entered into their readers’ lives as “text-books” of standard behavior and confirmations of common practice, providing an easygoing education that presented itself as unschooled and native.

This pedagogical influence acquired political zeal on a national scale precisely as higher education and the practices of student life began to assert themselves as epicenters of American futurity, models for new configurations of democratic community and networks for installing a more robust national identity. Admittedly, this claim rests on a rather improbable disparity between the handful of Americans who actually attended college (from 1% in 1865 to roughly 4–5% by the century’s turn) and the influence of higher education over late-nineteenth-century US life. Recent historians, however, argue compellingly that higher education became a vital extension of post-bellum governmentality, both through specific state enterprises (including the 1862 Morrill Land-Grant College Act, the newly established Bureau of Education, and the public university extension movement) and through nonstate national academic networks (including lecture circuits, the growing academic press, popular textbooks, and widespread newspaper interest in university life)—all of which led Americans to experience the curricular university as part and parcel of expanding federal power.⁷

At the same time, if academic culture nationalized the university as “a many-sided academic public sphere” (Teichgraeber 106), campus culture provided an underwriting social network. Although historians of higher education largely neglect the extracurricular, a good deal of evidence suggests that postbellum whites likely valued activities out of the classroom as much or even more than those inside of it. In 1870, for instance, Yale’s president Noah Porter echoed campus novels when he argued that for the “many who persistently neglect the college studies, the college life is anything rather than a total loss” (178). Alumni, too, began targeting their financial support to extracurricular activities as when Yale graduates sponsored an 1877 student minstrel show, adamantly opposed by faculty, at the Union League Theater in New York (Horowitz 54). Nor was it merely the elite or the people directly associated with university life who praised student cultures. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, one of the

few historians to examine extracurricular life, extensively documents instances when public support for fraternities and athletics stymied pesky professors' efforts to exert any taming force outside of the classroom (23–55). Ultimately, Horowitz concludes, “[c]ollege life—which had begun in the interstices of the early-nineteenth-century college—emerged by the end of the century as the handsomely endowed center of campus” (55).

This national influence drew the attention of writers outside the immediate genre of campus fiction, who cited college life particularly when addressing the problem of national reunion. The most famous Civil War antagonist, for instance, Stephen Crane’s *Henry Fleming* (1895), imagines battle as a college football game, a metaphor that registers not only, per Bill Brown, the era’s “conflation of war and sport” (3), but also football’s collegiate resonance with its accompanying “mysterious fraternity,” which the novel celebrates as an overarching “brotherhood more potent even than the cause for which they were fighting” (Crane 26). James’s *The Bostonians* (1886) likewise mends hostile feelings between its northern feminist heroine and its emblem of unreconstructed Southern manhood by taking the couple on a stroll through “the great university of Massachusetts,” which “exhaled for the young Mississippian a tradition, an antiquity,” such that even Memorial Hall, honoring Harvard’s Union dead, cathects the scene with a “sentiment of beauty” that arches “over friends as well as enemies” (221, 222). Many of the era’s explicitly white supremacist texts—including Thomas Nelson Page’s *Red Rock* (1898), Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902), and the Dixon-inspired film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)—likewise turn to college friendships or similarly modeled prep-school friendships as vehicles for fraternal bonds that affirm white affiliation. My argument here is not that Crane and James simply propagated white reconciliationist fantasies circulating around the campus. Rather, I’m proposing that all of these texts exhibit an implicit awareness of the campus’s remarkable, outsized, and likely exceptional ability to generate allegiance toward a national citizenship that transcends politics and sectional difference while presenting itself as the product of a native intelligence.

2. These Friends, These Brothers

I turn now to campus novels’ content and, specifically, to what I take to comprise the novels’ two foremost properties: fraternity, which manifests here as an everyday, local practice of homosociality as well as, on a larger scale, momentum toward forms of belonging organized around sameness; and nostalgia, which in the genre constitutes a pleasantly melancholic affect that coheres fraternal belonging.

