Private fantasies and public intellectuals : the campus novel and its various publics

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**PRIVATE FANTASIES AND PUBLIC
INTELLECTUALS: THE CAMPUS NOVEL AND ITS
VARIOUS PUBLICS**

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2019**

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CAMPUS NOVEL AND ITS VARIOUS PUBLICS**

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A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
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I certify that all work submitted for this thesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

26/01/19

Aaron Tang Wei Yao

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26/01/19

Christopher Trigg

Authorship Attribution Statement

This thesis contains material from 0 papers published in peer-reviewed journals where I was the first or corresponding author.

26/01/19

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. Tang Wei Yao'.

Aaron Tang Wei Yao

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS	ii
SUMMARY	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
Overview of Campus Novels.....	4
Critical Reception of Campus Novels.....	12
Publicness and Publics in the University.....	17
CHAPTER ONE: <i>Stoner</i>	26
Professionalization of Literature.....	28
Stoner, The Model Professional.....	32
Who Moved My Audience?.....	36
What's Love Got to Do With It?.....	46
You Can Always Count On a Serious Writer For a Plain Prose Style.....	56
Conclusion.....	63
CHAPTER TWO: Dear Committee Members	68
The College Man at Home in the World.....	70
Complaint as Resistance.....	79
Relatability is a Detestable Word.....	82
CONCLUSION	92
WORKS CITED	95

SUMMARY

This thesis argues that the public dimension of campus novels has been hitherto, an overlooked component in understanding the genre's reception and literary function. Reading John Williams' *Stoner* and Julie Schumacher's *Dear Committee Members* with an eye towards the novels' engagement with publics uncovers deep historical continuities with texts and media starting from the turn of the twentieth century. By tracing these historical continuities, we come to a great understanding of how campus novels function as texts within reading communities and strategies for the uses of texts as resistance to the commercialization of higher education.

Introduction

Universities are both inside and outside of society. As educational institutions, they perform the vital task of propagating knowledge and skills which a society is dependent upon.¹ They also serve as one of society's major producers of culture; societal identity, the negotiation of its own history, and the justification of its politics are transmitted, interpreted, and developed, in significant part, through the institution of the university. Yet, this vital function is made possible because of the university's autonomy from the state. The idea of tenure is built upon this understanding. Progressive intellectual work requires the freedom to express ideas which society might find controversial or even offensive, it is therefore imperative to secure professors against the negative effects of expressing these controversial statements in order to ensure a conducive intellectual environment. This duality in the university's relationship to society has become a site of conflict in which competing political agendas and divergent visions of higher education find expression.

A cursory survey of various debates about the university today will quickly reveal the cultural significance of universities in the political imaginary and discourse. The proliferation of articles and Op-eds that discuss things like political correctness, safe spaces, and identity politics often credit them with the erosion of public rational discourse, the degeneration of culture, or more recently, the election of Donald Trump to the American Presidency.² The stakes of the battle over the meaning of universities, it seems, is nothing less than democratic society itself. Andrew Sullivan, prominent conservative writer, in an article entitled "We All

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¹ There is a surprisingly broad consensus on the university's relationship to society but my characterisation of this relationship draws most explicitly from Jurgen Habermas' *Toward A Rational Society* (1-4) for its clarity and concision.

² 2015 saw a wave of interest in these kinds of debates, leading the charge was Jonathan Chait writing no less than 4 articles on political correctness for *New York Magazine*. "The Coddling of the American Mind" by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt in *The Atlantic* also sparked vigorous debate. Not to mention, the plethora of articles blaming Postmodernism or Cultural Marxism for creating the conditions that led to the election of Trump.

Live On Campus Now”, puts it this way: “What matters most of all in these colleges—your membership in a group embedded in a hierarchy of oppression—will soon enough be what matters in the society as a whole”. The title of Sullivan’s essay summarizes the argument he makes in it, university campuses have encroached into the public sphere in a way that threatens its very foundation. Sullivan’s argument reveals a vision of citizenship that is predicated on rational, objective public debate and views the university as a means to that end and experimentation with ideas like identity politics is to be tolerated only insofar as it remains within the confines of the campus.

Much of the argumentative force of articles like Sullivan’s comes from the telling of anecdotes that ostensibly demonstrate how the propagation of these ideas that originated in university campuses have eroded the integrity of public discourse. There are the stories of professors so afraid of offending the sensibilities of students and being labelled a racist that they have cancelled entire courses, people who have been dismissed because they expressed an opinion on something that does not belong to their own culture, etc.³ These anecdotes appeal to readers’ common sense and they are presented as sensitivity taken to such extreme degrees that they cannot be seen as anything but ludicrous. Adding to their rhetorical force, these anecdotes are often presented as stories told in confidence by frustrated professors or students too afraid of the potential backlash that they have to go through writers like Jonathan Chait in order to get their stories out, giving the impression of a broad grassroots movement that is being suppressed. However, recent reporting has exposed the great lengths to which these anecdotes are solicited and exaggerated while backed by wealthy backers with political agendas like the Koch brothers.⁴ Progressive media watchdog *Media Matters*’ report on the

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³ “Are You Politically Correct?”, John Taylor, *New York Magazine*, 21 January 1991

⁴ *Citations Needed* podcast episode “Attack of the PC College Kids” gives a good summary of the ways anecdotes about political correctness are solicited from students who are sometimes paid for their stories and then published on conservative websites like *Campus Reform*.

network of conservative funding aimed at influencing the discourse on campus politics only confirms this fact: campus gossip is serious business.⁵

The university and its place in society is evidently a culturally significant site, metonymic of idealizations and anxieties around politics, higher education, knowledge production, and intellectual authority, among others. Yet, considering its significance in the cultural imaginary today there is relatively scarce critical attention on the cultural meaning of universities.⁶ Universities are not mechanical factories that indifferently produce graduates with expertise in specific fields. As the rhetoric about universities show, they can encroach into public spaces, threaten the foundation of democratic society, hide and foment dangerous political ideologies. Universities are alternatively a place, ideologies, or its people. Despite this density of meaning and associations, fiction does not seem to find the university a productive topic. The genre that most directly addresses the university in fiction is the campus novel but in their comprehensive studies of the genre, the critics Mortimer Proctor and Ian Carter both observed an essential sameness to a lot of campus novels that, in their view, limits the genre's fictional possibilities. Janice Rossen's *The University in Modern Fiction*, takes a more measured approach than her predecessors, she finds the disparity between "the fact that the University holds an important place in our culture" (1), critics' view that the campus novel is inherently limiting, and the insistence of "[novelists'] choice of such a potentially limiting and problematic subject" (3) something that is worth examining. My approach is most similar to Rossen's but whereas she focusses on the creation of these

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⁵ <https://www.mediamatters.org/research/2017/03/29/conservative-dark-money-groups-infiltrating-campus-politics/215822>

⁶ Geoffrey Hughes' *Political Correctness: A History of Semantics and Culture* is one notable exception but focusses on the specific issue of controversy over language use. The authorisation of language use is an important mechanism of the legitimization of social values but my interest is in the ways in which that authority is invested in the university through narratives and meanings society has built around universities.

texts, my focus is on the ways in which these texts are being read and how that might tell us something about the place of universities in society today.

In this thesis, I use the term ‘university’ or ‘higher education’ but most of what I have discussed pertains to the humanities or specifically to literature departments. If one were to limit one’s attention to the ‘hard’ sciences, in many cases, there will not be any sense of crisis or debate about the relevance of what is taught. Yet, there persists the narrative of the university under threat in media and academia. I submit that the persistence of the notion of the university in crisis is evidence that the production and dissemination of culture is an essential function of the university as identified by Jurgen Habermas. If I have conflated the humanities or literature departments and universities in general, it is only to insist, as many scholars have insisted, that the function served by the former cannot be separated from the latter. In fact, the relative fortunes of those departments that deal with more “technical” knowledge is further proof that professionalization has only become more ingrained in society today. It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to mount an argument showing the growth of professionalization in higher education through the years, though there have been scholars of higher education who have done work on this.⁷ However, this cultural shift forms the basis of my reading of campus novels. Professionalization intersects what the literary critic Michael Warner describes as the public and private functions of the university along with the rewards of what a career in literary studies are perceived to be.

Overview of Campus Novels

The campus novel, as a genre, is widely thought to have emerged in the 1950s. Critics commonly attribute either C. P. Snow’s *The Masters* (1951) or Mary McCarthy’s *The Groves*

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⁷ Bill Readings’ *University in Ruins* (1997) is a slightly dated example but one that is still often cited by scholars working today. His chapter ‘The Idea of Excellence’ investigates the rise of professionalization through an analysis of the rhetoric of excellence in university press materials.

of *Academe* (1952) as being the progenitors of the genre although there are earlier works of fiction that feature professors and the university. For Elaine Showalter, the emergence of the campus novel genre was the product of changing social circumstances: “[in the 1950s] American universities were growing rapidly, first to absorb the returning veterans, and then to take in a larger and larger percentage of the baby-booming population” (i). These new conditions and the role of universities in society offered new fictional possibilities. The university as a setting bristled with dramatic possibility, it formed “a complete society on the campus, with housing, meals, medical care, and social life all provided communally and institutionally” (Showalter i).

Yet, even as the university was becoming accessible to more people and the campus regarded as a microcosm of society, the campus novel has never been a genre associated with realism. David Lodge, author of the celebrated Campus trilogy, provides this explanation: “academic conflicts are relatively harmless, safely insulated from the real world and its sombre concerns – or capable of transforming those concerns into a form of stylized play. Essentially the campus novel is a modern, displaced form of pastoral [...] it belongs to the literature of escape” (“Robertson Davis and the Campus Novel” 171). The sense of escapism and isolation from the real world is present in two of the earliest examples of the genre.