I'll be tracing fraternity and nostalgia as recognizable features across multiple texts, using a method of genre criticism that, as Northrop Frye famously celebrates, refuses to underestimate convention or succumb to the tendency to "think of the individual as ideally prior to society," although one, too, that can often occlude the fluid interrelationship between conventions (95–96). I'll start, then, not with intertextual patterns, but with a single novel that, by virtue of its strange proximity to the genre, highlights precisely these movements of relation. So doing, I aim to trace not merely campus novels' coherence as a genre, but also their contradictions and exceptions, revealing how the porousness of generic conventions abets rather than hinders the relationship between genre and history.

More love story than buddy tale and more Civil War novel than Harvard picaresque, Loring's *Two College Friends* would seem to have very little to do with what I've been describing. The narrative exerts no energy on the hijinks of college life; its heroes pass very little time on any actual campus; and, perhaps most profoundly, the novel focuses on the romantic affections between two young men, Ned and Tom, rather than the dispersed bonds of class feeling. Ned buys an Etruscan locket, has Tom's initials carved into it, and expresses bafflement when a young woman, with identical initials, assumes he intends the locket for her—"She!" I answered; 'it isn't any girl; it's my chum, Tom, you know'" (92–93). After the two leave Harvard to fight for the Union in the Civil War, he expresses pointed hostility towards heterosexual family life, writing to himself, "When this war is over, I suppose Tom will marry and forget me. I never will go near his wife—I shall hate her" (84). When Ned ultimately dies a hero's death, he is buried with a picture of Tom dressed as a "dear little peasant girl" (36). Given this seemingly exceptional representation, we shouldn't be surprised that *Two College Friends* is also the only novel under consideration here to receive considerable scholarly attention. Recent critics and editors have recuperated it as a key piece within an ambivalent grouping of texts that struggle to represent affectionate, erotic relationships between men.⁸ Far from constituting a training ground in normative sociality, for these scholars, the novel archives queer behaviors, relationships, and possibilities "beneath the dominant narrative" (Packard 5).

The circumstances of Ned's death, however, suggest a different conclusion. After Confederate soldiers capture Ned and Tom behind enemy lines, Stonewall Jackson himself allows the couple to rest overnight, honor bound to remain in place until they can be transported to a Confederate prison. Instead, Ned relies on the help of a Southern soldier, smitten by Tom's beauty, to smuggle his perilously ill friend back to Union territory. The next morning, his honor at stake, Ned leaves an unconscious Tom with his final farewells ("And

calmly, yet with a dreadful pang at his heart, he stooped, and once more kissed the flushed face of his friend" [130–31]) and then returns to the rebel camp to meet certain execution. Already, the plot suggests a reconciliationist outcome, underscoring as it does a system of honor that exceeds the war's particular politics. In a final letter to his and Tom's favorite professor, however, Ned shifts from a familiar narrative about the mutual nobility of the fight, North and South, to campus novels' more particular focus on the fraternal feelings of college life: "But if you ever want to think of me, and to feel that I am near, walk through the yard at Harvard, in the lovely evenings of the spring weather. It was at such a season, and at such a time, that I last saw the dear old place; and, if I ever can be anywhere on earth again, it is there. Ah, if I could only see Harvard once again! God bless it forever and forever! I wonder how many visions of its elm-trees have swept before dying eyes here in Virginia battle-fields!" (150). The passage shifts scale through three spatio-temporal registers in which Ned prefigures his death within the timelessness of Harvard nostalgia and, ultimately, as the scale of his attention increases, imagines himself to constitute a ghostly agent for fraternity on a national scale. He begins as a specific person, remembering a specific spring and a specific location on the Harvard campus. The pending execution then allows him to transform *that* season and *that* time into "such a season, at such a time," a shift that anticipates the timelessness Ned attributes to Harvard when he asks that "God bless it forever and forever." Finally, the particular act of site-specific melancholia disperses into a nostalgia that expands into national identification when Ned again shifts registers, this time to the Civil War heroism of all Harvard alumnae, whose northern or Southern allegiances eviscerate through their common deaths in "Virginia battle-fields."

In case we miss the point, the penultimate sentence begins with a compact phrase: "these friends, these brothers" (161). The first subject names the novel's eponymous pair, while the second names the fraternal ties their romance energizes. Working together, the pairing subordinates the exceptional to the fraternal as the latter position of "brothers" works to clarify "friends," neutering the term of its previously intimate associations. Indeed, earlier in the paragraph, a nursing metaphor has already begun directing the narrative away from romance and towards what we might call a campus-inspired national fraternity: "This wonderful country, that is still in its infancy, that is nursing men of every nation to form a new nation . . . justifies not merely enthusiasm, but any loss of human life which may aid in its preservation" (160–61). The text here directs the tragic energies of its conclusion into what it calls the "enthusiasm" of national belonging, a shared brotherhood binding "men of every nation" into the strange

infant motherhood of “[t]his wonderful country.” Simultaneously, it turns to the campus—the alma mater or nourishing mother—into an organizing matrix for this newly binding sentiment. Yet as the text frames it, this campus also names the site of past male romance and the site of Ned’s future ghostly return. So, even though romance ultimately finds itself set aside in favor of fraternity, the sentiment behind “brothers” cannot entirely erase the energies of intimacy that have, to this point, been the novel’s primary concern. Homosexual passion lingers on as a ghostly resource, supplementing the homosocial bonds of “brothers” and national “enthusiasm,” its energies targeted toward cohering fraternal sentiment by cathecting it with the memories and promises of intimate attachment.

3. One Solid Mass

Such sentiment constitutes a central concern in Olive San Louie Anderson’s anonymously published and autobiographical *An American Girl and Her Four Years in a Boys’ College* (1878), which tracks the first coeducational class at a fictionalized University of Michigan. Perhaps strangely, given its focus on coeducation, the novel provides one of the genre’s most telling representations of what *Two College Friends* identifies as the enthusiasm of brotherhood, cataloging the violence of its inaugural moments, the involuntary means through which it takes hold, and the democratic joy it finds in citing its ability to accommodate difference, even, at least partially, gender difference. So doing, Anderson introduces her readers—and us—to campus novels’ particular mode of fraternity, which orients its characters, through the practices and rituals of college life, toward fused union and holds itself out as a model for national citizenship.⁹

In an early chapter, Anderson’s heroine, Will Elliott, writes a letter to her sister, detailing her first chapel and explaining that she almost immediately came to feel “large as life,” a “member of the freshman class,” despite her rather abject relationship, as a woman, to the student body:

It was terrific, and I did not know as there would be a vestige of me left to send to you. You see, we have prayers every morning in the law lecture-room, as our hall is not done yet; it is an immense room, and the freshmen sit on one side and the sophs on the other, so that the two combustibles are separated by the grave upper-classmen. We girls (there are nine of us) went fifteen minutes before time, and, when we entered the door, we heard the most uproarious din, and, on coming up the stairs, found the fresh and sophs joined in mortal combat, while,

above all, rose the chorus, "Saw freshman's leg off—*short!*" We were terribly frightened, thinking that some one would surely be killed; but at last we were all in the room and no lives lost. . . .

We, poor little wretches, did not know where to sit, of course, and not one boy was polite enough or dared to face the crowd and show us a seat; so we kind of edged around into not much of anywhere, but found to our cost that it was in direct line of the missiles between the hostile classes, which missiles consisted of hymn-books, sticks, anything movable; a great apple-core struck me right in the eye, which caused me to see a whole solar system of stars; but I bore it bravely, feeling something of that rapture that the old martyrs must have felt—for, was I not suffering in the cause of co-education?