The Masters is set in 1937 under the looming threat of Nazi Germany but for narrator Lewis Eliot the rise of fascism did little to perturb the tranquillity of the university. Eliot elaborates: “for many it was a profound comfort to be one of a society completely sure of itself, completely certain of its values, completely without misgivings about whether it was living a good life” (344). Indeed, he concludes that: “the college was the place where men lived the least anxious, the most comforting, the freest lives” (345). This cavalier attitude to political realities is continued in *The Groves of Academe* where protagonist Henry Mulcahy feigns an association with communists in order to pressure Maynard Hoar, the president of

the college, to renew his contract. *Groves* was published at the height of McCarthyism but Mulcahy's ruse works only because of the university's freedom to operate autonomously of the fear of communist influence. Hoar having stood up for the political freedom of the faculty would appear hypocritical if it appeared as if Mulcahy was let go because of his communist affiliations.

The 1960s was a politically tumultuous decade. In America, the Vietnam war, the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, sexual liberation, and the growth of drug culture shook up every aspect of people's lives and universities were no exception. Universities were important sites of resistance to the state. They formed an intellectual environment wherein injustices and inequality could be theorized and articulated. Yet, as Showalter notes: "there is and was something disturbing about the disconnect between the [campus novels] and life of the '60s" (34). While the novels "do register a lot of the unhappiness, protest, and discontent [...] novel after novel ends in weak compromise, or simply business-as-usual" (34). Showalter lists John W. Aldridge's *The Party at Cranton* (1960), Kate Fansler's murder mystery campus novels *In the Last Analysis* (1964) and *The James Joyce Murder* (1967), Bernard Malamud's *A New Life* (1961), and Malcolm Bradbury's *Stepping Westward* (1965), as examples of novels that registered the tumult of the decade but failed to meaningfully engage with the forces that shaped it.

Despite the integral part that universities played in the politics of the 1960s, writers of campus novels found it easy to imagine the university as insulated from those realities. Instead the university was portrayed as a "tribe" (Showalter 34), its concerns were insular and the conflicts within campus novels tended towards the "Oedipal" (Showalter 35), never straying far from the university 'family'. It is perhaps no coincidence that for universities and English departments in particular, the 1960s was a time of plenty. In a recent article, writer Andrew Kay termed this period "Peak English" ("Academe's Extinction Event"). Kay speaks

to Gerald Graff who recalls having to “fight off employers” trying to hire him. This professional security surely contributed to the notion of the university as separate from society, it also suggests that this division is abetted by the cultural meaning of academic labour and the expectations of its rewards. The campus novels of the sixties showed that the intellectual work of academics was not expected to interact with the political and civil life of the society that it was a part of and its relative prosperity served to perpetuate this idea.

The 1970s saw the publication of two landmark campus novels, Malcolm Bradbury’s *The History Man* and David Lodge’s *Changing Places*, both published in the same year 1975. In many ways, these two novels marked a pivotal change in the history of universities. Situated at the precipice before the decline of public funding for universities and decreasing jobs and enrolment in the humanities, the novels demonstrated an awareness of the eroding boundary between the university and society that campus novels from then on would no longer ignore.

Bradbury’s *The History Man* tells the story of sociology professor Howard Kirk. Kirk is a representation of the excesses of the previous decade made grotesque in its intermingling with the appearance but not the substance of radical progressive politics. Where feminists sought to break down patriarchal gender norms, Kirk saw an opportunity to indulge in casual sex and neglect his children. The novel exemplifies what David Lodge identifies as the ironic core of the genre, namely that members of the university “are supposedly dedicated to the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and truth, but who are [...] revealed as slaves to ignoble instincts and passions” (“Robertson Davies and the Campus Novel” 170). Crucially, *The History Man* offers an explanation for this by way of the book that Howard Kirk is working on titled *The Defeat of Privacy*. Kirk explains that the book is about “the fact that there are no more private selves, no more private corners in society, no more private properties, no more private acts.... There are no more concealments any longer, no mysterious dark laces of the

soul” (*The History Man* 73). The irony of Howard Kirk bemoaning the loss of privacy is that Kirk himself strenuously performs the role of the radical leftist intellectual, turning private events into public performances – he once brings his students along to witness his wife giving birth. This would turn out to be an especially prescient framing about the role of universities from the seventies onward. Underlying many discussions about universities is the assumption that its public contribution is disinterested knowledge production and it is the disruptive and misleading inclusion of private concerns that corrupt the integrity of its operation.

David Lodge’s *Changing Places* is the second of the two seminal campus novels published in 1975. Lodge’s largely successful experiments with form in the novel, deftly switching between epistolary, newspaper extracts, student handouts, and play script, lent literary credibility to the genre. The novel follows two English literature professors, Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp, who embark on an academic exchange program. Both professors find themselves strangers in their host universities and have to learn to fit in. This premise allows Lodge to explore the difference between academia in Britain and America. The fictional British university of Rummidge is aristocratic but underfunded while the American university Plotinus is progressive, politically active, and flush with wealth. Lodge’s novel is a document of the rise of an international academic scene facilitated by the growing affordability of air travel. But as much as *Changing Places* speaks to widening scope of academia, it also acknowledges American universities as the center of concern in campus novels. Lodge elaborates on this elsewhere when he makes the distinction between campus novels and varsity novels, “the latter being set at Oxbridge, and usually among students, rather than teachers” (“Who’s Scared of the Campus Novel?”). In contrast, the campus novel has its origin in America – Lodge claims Kingsley Amis’ *Lucky Jim* as “the first British campus novel” (“Who’s Scared of the Campus Novel?”) – and is seemingly inextricable from its American context.

What remains compelling about Lodge's claim that the campus novel centers the American university is that it is borne out in later examples of the genre and in the developing discourse surrounding universities in America in later decades. This is most evident in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000). Roth's novel seizes upon the anxiety that the university is losing its ability to function as an autonomous, self-contained and self-sustaining society and ratchets up the stakes by making 'political correctness' the motivating factor of the its central conflict. The events of the novel is precipitated when its protagonist, professor Coleman Silk, refers to two absent students as "spooks", not realizing that the students are African-American and thus the term he used is derogatory. Silk defends himself by arguing that his intent was obviously non-derogatory since he could not have known that the two absent students were black, but pressure from students and the public eventually force Silk to resign. It is later revealed, in an ironic twist, that Silk is in fact African-American himself and has been passing as a Jewish man ever since he entered academia. Coleman Silk's reinvention of his identity as a Jewish man speaks to the possibility of the university to serve as a place of escape. Like Lewis Eliot and Henry Mulcahy, within the university Silk was free to adopt an identity that served to shelter him from negative effects he would otherwise face. The difference being that since the 1950s, the position of universities in America has changed. There is an increasing sense that the university can no longer be an entity apart from society but is instead highly accountable to it.

As the previously mentioned articles from Andrew Sullivan, Jonathan Chait, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt show, the university in America has become a common target for myriad social ills that afflict American society. Readings of campus novels set in America thus take on added political stakes.

In the midst of the generic evolution of the campus novel lies John Williams' *Stoner*. Initially published in 1965, the novel received little critical or commercial attention and was

largely forgotten. However, the melancholic story of William Stoner's life, from its humble beginnings as the son of simple farmers to an unremarkable career as a professor of English and eventually to the estrangement from his family and death from cancer, struck a nerve and gained a cult following. More recently, the novel was reissued in 2003 and 2006, it slowly escaped its cult status before the literary critic Morris Dickstein wrote a glowing review on the *New York Times*. The review vaulted *Stoner* forcefully into the mainstream book-reading consciousness, it topped bestseller lists in multiple countries and received enthusiastic praise from literary critics, authors, and even Hollywood star Tom Hanks.⁸

Stoner is uniquely situated as a campus novel. Between its muted initial reception and its dramatic rise to the upper echelons of the literary canon, it straddles the period of time between 'Peak English' and the continuing decline of English departments and the Humanities in universities in general. Its specific reception history reveals the changing attitudes towards the role that universities play in society. What makes *Stoner* a particularly relevant novel to study today is that the fictional University of Missouri in which it is set is a Land-grant, public university. Public universities in America today are increasingly under threat from a public administration that views them as an unnecessary expense. Within the last couple of years, public universities in America have faced attempts to cut their funding that would debilitate their continued functioning under the justification that they can't "be all

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⁸ "Big names in the literary world showered it with accolades, including Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes and Nick Hornby. Even a Hollywood celebrity fell under its spell. "One of the most fascinating things you've ever come across," said Tom Hanks.

New York Review Books Classics, *Stoner's* North American publisher, says the number of books shipped to booksellers tripled in the last year. Publishers Weekly has called the book's European sales "astounding." In March, it hit No. 1 in the Netherlands. It's been on Der Spiegel's bestseller list since its September publication in Germany. In Britain, 160,000 copies have sold." ("Stoner: How the story of a failure became an all-out publishing success". <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/stoner-how-the-story-of-a-failure-became-an-all-out-publishing-success/article15803253/>)

things to all people”, challenging the publicness of the public university.⁹ Furthermore, its protagonist’s change of majors from agriculture to literature signifies a shift away from the original purpose of Land-grant universities to provide technical skills and knowledge to address changes brought on by industrialization. All this makes *Stoner* a fascinating novel to study, especially in terms of the condition of academia as it stands now in America.