I thought that I was used to boys; but I must say that I never met boy in his most malignant form until I came to college. In looking at my own class, every variety can be seen—long boys, short boys, fat boys, lean boys, boys pious and boys impious, gathered from one hundred and fifty families all over the land, from Maine to Mexico, a most heterogeneous collection, fused into one solid mass by the common bond "our class." . . . The girls are not expected to have much class-spirit yet, but are supposed to sit meekly by and say "Thank you" for the crumbs that fall from the boys' table; but, in spite of that, I feel my bosom swell with pride when I look at these one hundred and fifty heads, and think that I, too, as much as the best of them, am a member of the freshman class of the University of Ortonville. (48–50)

The passage amounts to a "text-book" on textbooks. It decodes a familiar momentum in campus novels toward a mode of belonging so "terrific" that Will is unsure "there would still be a vestige of me left." At first glance, violence seems to comprise the central motivating agent behind such belonging, hinging class feeling on common injuries—an apple core to the eye—along with common enmities. Yet an appealing lightness and goodwill cuts through the terror even here, in this nascent scene of class feeling, for Will represents the events in a mock heroic tone. One effect of this humor, given the sophomores' threat to amputate freshmen legs, is to tame the memory of Civil War violence by relocating it from the battlefield to the campus. For Will, the humor more palpably signals that the scene has been one of pleasure rather than injury, such that "in spite" of an intense devaluation of women, she feels her "bosom swell with pride" for her membership in this "one solid mass." Her humorous tone further signals the ultimate success of her assimilation by

reproducing the light tone characterizing campus novels and undergraduate dialogue, and it comes as no surprise that, by her senior year, Will “had won a place of high standing in her class” (224).

The passage thus celebrates campus life as a pleasant coercion, all in the service of unity. In this, it is far from alone. Time and again, campus novels turn merry episodes into populist fables. Their student characters see even the most sophomoric pranks as engines of equality and even the most heinous hazing as anti-elitist adjudication. Even as they compete for limited resources, such as admission into a secret society, these students laud the extracurricular American campus as neo-Athenian. Recall, for instance, that *Donald Marcy's* Calhoun is primarily guilty of “snobbery,” not racism, and that correcting the former rather than the latter brings him back into his peers’ good graces. Indeed, the same novel also charts its northern hero undergoing a parallel transition; upon imbibing the democratic virtuousness of college life, the wealthy Donald Marcy decorates his room “less gorgeous[ly]” his Sophomore year, for as a freshman “he had learned . . . the healthy pleasure of adapting one’s self to the circumstances of one’s comrades” (65). Likewise, at Yale, observes the narrator of *Yale Yarns*, “[t]he rich man’s son . . . has to overcome a certain democratic prejudice” (22), a point echoed in *Two College Girls*, when a new student meets the daughter of Wisconsin’s governor and is then hastily reminded: “fathers don’t amount to a row of pins here, let me tell you. Neither do clothes” (50). The pattern emerges clearly: campus novels cite difference as a celebration of sameness—a way of highlighting their settings’ remarkable ability to fuse Will Elliott’s “most heterogeneous collection” into a coherent and self-identical unity.

Most obviously, this power comes from the appealing quality the campus lends to fraternal belonging. The “pleasure of adapting one’s self to the circumstances of one’s comrades” need hardly take an ascetic form when said circumstances include, as *Fair Harvard* catalogs them, “convivial ale, the social oyster, jolly songs, and conversation” (Washburn 25). As the narrator of *Hammersmith* asks: “what meager description can do justice to the abounding gaiety, the full, throbbing life, the buoyant festivities?” (Severance 479). What, indeed? Yet if a full, throbbing life suggests the affirmative bribe forming one end of fraternity’s disciplinary mechanics, then the enforced universality of collegial experience signals what, to be something of a spoilsport, I’ll call the positively hegemonic nature of its will to good times. Campus novels announce themselves as the arch-enemy of enmity (except that between freshmen and sophomores). They work against divisions prophylactically, tightening the spheres of acceptable deviation and transforming real differences into those faux differences that produce banter rather than disagreement, accord

rather than discord, and reconciliation rather than resentment. The “certain democratic prejudice” in these novels not only suppresses differences to favor the “one solid mass,” but also to render consent to the status quo a predetermined criterion for its uniquely conciliatory mode of democratic organization—a potent mechanism through which Will ends up happily acquiescing to “crumbs that fall from the boys’ table.”

Over the duration of their prominence, campus novels directed this mechanism to multiple sources of disruptions, acting as a barometer for the degree to which postbellum whites assessed threats to national unity. Novels published before 1900, for instance, remain particularly anxious to accommodate European immigrants. Thus *Fair Harvard* describes a capacious model for national whiteness and celebrates the campus’s ability to expand it even farther: “Under the influence of freedom, and the discipline of our schools, the children of the foreigner will grow worthy of their adopted home; in time we shall mould these different nationalities into one” (240). By the turn of the century, however, *Philosophy 4* seems less concerned with assimilating Oscar Marioni, its immigrant and possibly Jewish character, than with ostracizing him for his poverty and academic snobbery.

The novel’s hints that Oscar may have socialist inclinations reveal what may be its more pressing concern with radicalism—a threat *Stover at Yale* takes up extensively. In that novel, radicalism takes two forms: a handful of articulate though vague dissenters who at once champion individualism and defend socialism; and, more significantly, a successful challenge to the tradition through which sophomore clubs elected their own to campus-wide leadership positions. While other campus novels take for granted the easy cohesion of class feeling, here factionalism emerges as disgruntled students increasingly challenge Yale’s internal elitism. For Dink Stover, the novel’s hero, this turn of events is devastating:

Where had it all gone—that fine zest for life, that eagerness to know other lives and other conditions, that readiness for whole-souled comradeship with which he had come to Yale? Where was the pride he had felt in the democracy of the class, when he had swung amid the torches and the cheers past the magic battlements of the college, one in the class, with the feeling in the ranks of a consecrated army gathered from the plains and the mountains, the cities and villages of the nation, consecrated to one another, to four years of mutual understanding that would form an imperishable bond wherever on the face of the globe they should later scatter? (232)

The novel ultimately restores “whole-souled comradeship” and assimilates radicalism when Stover, in line to be captain of the football team and secure coveted admission to Skull and Bones, dramatically relinquishes his own elite position and befriends the dissenters. As he then works to bring about a “new harmonizing development,” the novel uses this friendship to absorb the threat of socialism, channeling it instead into the restoration of benign anti-elitism and restoring the campus to “a community of interest and friendly understanding” (320, 322).

I’ve been using *fraternity* and *camaraderie* as shorthand for this fraternal campus community, but I might just as aptly use *whiteness*. For the novels rely on a capacious model of nationalizing whiteness that readily accommodates wide-ranging difference. Challenging a central thesis of 1990s scholarship on whiteness, they present it as a paradigm of elasticity rather than plurality, their nods toward white particularity serving to emphasize whiteness’s liberalism and, in turn, elide their social scenes’ reliance on black exclusion.¹⁰ Yet a striking exception to this rule also emerges: the genre makes racial exclusion visible during key moments of gender inclusion, which remain particularly fraught given the homosocial nature of campus novels’ social settings. To ease the inclusion of either white women’s homosocial networks on all-women’s campuses or white heterosociality on coed campuses, novels featuring female characters package feminist arguments on behalf of women’s higher education within a generic form that links female opportunity to white privilege and nonwhite exclusion, as though the “brotherhood” of whiteness might triumph over fraternity’s otherwise constitutive exclusion of women. Fuller’s *Across the Campus*, set at a fictional Smith College, for instance, begins when a new college girl hires a “grin[ning]” “negro boy” (“Enter, African, and hang my pictures”) despite her roommate’s entreaty not to “bring any miscellaneous kind of creature up here” (4, 3), an opening scene that rests the white women’s inclusion on African Americans’ doubled exclusion from the national domestic (“African”) and the human (“creature”).