In contrast to *Stoner*, Julie Schumacher’s *Dear Committee Members* (2014) found moderate commercial and literary success quickly after its publication. Critics lauded the novel’s structure where the narrative is told mainly through letters of recommendation. Although *DCM*’s literary impact is modest relative to *Stoner*, it still managed to generate discussion about its worthy contribution to the campus novel genre and even won the Thurber Prize for American Humor—the first time the award was won by a female author. The widespread embrace of Schumacher’s novel—featuring a beleaguered and at times feckless but ultimately well-meaning protagonist—speaks to the presence of a readership that is receptive to campus novel protagonists that differed from their masculine forebears like *The History Man*’s Howard Kirk and *Changing Places*’ Morris Zapp. Indeed, the change in readers’ appetite for campus novel protagonists is of a piece with a desire for less caustic satires of the university. Andrew Kay attributes *DCM*’s appeal to its holding out “the possibility of forgiveness, of reconciliation” (“Academics Are Too Scared To Laugh”).

Stoner and *DCM* are two campus novels that have found receptive audiences at a time when the calls of crisis in the Humanities have never been stronger. Each novel, in their own way, represents some kind of redemptive or reconciliatory possibility. *Stoner* seeks the nostalgic possibility for the university as a shelter from the world where people who feel displaced can come together based on their common interest in intellectual pursuit. *DCM*, in

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⁹ <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/education/2019/06/28/dunleavy-veto-is-devastating-says-university-of-alaska-president/>

contrast, argues that the intellectual labour of scholarship or the writing of fiction cannot and should not be given pride of place over other forms of labour. The novels conceptualize the public and its relation to the university in different ways. Both novels are thus advantageously positioned to serve as documents of the cultural attitudes towards universities and of the meaning of intellectual work in the Humanities.

Critical Reception of Campus Novels

Although the campus novel genre is usually thought to be of marginal literary value, there have been, in recent years, a growing critical interest in the genre such that there is now “a small body of criticism devoted to it” (Showalter 2).¹⁰ The most optimistic expressions of those criticisms have even argued that the campus novel is at the center of literary production today.

For Christopher Findeisen, the campus novel has become a literarily important genre simply because of the education of its writers and how it has come to be a genre in which authors with literary ambition have decided to flex their muscles:

It’s not just that a great many major writers who are otherwise uninterested in genre fiction (from Vladimir Nabokov and Mary McCarthy to Ishmael Reed and Jane Smiley) have found inspiration in academic fiction, but also that the minor genre within the minor genre—the campus sports novel—has been taken up by writers with distinctly unminor ambitions, such as Tom Wolfe and

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¹⁰ Examples like Jeffery Eugenides’ *The Marriage Plot* or Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* are the exceptions that prove the rule. Moreover, *White Noise* largely moves away from the campus setting one-third into the novel perpetuating the view that the campus is inherently limited in its fictional possibilities.

Chad Harbach.¹¹ Which is to say that if writing about people like Dink Stover at Yale put you at the margins of American literature at the turn of the century, writing about people like Charlotte Simmons at Dupont puts you very near its center today. (Findeisen 68)

The reason literary ambition is an important signifier for Findeisen has to do with the societal narratives of success which he sees campus novels opposing. Implicit in his argument is the contradiction in attempting to utilize a genre in its satirical mode, which historically served to challenge conventional narratives of success, while harboring ambitions of literary success. This contradiction, Findeisen reasons, renders these campus novels impotent in their critical function.

Mark McGurl, in contrast, sees the rising prominence of the campus novel in post-war American fiction as the logical consequence of the growing importance of creative writing programs in universities. He writes: “The proliferation of universities as settings for novels is, in other words, what we might call a thematic symptom of a larger shift in the institutional arrangements of postwar literary production as such” (47). But McGurl goes even further than observing a pattern of novels being set in university campuses; he argues that the importance of creative writing programs in literary production makes the genre the *de facto* center of contemporary literature. For McGurl, a text’s literariness must be measured against the conventions of the campus novel, “The question is whether and to what degree all novels aspiring to the honorific status of literature must be considered campus novels of a sort” (47). Though, the argument proceeds to link a self-reflexive “autopoetics” (49) to the genre of the campus novel as an essential feature, effectively expanding the definitional range of the

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¹¹ While some critics have sought to fix the usage of the terms ‘academic fiction’ and ‘campus novels’, I will be using them interchangeably. While there is a focus in this thesis on novels set in university campuses and that involve professors more than students, the broad arguments I am making should apply to variations on the genre as well.

campus novel that to some might seem a stretch, McGurl's interpretation of the genre as being essentially self-reflexive as a result of the greater interaction between literary criticism and literary production in creative writing programs in universities bears greater inspection. The idea of 'autopoetics' positions literary creation as a form of self-making that in turn repositions reading novels into complementary acts of autopoiesis, performing "the autopoetic agendas [the novels] also enact" (49). The inextricability of literary production and interpretation means that McGurl's characterization of reading naturally privileges the perspective of the literary critic or literature professor in universities. In this context, the debate around reading practices in literature departments take on an added existential import, reading campus novels becomes fraught with the burden of the self-creation of individual readers, cultural institutions and even society itself.

However, these positive critical perspectives are rare when it comes to campus novels. The campus novel suffers, like many 'genre' novels, from a reputation of triviality and conventionality. Eminent literary critic Elaine Showalter begins her book on campus novels with a defensive gesture offering an explanation for "what I read and what I read for" in an apologetic tone. She confesses that there may be a certain "narcissistic pleasure" (1) that draws her to campus novels and elsewhere she writes about the "gossipy pleasure" (4) in recognising portraits of colleagues and friends. The tone of guilt in Showalter's reflection on her reading of campus novels reflects a certain anxiety about a particular kind of self-obsessed readership: those who are primarily concerned "about their own world, and indeed about themselves" (1). Showalter elaborates on the positionality of her reading of campus novels:

I measured the gap between what I lived and what I read. In an era before there were handbooks, self-help guides or advice columns for graduate students and junior faculty in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, novels

taught me how a proper professor should speak, behave, dress, think, write, love, succeed, or fail. Now that I have retired, I read them less personally, but with more affection and empathy. (2)

The comparison made here between campus novels and self-help literature is telling. Campus novels seem almost to address specific readers just like how advice columns might address a pining teenager or how self-help books might address the novice beginning carpentry. This feeling of specificity could be attributed to the large amounts of readers who are familiar with the experiences depicted in campus novels or to the preponderance of writers of campus novels being professors themselves. The overall effect is that campus novels, like self-help literature, has the reputation of having marginal literary value because of its near narcissistic obsession with the niche experiences of a specific and relatively small group of people. Campus novels tend to be read as vindictive takedowns of the excesses of the university, gossipy exposés, or as chronicles of the failures of the principles of the university, to the point that the conventionality of campus novels is often the first thing that critics observe.

In their respective studies of campus novels, Mortimer Proctor and Ian Carter both remarked on the genre's essential "sameness" (Proctor 1), Carter even notes with emphatic disappointment the feeling of reading another campus novel, writing: "After a couple of pages I would discover the awful truth. *I had read it all before*. After a couple of years, I had read them all before" (Carter 15). The source of this repetition of plots is usually traced to the limitations of the setting; the cloistered environs of the university campus have established hierarchies which produces well-rehearsed dramas (Showalter 3). Yet, there remains an undeniable fascination with these novels. What compels literary critics to read campus novels and what might account for the resiliency of the genre's broad appeal even as they retell the same story? What accounts for the "sense of permutative abundance" (Showalter 3) despite the depiction of a world whose every contour has been seemingly surveyed and mapped?

Janice Rossen in *The University in Modern Fiction* contends that the genre derives its longevity from the university's continued importance in contemporary society. She reads campus novels as documents of the evolving role of universities and the value of an education in society but she also urges a focus on these novels' fictionality. Rossen writes that "these novels are social documents but they are also fiction: private fantasies writ large across cultural norms, expectations and values" (3). I agree with Rossen that campus novels weave a "complicated web" (3) that connects disparate threads about the way the university functions in the cultural imaginary. However, I wish to pursue Rossen's characterisation of campus novels as "private fantasies writ large" (3) further. I submit that the modes of circulation which campus novels participate in are crucial to understanding how the genre functions, that is, the ways in which these private fantasies are exposed and circulated to an audience tell us something about how these texts function as social documents at all.

Rossen's separation of campus novels into social documents and private fantasies is indicative of the different ways in which these texts circulate among different publics. As social documents they form a portrait of the University that condenses the lived experience of people within universities and symbolically contain the zeitgeist of society's attitudes towards issues involving the University in a specific historical period. As private fantasies, campus novels reflect the attitudes people have towards universities and confront the disparity between the ideal function of universities and the lived reality of being a participant in it. In truth, there is little separating these two functions of the campus novel. Any social document should reflect, to some degree, the aggregate of people's personal aspirations and attitudes toward the University and the cultural zeitgeist would inevitably influence individual expressions of those aspirations and attitudes. Which is to say, the public and private function of universities are mutually dependent. Yet, there is a consistent practice of keeping these two spheres separate. Rossen's association of the private with fantasy and

fictionality betrays the subordination of the private to the public. Social documents, with the formality and academic rigor those words together imply, are naturally more important than the mere fantasy of any individual writer no matter how well-intentioned. Rossen, of course, does not make this argument herself, rather, she attempts to rehabilitate this difference in importance. However, the fact that Rossen had to begin her book by reiterating this difference in importance is crucial to our understanding of campus novels and how they address the distinction between public and private.

Publicness and Publics in the University

Upon casual reflection, the distinction between public and private is so apparent as to appear almost natural. Public spaces are those we share in common with others to which everyone has an equal claim whereas one would feel a breach in privacy if someone were to enter one's room without permission. Public speech are enunciations addressed to everyone in general whereas the addressee of private speech is specific. Yet, on closer inspection, the boundaries between public and private are rarely as consistently drawn as our confidence in their definitional distinctiveness might lead us to expect.