Largely, however, the novels leave race unmentioned, a fact that both elides racial exclusion and signals their preoccupation with the race that announces itself through its refusal to do so. It is, then, a good-natured joke between friends that best illustrates how campus fraternity remained inextricable from both the furtherance of racism and the social realization of white reconciliation. After spending an entire period in front of the classroom, unable to solve a math problem, a student in Washburn’s *Fair Harvard* tells his fellows: “It would try the soul of an abolitionist to stand a weary hour, staring at the black face of a long board as I did” (45). The joke most readily assumes a white audience that would rather not look upon black faces at all. Discipline not only follows from the joke as a kind of

preemptive strike against any auditor who may be harboring antiracist or radical Republican thought, but also shapes the very conditions that make the joke initially possible. It succeeds because it economically brings together the various expressions that camaraderie permits: an antischolarly sentiment that affirms sociality, an antipolitical sentiment that affirms jocularity, and a racist (though not boldly enough to offend northern sentiment) commentary on black appearance that has the benefit of affirming whiteness as a prerequisite to class feeling.

4. A Pleasant Melancholy, a Gentle Sadness

In *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), William Faulkner's narrator jabs at the fraternal feeling in campus novels by contrasting the famously "happy marriage" between Quentin and Shreve with the "ritual as meaningless as that of college boys in secret rooms at night" (93, 253). His point might very well be quantitative as much as qualitative, for how can friendship remain friendship when it's spread across 20, 50, or even hundreds of fellow students? As a character in *Two College Girls* puts it: "you do have to take most people superficially here. . . . You just touch so many people, without any close contact with them. It is like a book overcrowded with characters,—the life here is" (128). The observation points to a central conundrum: as a genre built in part around the ideal of "class feeling," campus novels have to manage the discrepancy between a large-scale distribution of student affections and the potentially "meaningless" nature of friendship spread too thin.

Their rather obvious solution—nostalgia—is, it turns out, ready-to-hand. For nostalgia lurks as a built-in function of the campus's neoclassical architecture and Greek-life customs, lending an aura of timelessness to everyday experience. Thus the opening pages of *Fair Harvard* turn a stroll between two brand-new acquaintances into a transcendent and collectivizing encounter with the ghosts of Harvard past and Harvard future: "The sight of the classical grounds, rich with memories of the past and hopes of the future, touched the minds of the young fellows with a pleasant melancholy" (19). The memories that affect each student so palpably in no way derive from either's immediate experience or previous intimacies. It is only because of their impersonal relationship to the memories, their pleasant longing for the newly possessed yet never experienced past, that the "classical grounds" effectively provides the two with a doubled sense of belonging—primarily to the collective student body, past, present, and future, and secondarily to one another. Likewise, in *For the Blue and Gold*, the narrator asks: "Who does

not experience this uplifting, enlarging emotion when he stands, taking in the beauty and dwelling on the significance of the dear old campus and its sights? It comes to the new sophomore, just returned from his first long vacation; and to the staid alumnus, too, the old longing, unappeased, returns when, after each absence, he views the old, familiar scenes" (7). The passage hails a binding attachment to the campus, uniting the returning sophomore and the "staid alumnus" not merely to the "dear old campus," but also, through the shared experience of such longing, to each other and, by extension, to all their fellow students.

In case the grounds prove insufficient, several campus novels additionally feature student deaths. As the *Hammersmith* narrator puts it, this death instills in students a "greater longing" and "deeper purpose," as "an unexplained tenderness of grace, seemed to fill all the old familiar scenes" (342, 341). The previously marginal nature of the newly beloved dead provides a necessary component for "greater longing," because it enables the absent student to be efficiently abstracted—like Ned's ghost in *Two College Friends*—into universally shared sentiment. The dead student quickly becomes everyone's dearest friend so that everyone might collectively mourn her or his passing. This death additionally anticipates the inevitably finite nature of college life, with its relentlessly approaching class days and graduation: "The seniors grew closer together," notes the narrator of Fuller's *Two College Girls*, reflecting on this finiteness; "new friendships were formed, old friendships were strengthened. That it was 'for the last time' tinged every pleasure with a gentle sadness" (288). Taken together, this mixture of pleasure and sadness, meaning and mourning, enables a nostalgia that is timeless both in the sense that it quite literally transpires in no time and in the sense that it invites students into the enlarging pleasures of belonging to something temporally sweeping and ineffably grand. If, as Elisa Tamarkin argues, in one of the only critical analyses of antebellum campus fiction, "the elaborate world of ritual allows for students to live out their commitments to their friends . . . in terms that also emphasize their reverence for the principle of belonging to an institution," then nostalgia gives such reverence a widely lateral momentum, such that the students simultaneously learn to revere their connections to one another precisely for their shared institutional belonging (302).

Such nostalgia thus solves a problem introduced by the flatness and, per Faulkner, potential meaninglessness of fraternity by inserting a divide between lived experience and the affective response students have to that experience. It intensifies, injects with significance, and ennobles even the most banal of banalities. College students thus maintain and nurture an a priori nostalgia for campus life even as it transpires, allowing the "greater longing" and "pleasant melancholy"

to compensate for the absence of sustained intimacy. Far from the backward looking and petrifying force critics sometimes take it to be, this nostalgia not only makes life meaningful for students, it additionally cathects their social beings with a momentum through which certain futures achieve inevitability. Such a “restorative nostalgia,” as Svetlana Boym names it, prioritizes futures characterized by group feeling, because it offers a “comforting collective script for individual longing” that promises to rebuild lost community and cohesion (42).

Nostalgia’s “collective script” returns us to sectional reconciliation and trans-sectional whiteness, which I’ve been arguing comprised the most urgent demands on campus novels’ facility for conflict resolution and group feeling. For through nostalgia, campus novels tap into the governing affect of the reconciliationist industry: the cultural machinery surrounding plantation mythology; the memory and commemoration of the Civil War (which, as David Blight notes, continues to serve as a “mother lode of nostalgia” [4]); and Dunning School national fantasies, from *The Birth of a Nation* through *Gone with the Wind* (1936)—all of which create smooth, easily accessible pasts that gloss over the analytic category of race in the service of reinvigorated fraternal nationalism. As Tara McPherson (*Reconstructing Dixie: Gender, Race, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* [2003]) compellingly argues in her analysis of Ken Burns’s famous documentary, nostalgia remains the preeminent vehicle and hermeneutic lens for representing the Civil War to a sentimental white American public. Not only does this nostalgia facilitate reconciliationist sentiment, but also nostalgia for fraternity’s manifestation through celebration of post-Civil War reconciliation (as with images of previously warring veterans now shaking hands and exchanging stories) in turn works with self-regenerating efficiency to drive yet further reconciliationist nationalism. Campus novels enter this self-reproducing economy of feeling by representing campus experience as the microcosmic model for a newly unified national life and the ideal adhesive for white racial unity.

5. Conclusion: The Strange Melody

I end where I began, with a text that exhibits an explicit insight into the sociopolitical significance of campus life and campus novels for the history of American race relations. If Phelps’s *Donald Marcy* celebrates the salvific powers of college friendships, W. E. B. DuBois’s short lynching story, “Of the Coming of John” (1903), uncovers the black resubjugation on which they depend. In the story, two small-town Southern boys, both named John, head off to college: one to the Wells Institute and one to Princeton; one to a black uplift educational setting that rewards hard study (what the

white characters in campus novels would deride as “grinding” or “digging”) and one to an idle atmosphere that comprises the typical campus novel setting. Upon graduating, the former bristles against a world that not only refuses to recognize his labors and hard-won achievements, but also punishes him for them, while the latter returns home “tall, gay and headstrong,” “spoiled and self-indulgent,” entitled to the world (163, 165). The story ends tragically, and perhaps inevitably, when the town’s whites lynch the black John, who has just saved his sister from rape by striking the white John dead.