Michael Warner in *Publics and Counterpublics* brings up the example of Abolitionist and women's rights advocate, Frances Wright, who in the late 1820s went on a lecturing tour in America. Wright's public lectures provoked widespread disapproval, which led the American Catherine Beecher to write:

Who can look without disgust and abhorrence upon such an one as Fanny Wright, with her great masculine person, her loud voice, her untasteful attire, going about unprotected, and feeling no need of protection, mingling with men

in stormy debate, and standing up with bare-faced impudence, to lecture to a public assembly ... I cannot conceive any thing in the shape of woman, more intolerably offensive and disgusting.

(Qtd in Warner 22)

The irony of this opprobrium from Catherine Beecher is that Beecher herself was a prominent public figure; alongside her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, she was a prolific writer and became one of the most public women of her day. Evidently for Beecher, Frances Wright's lectures constituted a public display that was unbecoming of a woman whereas her own publicness as a prolific author bore no such disrepute. The physical occupation of public space is different from the textual presence in the public sphere.

In Catherine Beecher's reaction, we can detect how the platform of the public lecture was coded as a masculine space. When the female figure of Frances Wright occupied that space, she was perceived to become monstrously masculine in a way that contravened the proprieties that dictated the public display of feminine bodies, her masculine person, loud voice, untasteful attire, and being unaccompanied by protection was counted against her womanhood and provoked a visceral disgust. Those physical attributes project an undeniable presence. Warner also brings up the example of the Greek philosopher Diogenes who denied the distinction of public and private and who as an act of "performance criticism" (21) would masturbate in the central marketplace whenever he felt sexual need. The visceral disgust provoked by Frances Wright and Diogenes powerfully demonstrate the proprieties that dictate the public display of bodies. Beecher's status as a public figure is no doubt assisted by the platform she conducted her publicness by. As an author, Beecher's physical presence could be subordinated to her words or arguments, that is, to a textual presence. Asserting a public presence through texts thus presented a certain liberal potential, where marginalized

people could find a voice. But it became increasingly apparent that the liberal potential of participation in textual publicness could come at the cost of other forms of public participation.

Warner places the binary relation between the private and the public at the center of the liberal tradition. “In liberal thought, private persons, no longer defined by privation or powerlessness, had become the proper site of humanity” (Warner 39). Liberalism reconceived rights as “claims that all persons could make on the basis of private humanity” (39) rather than conferred by a higher authority. This re-conception of individual rights promised an ethics that could break the chains of discrimination since it insists on a common shared humanity. It is this basis of shared humanity that animated many of the arguments of first-wave feminists and Abolitionists. This form of Liberalism gained even more traction when it was tied to the logic of the free markets of capitalism. This logic, encapsulated in Bernard Mendeleville’s motto: “Private vices, public benefits” (Warner 40), asserts that the competitive pursuit of self-interest leads to situations which maximize the public good. However, this led to a pronounced distinction between the private and public spheres, as Warner notes: “as private persons came to be seen as driven by self-interest, the public came to be defined as disinterested. Those aspects of people’s lives that particularize their interests came to be seen as inappropriate to public discussion. To be properly public required that one rise above, or set aside, one’s private interests and expressive nature” (40).

The separation of the private and public spheres was further exacerbated by modes of textual circulation that became dominant in western society. In Immanuel Kant’s seminal essay “What Is Enlightenment?”, the influential philosopher made a distinction between public and private uses of reason which solidified the separate spheres theory. Kant writes,

The *Public* use of reason must at all times be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men; the *private* use of reason, however, may often be very narrowly restricted without the progress of enlightenment being particularly hindered. (Qtd in Warner 44)

From the quote we observe that Kant, knowingly or unknowingly, gendered the project of enlightenment as a male project, contributing to the still prevalent paradigm that the public sphere is essentially masculine—and that decades later would lead to Frances Wright being perceived as monstrously masculine. Kant proceeds to define what he means by public and private uses of reason, writing:

I understand, however, under the public use of his own reason, that use which anyone makes of it *as a scholar* [Gelehrter] before the entire public of the *reading world*. The private use I designate as that use which one makes of his reason in a certain *civil post* or office which is entrusted to him. (Qtd in Warner 44)

While the latter half of Kant's definition might be a little confusing considering that holding a civil office is commonly thought of as a public service, the emphasis is on the insularity of having interests other than one's own foisted into one's responsibility. True freedom of thought is only possible through the medium of the print public. "The entire public of the reading world" transcends boundaries of geography and prejudice. It is this formulation of public and private that allows one to imagine that particularized individual perspectives can, through the circulation of texts, obtain a disembodied, objective universality. This is due to the nature of the reading public that Kant evokes.

Publics refer to the group to which some object, event, or communicative act reaches in their address. An audience of a theatre performance is a relatively simple public as they

share a spatial and temporal locality, the location and time of the theatre performance.

However, in the case of textual publics which are formed by the circulation of texts, its scope is a lot harder to define. The characteristics of the readers of a particular novel change over time and across geographical localities. The lack of specificity in address and the open potential of textual publics lend it an air of universality since anyone who is able to read might potentially be a text's public.

In the context of campus novels, examining the publics which these novels reach and how their different readerships approach the novels provide a means of investigating broad cultural attitudes towards universities. Furthermore, the public reception of campus novels reflect the evolving meanings of being an intellectual in public. Just as Frances Wright's public presence was enough to provoke feelings of disgust from members of her audience, the publication of campus novels also occasion affective responses that speak to broader prejudices. But these affective responses tend to be sublimated to more intellectually focused frameworks. Mark McGurl's claim of campus novels as compelling particularly self-reflexive readings is manifested here as the intellectualizing of affective responses in ways that privilege a Kantian 'rational-critical' paradigm to the exclusion of the affective.

Methodologically, literary critics like Showalter and Rossen employ the familiar intellectual tools of literary criticism: close reading texts, positioning texts within a socio-historical context, etc. But just as the reading public implied a rejection of the private, Showalter and Rossen similarly ignore or reject affective readings of campus novels. In *Faculty Towers*, Showalter begins by relating how reading campus novels was for her not merely an intellectual activity but an inevitably personal one, she writes: "Now that I have retired, I read them less personally, but with more affection and empathy" (2). Having retired from academia, Showalter is able to take them "less personally" but her description of her reading experience is suffused with the language of affect. In contrast, the rest of the book

proceeds along the familiar lines of the academic genre of the 'Critical Introduction', dividing campus novels by decade and demonstrating broad thematic similarities. Though Showalter does occasionally insert asides about not believing in a novel's happy ending or deriving pleasure in reading another, her approach stands in stark contrast to the kinds of uses she outlines for campus novels in her introduction: "[campus] novels taught me how a proper professor should speak, behave, dress, think, write, love, succeed, or fail" (2). These uses for the campus novel are too practical, too steeped in the private and personal issues of being a professor that they appear out of place in an academic analysis of the genre. This oscillation between Showalter's commitment to the academic form of the 'Critical Introduction' and her inability to divorce her personal perspective from her analysis of campus novels even after her claim that leaving academia allows her to be "less personal" with regard to the genre, renders *Faculty Towers* an ambiguous document. Despite the markers of academic rigour such as extensive endnotes, citations of academic sources, and a bibliography, *Faculty Towers* is published by the University of Pennsylvania Press under the genre of "Personal Takes". That is, the network of associations and meanings that link the public realm, rationality, and *academia* are so distinct from the private, affective, and personal that academic presses are hesitant to contemplate the possibility that one might be intellectually and critically engaged with personal and affective readings of texts.

Janice Rossen displays a similar diffidence in confronting the personal in her analysis of campus novels. For instance, in a chapter about competition in academia, Rossen concludes that

[The] complex of effects related to scholarly competition and the global campus revolves around the fact that academics tend to have a personal stake in their work; they could hardly sustain their commitment to it for long if they

did not possess this level of interest on an emotional as well as on an intellectual level. (169)

Though Rossen acknowledges that personal investment is inextricable from the work of academics, she also sees this as an inconvenient hinderance to progress of intellectual labour.

The inherent disadvantage of this personal investment in one's subject is that it can result in a scholar's dissipation of energy in efforts to guard his or her territory within a given field of study—including protecting British national culture from inquisitive Americans. (170)

In the quote above, we find Rossen reiterating Kant's characterization of the reading public. The personal or private interests of individuals tend to be insular, or in Rossen's words, territorial, concerned with advancing the interests of some particular group, the solution imagined by both Kant and Rossen is the creation of a group that is able to subsume the limited interests of smaller groups to address humanity at large. In this way, Rossen reinstates and perpetuates the division between the private and public, leading to the ultimate conclusion in her chapter where she asserts unequivocally that the two are incompatible:

This complex of personal identity, as related to the institution of the University, scholarship, and private fantasy becomes even more focused in novels about novelists and the University, in which the unworkableness of their presence in academe becomes increasingly clear. (170)

What the critical reception to campus novels like the ones from Showalter and Rossen make apparent is the functional divide between public and private uses of reason and the various ways that higher education enters the realm of the public and private. As much as critics acknowledge that the personal cannot be divorced from intellectual pursuits in academia or

that the private lives of academics are a recurrent theme in campus novels, the application of the rational, critical tools of academia seems to inevitably lead to the conclusion that the realm of the private has no place in the ‘rational-critical’ realm of the reading public that academia has adopted from Kant. Rossen’s use of the word “unworkableness” to characterize the incompatibility of the presence of the “complex of personal identity” and “private fantasy” in academia hints that this has something to do with the nature of intellectual labour.¹² Mixing the personal into the workplace is *unprofessional* and, even more damningly, in academia it is *uncritical*.