Throughout, DuBois seems explicitly to cite campus novels and the reputation enjoyed by white college life, depicting his Princeton graduate as a quintessential campus novel character, a “young idler” bored by the offerings of small-town life, who sees the sister’s “trim little body” as a means to return to the pleasures of Princeton leisure (165). In so doing, DuBois positions his story, with its neatly symmetrical pairing of two jarringly different experiences, as a revelatory counternarrative that rises through “dark shadows,” very much like “the strange melody” in the story’s conclusion, which drifts up from the sea to fill his doomed hero’s ears (166). By indexing white campus idiom (“trim little body”) and by underscoring the neat fit between Princeton’s extracurricular mores and the rape of black women, DuBois roots the camaraderie of white campus life in a socio-political history that chose white affiliation over Reconstruction and brought about resubjugation of the formerly enslaved. If campus novels were indeed “text-books” for the easy transmission of conventions and social norms, then, DuBois suggests, a more brutal education was in fact at stake—an education in tactfully and tacitly negotiating what, in an autobiographical account of his own experience as a student at Harvard, he names the “recurring problem of a ‘nigger’ on the team” (*Dusk of Dawn* 18). And, thus, in “Of the Coming of John,” this remarkably compact airing of the story white reconciliation has never wanted to tell about itself, DuBois responds to an entire genre of popular fiction, placing it into new relationships and highlighting its racialized registers of history and meaning.

Notes

1. On the post-1877 life of Reconstruction, see Heather Cox Richardson’s *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865–1901* (2004).
2. For a useful study of the role played by heterosexual marriage narratives in reconciliationist sentiment, see Nina Silber’s *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (1997).

3. See also Elizabeth Duquette, *Loyal Subjects: Bonds of Nation, Race, and Allegiance in Nineteenth-Century America* (2010).

4. On academic novels, see Williams. In addition to the campus novels cited or mentioned here, see also Ralph Henry Barbour, *The Land of Joy* (1903); Edward Tyler Blair, *Lloyd Lee: A Story of Yale* (1878); Flandrau, *The Diary of a Freshman* (1900); Hamlin Garland, *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895); Richard Thayer Holbrook, *Boys and Men: A Story of Life at Yale* (1900); Rupert Sargent Holland, *The Count at Harvard* (1906); Reginald Wright Kauffman, *Jarvis of Harvard* (1901); Shirley Everton Johnson, *The Cult of the Purple Rose* (1902); Jesse Lynch Williams, *The Adventures of a Freshman* (1899); Wood, *College Days: Or Harry's Career at Yale* (1894); Eleanor Dey Young, *Two Princetonians and Other Jerseyites* (1898); and Rida Young and Gilbert Coleman, *Brown of Harvard* (1907).

5. Like Williams, my research into the genre follows the bibliographic work of John E. Kramer, which meticulously identifies novels set primarily on or around college campuses, from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Fanshawe* (1828) to William Hart's *Never Fade Away* (2002).

6. The original quotation in Wister's text can be found on page 117.

7. See Michael David Cohen, *Reconstructing the Campus: Higher Education and the American Civil War* (2012); Mark R. Nemecek, *Ivory Towers and Nationalist Minds: Universities, Leadership, and the Development of the American State* (2006), and Teichgraber.

8. Excerpts of the novel have been anthologized in *Glances Backward: An Anthology of American Homosexual Writing, 1830–1920* (2006), ed. James J. Gifford; and *The Romantic Friendship Reader: Love Stories Between Men in Victorian America* (2003), ed. Mark Nissen. It has also been examined in Jonathan Katz's *Love Stories: Sex Between Men before Homosexuality* (2001); Nissen's *Manly Love: Romantic Friendship in American Fiction* (2009); and Chris Packard's *Queer Cowboys and Other Erotic Male Friendships in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2005).

9. This focus on the praxis of social life distinguishes fraternity in campus novels from the imagined or fantastic fraternity that critics have so usefully analyzed in antebellum texts. See especially Dana Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (1998); and Peter Coviello, *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* (2005).

10. For arguments about the plurality of late-nineteenth-century whiteness, see Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998), David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991), and Matthew Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995). For arguments about whiteness as capacious rather than plural, see Eva Cherniavsky, *Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital* (2006); and Robyn Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity" *boundary* (1999): 115–50.

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