The tensions that underlie debates around what counts as critical reading in English departments, I submit, are animated by the same perceived discontinuities between professionalism, private subjectivity, and the ‘rational-critical’ reading public. The groundswell of literary critics offering alternatives to critical reading is really an insistence on the criticality of practices that have hitherto been relegated to the private sphere—where, because of its assumed incompatibility to the reading public, is perceived to be uncritical. The goal, therefore, as Michael Warner elucidates in his essay “Uncritical Reading”, is to de-naturalize critical reading as “mere reflection” (16). By breaking up the sedimented layers of meaning built upon Kant’s association of objective reasoning with participation in an intellectual reading public, we resist “[universalizing] the special form of modernity that unites philology with the public sphere” and open ourselves up to the “existence of other cultures of textualism” (16).

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¹² Intellectual labour is increasingly viewed in financial or economic terms, as this *Washington Post* article on the US government’s plans to merge the Education and Labour departments demonstrate. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/white-house-to-unveil-plan-to-overhaul-federal-agencies/2018/06/20/da8b49fe-74ca-11e8-805c-4b67019fcfe4_story.html?utm_term=.b56a481371fc) This is also not an exclusively American phenomenon, Stefan Collini’s *What Are Universities For*, among other texts, show how this “mercantilism of the intellect” (17) is a result of globalisation.

By “cultures of textualism”, Warner means the ways in which society confront texts. For Warner, the contemporary understanding of modernity seeks to find linguistic meaning in texts, which in the context of the public sphere is pure meaning. But this blinds us to other ways of relating to texts such as “identification, self-forgetfulness, reverie, sentimentality, enthusiasm, literalism, aversion, distraction” (15). Anything divergent of the practice of critical analysis is dismissed as “unsystematic and disorganized” (15). Already there is a movement in academia to move away from this model of critical reading towards alternatives which consider the diverse ways in which texts are *used* beyond “the matrix of literary history—of authors, text, and critics” (Fox 249). This alternative outlined by Nicholas Hengen Fox, which he calls a ‘Habermasian Literary Criticism’, “asserts that the uses of literature go far beyond the rarefied republic of letters; its users are diverse and engaged with others in their communities and beyond” (250). It is precisely the inability or diffidence of critics to consider the *uses* of campus novels that results in their ambivalent analyses of these texts.

In this thesis, I draw on Fox’s approach to analyze the ways in which campus novels are used by the community of its readers to imagine alternatives to an intellectual reading public defined by Kant’s ‘rational-critical’ model. Thus far, critics like Showalter and Rossen show a commitment to dominant constructions of the public/private binary, at the same time, their analyses constantly bring up affective responses to campus novels in ways that defy that strict binary.

Chapter 1: *Stoner*

As readers turn over the final pages of John Williams' campus novel, *Stoner*, they encounter the eponymous protagonist at the end of his journey through life, and like the reader has a book in his hands:

He opened the book; and as he did so it became not his own. He let his fingers riffle through the pages and felt a tingling, as if those pages were alive. The tingling came through his fingers and coursed through his flesh and bone; he was minutely aware of it, and he waited until it contained him, until the old excitement that was like terror fixed him where he lay. (278)

At the novel's close, Williams sets up a final gesture of identification between reader and protagonist; as each puts down their respective texts, they leave the life of Stoner behind. What is left is inanimate, the text rendered a mere object—"the book they had held moved slowly and then swiftly across the still body and fell into the silence of the room" (278). The effect of this identification is an emphasis on the solitary nature of silent reading, just as the book falls into the silence of the room, the implied reader of the novel emerges from their reading confronting an inert text and probably a silent room. But if this figures the ideal reader of the novel as solitary and reading as a private activity, the novel simultaneously asserts that the relationship between the reader and text is not one of possession or mastery. The text does not become "his own". Rather, the relationship between text and reader is presented as essentially ambiguous. Stoner is unable to definitively "find himself" (277) even in the book which he authored. Given this message of a text's essential ambiguity, it is not surprising to find critics like Anthony Domestico, who is quoted in the novel's laudatory blurbs saying: "There are some books that you don't want to spoil by criticism. Instead, you

just want to exhort whoever is in front of you to go, read, and discover the book's wonders firsthand. This is how I feel about *Stoner*."

Domestico suggests that there is an incompatibility between criticism and the pleasures of reading the novel firsthand and he is not alone in his assessment. In John McGahern's introduction to the New York Review Books Classic edition of the novel, he reports that Williams himself "complain[ed] about the change away from pure study within the universities, the results of which cannot be predicted, towards a purely utilitarian, problem-solving way of doing things more efficiently, both in the arts and sciences, all of which can be predicted and measured" (xiii). The novel's ending, therefore, reaffirms Williams' belief that "pure study" is incompatible with fully mastering a text's meaning. Instead of providing any straightforward interpretations of the events of Stoner's life, readers are positioned to share the final sensory experiences of the protagonist, emphasizing the subjective experience of reading over pronouncing any definitive meaning. But while there is a certain alignment in values between Domestico's advocacy of firsthand reading and Williams' portrayal of an earnest professor's modest attempt to champion 'pure study', the novel does not easily fall into the category of academic jeremiad.

Williams's lament that universities are shifting towards utilitarianism echoes the perennial reports of the university—and in particular, the humanities—in crisis. That basic sentiment is found in many articles about what is wrong with universities today, except the blame has shifted from utilitarianism to capitalism and corporate interest. But if the university is perpetually in crisis what might account for *Stoner*'s resurgence in literary reputation in recent years? In order to answer that question I've turned to book reviews of *Stoner* in non-academic publications as well as secondary criticism on the novel. What emerged was an amalgamation of voices and perspectives that, in my reading, revealed ways in which the novel helped readers to articulate alternative visions of the university and humanities. These

articulations often relied on the under-examined associations between learning and reading and furthermore by what is promised by having an education or to be in possession of learning. The popularity of Frederick Douglass' apocryphal quote, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free", testifies to the strong connection between reading, education, and the promise of freedom.

I argue that *Stoner*'s literary resurgence is due in large part to its substantial engagement with the issues that arises out of the association of learning with reading. Specifically, in staging the conflict between what Williams identifies as utilitarianism and 'pure study' and the novel's seeming advocacy for firsthand reading, *Stoner* is positioned as a document of an idyllic past.¹³ However, I contend that this interpretation serves as a problematic in the Foucauldian sense of gesturing towards "the practical horizon of intelligibility within which problems comes to matter for people" (Warner 154). *Stoner*'s position as a literarily vital text in this contemporary moment is indicative of its usefulness as a mediating text in thinking through the issues that confront universities today.

Professionalization of Literature

Reading articles about the state of the university and higher education reveals a consensus that the foremost problem confronting universities is capitalism. Writers like Stefan Collini in his book *What are Universities For?* and Henry Heller's *The Capitalist University*, identify the shift towards for-profit operations as being responsible for the systemic failings in achieving the goals of education. In this context, some critics have read *Stoner* as being in opposition to capitalistic impulses in the university. Maggie Doherty, for

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¹³ Maggie Doherty's article on *The New Republic* "The Vanished World of *Stoner*" is a clear example of this.

instance, sees the world that *Stoner* depicts as a “vanished world”. What has ‘vanished’ for Doherty is the availability of jobs which provide financial stability and with this lack of financial stability comes another loss. Doherty writes: “Stoner, tragic figure though he is, finds something much described and more rarely seen: teaching as a vocation” (“Vanished”). Here, the blame is placed on the increasing exploitation of adjunct labour in the university for creating an uncondusive environment for the development of vocational aspirations. Doherty takes care to characterise her use of the word ‘vocation’ as a kind of calling or disposition which is inevitably tied to the material reality of academic labour. To the extent that this identifies a problem with the university as an institution, it remains on firm ground. The problems arise when the idea of the academic as vocation is taken as a panacea to the university’s ills is detached from discussions about material conditions.

The problem of the academic as vocation lies in the way that emphasis is placed more on the academic as dispenser of intellectual labour rather than what that intellectual labour performs. This narrow vision of the value of academia is easily commodifiable and thus easily assimilable into capitalistic structures as an apparent contradiction will serve to illustrate.

Henry Heller voices a common sentiment among those blaming capitalism for the university’s decline in his book *The Capitalist University*, he writes, “The current attempt by universities to mimic the private sector is a form of economic and ideological desperation” (source). The university’s shift towards imitating private corporations is generally taken as a sign of its weakening position as a cultural institution within society. That is, how universities functioned is quickly becoming obsolete. And yet, as Joshua Kim, writing for *Inside Higher Ed*, notes,

The world's most valuable companies mimic higher education in some tangible ways. The offices of tech companies are often called campuses. A designation of a "fellow" is often a highly honorific, and remunerative, title at many companies. The culture of long-range thinking and investigator autonomy that has its origins in higher education faculty has migrated to the research labs of corporations, with a straight path from yesterday's Xerox PARC and Bell Labs to today's GoogleX.¹⁴

How can the practices of the university be increasingly obsolete on the one hand and stunningly profitable on the other? Upon closer examination, though, this apparent contradiction quickly begins to fall apart.

Kim's enumeration of adopted practices are really either nominally associated to universities or else reflect luxuries supported by excesses in capital. The greater degree of "autonomy" in the "research labs of corporations" was never inherent to the practices of the university; rather, it was a consequence of competing institutional directives. The university's continued existence within capitalistic systems being the current dominant directive that drives its imitation of the private sector and places restraints on research autonomy. The ending to Kim's article reveals the relationship between what he defines as intellectual labour and its practitioners:

A college or university is only as valuable as its people.

Capitalism Without Capital, although not at all about higher education, should be read as a roadmap by postsecondary leaders for ensuring long-term success.

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¹⁴ <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/technology-and-learning/capitalism-without-capital-and-why-universities-are-valuable>

What are you reading?

The admission that the book he was reviewing had nothing to do with higher education at all is telling in its contradiction of what Kim wrote earlier. If *Capitalism Without Capital* is “not at all about higher education” then what compels Kim to read the nominal similarities between universities and corporations as a form of mimicry? Why does he recommend that the book should be read as a “roadmap” for success? And most surprisingly, why does Kim issue a challenge to readers of his article regarding their choice of reading material?

Kim’s stance betrays a commitment to what Michael Warner terms the “professionalization” of higher education, specifically of literature departments, originating in German models of the university.

The German graduate schools were not primarily producers of knowledge or information but of serious workers, and those workers did not enter the market as peddlers of a commodity but, in a way, as commodities themselves, produced by means of much time and labour by the institution.

(“Professionalization” 5)

This movement towards viewing academics as “commodities themselves” has consequences for the way that academic labour is defined as we shall see later. For now, professionalization provides a way of contextualizing Kim’s statements. The challenge issued to the reader about what they are reading is not a concern regarding the content of their reading material but rather an admonishment for particular ways of reading. It does not matter that the book that Kim is reviewing is “not at all” about higher education so much as it matters that the leaders of higher education should read it as a “roadmap” to success. Furthermore, that success is measured in the university’s ability to reproduce those readers who read with an eye to a roadmap for success. This form of abstractive reading, one that emphasizes the performance

of institutional modes of reading that identifies its reader as being in possession of expertise, in short, identifies the reader as a professional, aligns easily with the alienating logic of capitalism. In disregarding the content of intellectual labour and instead adapting the forms of the university—campuses, fellowships, and open research—corporations are able to siphon the prestige and expertise those forms suggest.

Stoner's reception is marked by the tension between holding on to the legitimization of professionalization while maintaining the notion of 'pure study', that is, intellectual labour that does not serve any utilitarian or capitalist purpose. As we shall see, the novel's reception helps to illuminate the ways in which the act of reading becomes a contested site in which these impulses play out.

Stoner, The Model Professional

The professionalization of academic life provides a crucial context for *Stoner*. At the start of the novel, readers are informed of the protagonist William Stoner's lack of career success: he spends 38 years in the academy without ever "rising above the rank of assistant professor" (3). Furthermore, the novel states unequivocally that Stoner does not leave much of an impression after his death: "Stoner's colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now [...] to the younger ones [his name] is merely a sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers" (3-4). In a few short paragraphs, the novel emphasizes that Stoner does not have much of a career and as readers we learn later that it is precisely Stoner's disregard for careerism allows him to find a deeper meaning in his job. Unsurprisingly, readers of the novel have often adopted Stoner as a symbol of the virtue of scholarly work performed earnestly and passionately set against the distractions and obstacles

thrown up by a business or commercial logic infecting the operations of the university. This means that Stoner is described by many readers as a hero--Mel Livatino, for instance, calls Stoner “a quiet Job-like hero of the soul” (421) and Jeff Frank writes that Stoner “is a testament to the veiled heroism of work” (237).

John Williams himself spoke of Stoner as a hero and it is worth quoting him at length to see how his perception of Stoner’s heroism is tied to work:

I think he’s a *real* hero. A lot of people who have read the novel think that Stoner had such a sad and bad life. I think he had a very good life. He had a better life than most people do, certainly. He was doing what he wanted to do, he had some feeling for what he was doing. He was a witness to values that are important... The important thing in the novel to me is Stoner’s sense of a *job*. Teaching to him is a job—a job in the good and honorable sense of the word. His job gave him a particular kind of identity and made him what he was...It’s the love of the thing that’s essential. (*Stoner* xii)

Here, Williams connects a job “in the good and honorable sense” to the affective love that one has for one’s job. In fact, it is this love that is “essential” to Stoner performing his job heroically. Love plays an important role in the organisation of American literary studies, as Merve Emre convincingly argues in her book *Paraliterary*, “the discipline has wholeheartedly enshrined love in its epistemological, pedagogical, and communicative practices” (65). In a later section, I build on Emre’s argument to explore how love functions to generate readings of campus novels. Presently, however, focussing on how Williams frames the expression of love in the context of performing one’s job well provides a useful way of thinking about the visions of academic labour at stake in the reception to *Stoner*.

It is significant that Williams establishes that Stoner comes from a working class background: his parents run a small farm in central Missouri. The Stoner household, Williams writes: “was bound together by the necessity of its toil” (4). Though this work on the farm is presented as onerous and at times physically debilitating, the novel valorises the simplicity and earnestness of that tough labour being carried out. When Stoner is granted the opportunity to study agriculture in university, Williams describes Stoner’s approach to his studies in this way: “He did his work at the University as he did his work on the farm—thoroughly, conscientiously, with neither pleasure nor distress” (9). Despite the vast differences in the kinds of labour involved in working a farm and studying in a university, the novel suggests through Stoner’s stoic performance of both that it is the way one carries out one’s work that makes it “good and honorable” rather than the nature of the labour one performs. This should immediately bring to mind Warner’s characterisation of the German model of universities producing “serious workers” as “commodities themselves”. The way that the novel characterizes Stoner and readers’ propensity to ascribe heroism to the way he works, indicates how strongly entrenched the idea that labour performed earnestly and effectively constitutes a solution to institutional problems. Implicit in the effusive praise for *Stoner* by advocates like Livatino and Frank is that if universities were conducive to the production of workers like Stoner then any talk about crises would naturally dissolve. It is this logic at work that compels Frank to prescribe *Stoner* as a text on which to base a “living teaching” (240).

Transferable skills have become quite a hot button issue in recent years as academic jobs become more scarce and new graduates are increasingly pushed towards finding non-academic employment. However, demonstrating employable skills have proven to be especially difficult for humanities graduates. In 2005, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported a common sentiment among humanities graduates that “they have no viable career

options other than being a professor” because they have “no skills”.¹⁵ Ten years later, in 2015, *ChronicleVitae*, an offshoot of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, published an advice column series titled ”Ph.Ds Do Have Transferable Skills”. Clearly, there has not been much improvement in helping graduates identify their skills in the decade since 2005. Furthermore, the anecdotes reported in these articles painfully demonstrate the intense anxiety facing graduates looking for non-academic employment. There is something darkly humourous about the notion of highly trained graduates involved in years of intense studies having to be reassured that, yes, they have skills that might apply elsewhere. But therein lies the complication. The demand for transferable skills is indicative of the way in which, under the regime of professionalization, skilled labour is expected to conform to recognizable forms as defined by the relationship between a particular field and society. Conformity to these forms goes a long way towards determining if an individual is a professional, a person of expertise and appropriate personal traits, that is, a serious worker. Despite the transitivity implied by the term ‘transferable’, not all fields are created equal. Consider the wide range of careers open to graduates with a mechanical engineering degree without the attendant anxiety over whether the labour one performs in university might be applicable to highly specific occupations which often require additional training and accreditation. The gulf in transitivity of transferable skills in the field of humanities and engineering speaks to the degree to which the humanities have always been out of step with the professionalization of higher learning. If we grant that the humanities are at the heart of producing and disseminating culture broadly defined, a task that Habermas argues is essential to the function of the university, it should perhaps be unsurprising that the humanities are so resistant to the constraining effects of

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¹⁵ Rebecca A. Bryant, ‘But I Have No Skills’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 18 2005.

professionalization. After all, the production of culture is generative and so would necessarily constantly exceed or push against boundaries.

Michael Warner's history of literary studies as a competition between "gentlemen amateurs" and "professional philologists" (1-2) is a microcosm of the pressures the humanities face from the social sciences. The various disciplines described as social sciences (give examples here) are much more amenable to professionalization since they share similar methodologies to the more legitimised natural sciences. Between these two impulses, embodied within the figure of the gentleman amateur and the professional philologist lies the figure of William Stoner. Stoner in many ways is a model professional. Livatino and Frank are never in doubt that Stoner represents a sterling example of a literature professor. To them, as we have seen, he is a hero and an undeniably serious worker. To read Stoner in this way is to grant a legitimacy to the profession of literature professor--a legitimacy that in recent years has become more urgent given the fall in enrolment for the humanities, the dire academic job market, and the hazily defined but ubiquitous 'culture war'. The optimism of reading Stoner as a model professional, however, is undercut by the beginning and ending of the novel which present this question: who is the audience of the humanities?

Who Moved My Audience?

Stoner begins and ends with its protagonist's death and insignificance which are further emphasized by their juxtaposition to instances of failure in textual transmission. We learn at the beginning of the novel that Stoner's colleagues made a "memorial contribution of a medieval manuscript to the University library" which was only perused by the "occasional student" (3). The novel ends with the image of Stoner's only published manuscript falling into the silence of an empty room. These two images, taken in consideration with the muted

reception that the novel initially received, resonate with the concern that Williams had that universities at the time were shifting to “purely utilitarian” ways of doing things. It is hard not to read the lack of transmission of the two texts within the novel as a way for Williams to dramatize the corresponding lack of cultural currency of the mode of “pure study” embodied in William Stoner. The traditional humanities, the novel suggests, had lost its audience.

Stoner’s tepid reception during its initial publication was taken as proof that the values it espoused lacked a suitably receptive audience. Most famously, C.P Snow, in a review of the novel, asked rhetorically why it wasn’t famous. His answer was that “we live in a peculiarly silly age” and the novel “doesn’t fit the triviality of the day” (qtd in Livatino 422). Following that logic, one might reason that the overwhelming positive response that *Stoner* has received upon its republication in recent years is a sign that there is a receptive audience for the traditional humanities now. This question is hard to answer definitively. Ben Schmidt, an academic who has applied statistical analysis to the question of whether there is a crisis in the humanities, reported that there has been a steady decline in enrolment in the humanities in American universities from the 1960s onwards.¹⁶ Furthermore, this decline seems to have accelerated since 2008. These statistics present a strong challenge to the hypothesis that there has been a growth in audience for the humanities.

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¹⁶ As a relative percentage of humanities degrees against all college degrees. This is based on statistics gathered by Ben Schmidt. <http://sappingattention.blogspot.com/2018/07/ mea-culpa-there-is-crisis-in-humanities.html>

There is another way to interpret the literary resurgence of Williams' campus novel. It is precisely the reality of this decline that makes the need for the humanities all the more urgent for its advocates. The success of *Stoner* does not signal the presence of a receptive audience for the humanities but rather the urgent need for one. This desire for the formation of an audience motivates the plethora of discourse around the humanities and its value. Schmidt notes in his blogpost on college enrolment statistics that "Little-c conservatives tend to argue that the humanities must return to some set of past practices: teaching Great Works or military history". Stanley Fish's argument in his book *Save the World on Your Own Time* basically amounts to saying the same thing. More recently, Michael Clune argued for the importance of preserving the integrity of disciplinary boundaries, insisting that for English departments "Our object of study is literature; our method is close reading".¹⁷ All three

¹⁷ https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Bizarro-World-of-Literary/244938?cid=wcontentgrid_41_2

examples listed above are reactions to some perceived form of crisis in the humanities. This interpretation, that there is a greater desperation and urgency in the advocacy for an audience for the humanities, fits better with Schmidt's statistics. *Stoner*'s publication in 1965 coincides with the peak of enrolment in humanities degrees relative to all college degrees. But this in turn calls into question the decline for an audience for the humanities that the novel postulates.

The concurrence of the upturn in humanities enrolment and the bleak prognostications *Stoner* presented need not be taken as contradictory. Indeed, this concurrence is instructive as it demands that we scrutinize what we mean when we talk about an audience for the humanities. We can note, for instance, how there is a disconnect in the rhetoric that different commentators have employed in speaking about an audience for the humanities. On the one hand, there are the people who are more sentimental about the humanistic value of a humanities education. Their rhetoric tends towards emphasizing the love and passion for scholarly work ("Love and Work: A Reading of John Williams' *Stoner*" – Jeff Frank) and to the transformative effect it has on individuals, to move people into becoming "human being[s] of noble dimensions" (Livatino 421). On the other hand, there are those who view a humanities education as simply the conveyance of certain specialized sets of skills. The rhetoric employed by this latter group, unsurprisingly, tends towards preserving the integrity of the process of qualification and a concern for the number of students who are enrolled in humanities degrees. This difference in rhetoric belies appeals to different audiences for the humanities, with consequences for the expected societal role of the humanities.

A scene from *Stoner* encapsulates the tension between these two viewpoints and will help to situate the difference in its reception during its initial publication and its re-publication in recent years.

During the preliminary oral examination to determine the graduate student Charles Walker's ability to continue in the doctoral program, Stoner, one of the examiners in the panel, becomes suspicious after he notices that Walker's supervisor seems to be leading the student through rehearsed answers. Stoner's suspicion is reinforced by his prior experience teaching Walker; for the final presentation of the class, it becomes apparent to Stoner that Walker had not written the paper that he was presenting but was extemporizing his speech. Thus, when it came time for Stoner to question Walker in the oral examination, he decides to ask simple questions about literature that exposes Walker's unfamiliarity with the canon of literary works. As the panel convenes after Walker's questioning, the possibility of issuing a conditional pass is raised in consideration of both Walker's strong performance during his thesis examination and his weaker knowledge of the literary canon. However, Stoner insists on failing Walker, saying:

"The man's incompetent. There can be no question of that. The questions I asked him were those that should have been asked a fair undergraduate; and he was unable to answer a single one of them satisfactorily. And he's both lazy and dishonest." (162)

Given this justification, that Walker demonstrated a lack of the requisite set of knowledge that a literary academic is expected to have, it is easy to agree with Stoner that he should not pass. Judging purely on this justification alone, the novel seems to suggest a reading that upholds a principle of professional ability. In this view, it is Walker's inability to meet the

demands of rigour in academic work signalled by his unfamiliarity with the literary canon that precludes him from the professionalized space of academia.

As discussed in the previous section, the increasing professionalization of the humanities is in large part motivated by a desire for the legitimacy of recognizable forms of knowledge production and the conception of the academic as, in the words of Warner, commodities, “certified and accredited by processes that can be said to have produced him as a critic” (“Rewards” 22). But this aura of professionalization is buttressed by the presence of a specific audience, namely, a commercial demand for the humanities academic as commodity. As Warner notes, “[the professional critic] vends himself on the market in his role as a critic. His person is reduced to that role in order to stand (as a reputation, as expertise) over whatever actual labor of criticism he may actually perform” (22). What Warner is essentially saying is that accrediting processes such as the oral examination and familiarity with the literary canon ensured the professional integrity of the literary critic.

Yet Stoner’s opposition to Walker’s doctoral candidature extends beyond a concern about professional ability. In fact, the novel precludes a purely professional motivation on Stoner’s part when Stoner declines to give Walker a conditional pass, in which case Walker will be given the opportunity to make up for his lack of familiarity with the canon. Instead what disqualifies Walker as a doctoral candidate for Stoner is that he is “lazy and dishonest”. What disqualifies Walker is not a lack of professional ability but rather the defects in his character. In calling to question Walker’s deficiencies in character over his professional ability, Stoner brings the personal into the professional.

The degree to which Stoner takes this personally is made all the more explicit when he reminisces about a conversation he had with his friends about who the university is for:

“The three of us were together, and he said—something about the University being an asylum, a refuge from the world, for the dispossessed, the crippled. But he didn’t mean Walker. Dave would have thought of Walker as—as the world. And we can’t let him in. For if we do, we become like the world, just as unreal, just as... The only hope we have is to keep him out” (167)

It is evident from the quote above that Stoner is unconcerned with the legitimacy of literary studies as a profession, rather the reverential tones of Stoner’s reverie suggest spiritual and even existential stakes are involved. What is at stake is not just professional competency but reality itself. For Stoner, the unreality of “the world” forces certain types of people to seek refuge in the university where, presumably, those people can labour in the pursuit of something real. But this vision of the university is far from inclusive.

Stoner’s rejection of Walker from his utopic vision of the university belie its exclusionary nature. Stoner’s university is a place that is for “the crippled”, just not for Walker—who is a crippled person. This prevarication speaks to the limited inclusivity of the humanity implied in the liberal humanities and to the way in which how we envision the audience of the humanities exclude certain people. Stoner envisions the university as a kind of fraternity of social misfits, who, though relegated to the fringes of society, are able, through the possession of particular virtues and the application of ‘serious’ labour, to create authentic experiences of reality. But as we interrogate these authentic experiences of reality, which the novel implies form the basis of an inclusive humanity, this utopia crumbles. The rejection of Walker as one of “the crippled”, denies Walker’s physical reality. This gesture is presented as a principled stand against an existential threat of intellectual sophistry and insofar as this is true, presents Stoner as a hero. But it also subordinates the physical reality of disability to intellectual and moral realities. It is an assertion that an inclusive humanity must be based on intellectual and moral grounds rather than physical realities.

To say that Stoner takes this matter personally is not just to claim that he lets personal convictions about the university drive his decision on a professional matter, it is also to claim that Stoner's vision of an inclusive liberal education is founded upon the principle of individuality. Consider the way the novel depicts Stoner's burgeoning consciousness of his part in humanity, first developing an individual consciousness: "He became conscious of himself in a way that he had not done before" (15), later developing a fellowship with the people around him: "he wandered in the long open quadrangle, among couples who strolled together and murmured softly; though he did not know any of them, and though he did not speak to them, he felt a kinship with them" (15). Crucially, the novel depicts the experience of kinship with a wider humanity evolving out of the burgeoning self-consciousness of Stoner as an individual. Moreover, this individuality is born out of the contemplation of the meaning of one of Shakespeare's sonnets (13-14). Indeed, the mutually reinforcing relationship between literature, individuality, and humanity is made explicit in this extended section describing Stoner's intense reading experience:

The past gathered out of the darkness where it stayed, and the dead raised themselves to live before him; and the part and the dead flowed into the present among the alive, so that he had for an intense instant a vision of denseness into which he was compacted and from which he could not escape, and had no wish to escape. Tristan, Iseult the fair, walker before him; Paolo and Francesca whirled in the glowing dark; Helen and bright Paris, their faces bitter with consequence, rose from the gloom. And he was with them in a way that he could never be with his fellows who went from class to class, who found a local habitation in a large university in Columbia, Missouri, and who walked unheeding in a midwestern air. (16)

Reading mediates an imagined community between Stoner and characters, not out of fiction but of the “past” and fosters a deeper connection than the actual people around him who are merely geographically proximate. Reading literature, thus, has the effect of transcending time and space in order to address the reader to humanity at large. Ironically, for Stoner, this newfound sense of communion with an imagined community does little to mend his fraught relationships with people close to him. However, the novel here strongly advances the notion that the act of reading constitutes one as a member of a public.

More specifically, this liberal humanity that the study of humanities addresses can be called what Michael Warner termed a counterpublic. Counterpublics are similar in most respects to the publics discussed in the introduction with the exception that they are organised around their perceived subordination to a more dominant public. Warner refers to counterpublics as an “odd social imaginary that is established by the ethic of estrangement and social poesis in public address” (*Publics* 81). By this he means that counterpublics seek to form real social groups and that they are energized by a sense of marginalization or estrangement. Warner’s description of textual publics formed through the process of textual circulation is relevant here. As discussed in the introduction, the Kantian conception of the public sphere is built upon an imagined “reading public” which instantiated the metaphor of textual circulation that implied standards of rationality and universality. Stoner’s imagined communion with the past and to others beyond his “local habitation” displays the features of an attempt at forming a counterpublic. The humanity which he envisions are joined by a shared morality as encoded within the figure of the humanities professor and gained through the contemplative study of a canon of texts.

Stoner’s vision of humanity fits with Warner’s archetype of the gentleman scholar, both asserted that “a special and limited kind of private experience (esthetic, “vicarious” experience) was made to stand for *all* of experience, for life itself—as can be seen in the

assertions that literary experience helps to transcend the mundane, that it is spiritual, that it “is life”, that it engages all of what Henry James called “the sentient soul of man”” (“Rewards” 21). Juxtaposed against this is the professional critic who drew his legitimacy from the commercial, John Williams would say “utilitarian”, value of the role he vends in the marketplace. The literary scholar in this latter view, is valuable only insofar as the means to some economic or financial end.

Stoner’s poor reception during its initial publication might thus be recontextualized. The novel as a form of public address meant to form a counterpublic against the dominant professionalization of the discipline of humanities fell on to deaf ears. Coming at the height of public demand for humanities degrees, especially in terms of ‘market demand’ as measured by the number of enrolments, the professional critic was in vogue. Few people felt as keenly as Williams did that the shift towards utilitarianism represented a decline particularly given the legitimacy the profession enjoyed at the time. Indeed, as *Stoner*’s intervention in Walker’s oral examination shows, professors were able to instrumentalize the structures of professionalization for essentially personal convictions, precisely because of the legitimacy they possessed.

In more recent years, as the phrase ‘crisis of the humanities’ has become more urgent and backed up by statistics, the profession is no longer secure in its role in society. More and more we find debate about how the university and specifically the humanities have to find ways to engage the public. For example, in March 2015, the *PMLA*’s recurring section ‘The Changing Profession’ featured essays organised under the theme of “The Semipublic intellectual: Academia, Criticism, and the Internet Age”. A particular sore point was the ‘dehiring’ of Steven Salaita whose offer for a tenure position in the University of Illinois, Urbana, was rescinded following the discovery of his tweets in support of Gaza and criticizing Israel. The controversy called into question the boundaries of the public and

private for academics and how ,increasingly, being ‘in public’ on the internet means risking a career-killing *faux pas* and also not having these ‘non-academic’ work be recognised by universities.

In the midst of all this confusion surrounding the reorganisation of the profession, *Stoner*’s simple assertion about the value of the humanities touching all of life itself can seem exceedingly reassuring. Facing the harsh decline in the legitimacy buoyed by ‘market demand’ of the professional critic, it is tempting to join Stoner in shutting out the “unreal” world while at the same time imagining a communion with a larger reading public that shared one’s moral values. But just as Kant’s public sphere required the universal reach and rationality invested in the metaphor of the reading public, Stoner’s vision of the university required a metaphor that bridged the personal and the professional, the private and the public. As Archer Sloane, Stoner’s mentor, triumphantly declared when he sized Stoner up and determined that he would be a teacher in the university: “It’s love, Mr. Stoner [...] You are in love. It’s as simple as that” (20).

What’s Love Got to Do With It?

Love figures prominently in the reception of *Stoner*. The novel is often cited as giving voice to the love of teaching and scholarship. For example, in Jeff Frank’s “philosophical reading” of *Stoner*, love, as an affective response, mediates between the “deep emotion” (235) that motivates one to undertake the labour of teaching and the difficult and dispiriting nature of that labour. For Mel Livatino, love in *Stoner* is the debt of loyalty that Stoner owes “for how [literature] has transformed his life from dumbness into consciousness” (421). Indeed, the ubiquity and variability of function which love plays in the reception of *Stoner* is aptly summarized in John McGahern’s foreword of the novel, where he writes:

If the novel can be said to have one central idea, it is surely that of love, the many forms love takes and all the forces that oppose it. “It [love] was a passion neither of the mind nor of the heart, it was a force that comprehended them both, as if they were but the matter of love, its specific substance.” (xiv)

McGahern concludes his foreword with a popular quote from the novel that sums up succinctly the appeal that love holds for those who think a humanities education is important; the concept of love allows for the strategic conjoining of affective intensity to intellectual capacity, a force comprehending both the heart and the mind.

Earlier in this chapter, I brought up Merve Emre’s assessment that American Studies has “wholeheartedly enshrined love in its epistemological, pedagogical, and communicative practices” (65). In her argument, Emre examines American institutions such as the Fulbright program and the work and letters of American writer Sylvia Plath in order to show the work that the concept of literary love played in fulfilling institutional purposes while shaping the creative directions that American writers have taken. Though her argument limits its scope to American institutions, the particular “vision of love” which these institutions deploy in their organisation of international outreach programs is also more broadly applicable to university literature departments in general. Emre describes this vision of love as something “that exists more powerfully, more perfectly, in another space and time, and thus avoids its material realities” (93) and which imagines its most effective transmission in the model of “face-to-face communication” (87). If it seems as if the concept of love is being made to do a lot of symbolic work here, that is because, for Emre, it does. Part of the reason why love can be made to carry such a heavy symbolic weight is because of its inherent ambiguity. For instance, Emre shows how the romantic love between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes abetted the institutional goals of the Fulbright’s program’s more broadly conceived vision of promoting “love between nations” (59). For Emre, love links international diplomacy,

romance, the formation of an American public, liberalism and capitalism, and the passionate affects of institutional subjects. And just as Plath and Hughes' marriage provided Emre an entry into the discussion of the Fulbright program's theoretization of how "international readers' emotional responses to American literary texts could "breed love"" (60), the love affair in the novel between Stoner and a graduate student reveals structures of what Emre calls "feeling rules" which underlie much of the positive sentimental reception of the novel.

Facing professional ostracization after his confrontation with Lomax and a loveless marriage with an inexplicably emotionally abusive wife that estranged his relationships with his daughter and parents, Stoner finds an unexpected joy in the arms of a graduate student, Katherine Driscoll. They grow closer over the course of Stoner advising Driscoll for her dissertation, eventually uncovering their mutual attraction for each other. This spontaneous outpouring of passion rejuvenates Stoner. His romantic love for Driscoll reinvigorates his passion for learning, indeed, the novel suggests that they were one and the same thing: "Then they would make love, and lie quietly for a while, and return to their studies, as if their love and learning were one process" (199). This portrayal of love's ability to affect one both romantically and intellectually, as in the case with Plath and Hughes, is a particularly attractive and useful proposition. In the case of Plath and Hughes, it works to advance the notion of American cultural export as effective international diplomacy and reinforce the primacy of the family as social unit, among other things. In the case of Stoner and Driscoll, it works to establish passion as an essential component of valuable intellectual labour that opposes utilitarian purposes of education and in fact because it is so opposed, cannot be justified in utilitarian terms. One need only observe how Stoner and Driscoll define themselves against "the outer world" (210) or how they came to realize the prejudices that would compel others to misjudge their love which they call "given opinion" (199), one of

which was that “they had been brought up in a tradition that told them that the life of the mind and the life of the senses were separate and, indeed, inimical” (199).

We see this rhetoric of love in John Williams’ own comments on what makes a good teacher:

It’s the love of the thing that’s essential. And if you love something, you’re going to understand it. And if you understand it, you are going to learn a lot. It all grows out of the love of the thing. The lack of love defines a bad teacher.

(Woolley 30)

Here Williams asserts the essentiality of love but does little to elaborate how that is supposed to be realistically put into action; it is as if the presence of love is self-justifying. Indeed, love’s ambiguity is evident in Jeff Frank’s “philosophical reading” of *Stoner* which also uses the Williams quote above. Frank’s aim in his essay is to read *Stoner* as a positive role model for a good teacher and he hitches his pedagogical wagon to love. Frank explains:

It is not only the sense of committing to something and working at it that is important; it is the sense of being in love and dedicating oneself to it regardless of whether it leads to anything like what might be called a success. It is important not to confound this love with love that is foolish, quixotic, sentimentalized or superficial. The love is real and directed at something meaningful, valuable, good. (237)

For Frank, as with Williams, labour without love is effort without purpose, incapable of aspiring beyond success, that is, incapable of anything that might be philosophically good. But unlike Williams, Frank’s emphasis on the philosophical necessitates the specification of love as one that is not “foolish, quixotic, sentimentalized or superficial” (237). Frank

precludes these negative traits in an attempt to characterize the love he is speaking about as philosophical and rational. Yet, the rest of his essay does not elaborate on how love might function as a guide towards what is “meaningful, valuable, and good” (237). In fact, while Frank only makes a passing observation of Stoner’s “short-lived affair” (234), preferring to focus on Stoner’s love of teaching, his use of a quote from the novel that actually refers to the affair instead of the love of teaching (238) shows how difficult it is to separate sentimental love from rational love. Ultimately, Frank reverts to the self-justifying presence of love; he urges readers to “remember that Stoner is not a good teacher; but he is also not a bad one because he is moved by love. And so the presence that no one can mistake and that Williams writes about is potentially curious; worth considering” (238). Here as in many other cases where love is celebrated as an essential component of intellectual work, love stands as an incontrovertible good that nonetheless remains frustratingly ill-defined. Its presence is supposedly unmistakable, yet the proliferation of discourse around love, intellectual work, and *Stoner*, suggests that it is fragile and demands constant affirmation. This drive for affirmation and an emphasis on the presence of a hard-to-define internal affect points to the retreat of the humanities to the private realm.

As mentioned in the introduction, the distinction between the public and the private is not easily drawn and each mutually defines the other in a perpetual negotiation. However, it would not be controversial to claim that in recent history there has been a general shift in society towards the private realm. From Lionel Trilling’s seminal argument for the shift from the more publicly oriented sincerity to the privately authenticated concept of authenticity, to the work of the Frankfurt School which unveiled the many ways in which modern society was oriented towards the construction of individual subjects, there is a long and established scholarship that traces this shift towards the private. In speaking about the retreat of the humanities to the private realm, I seek to acknowledge more than just this general shift

towards the private. Rather, I argue that the positive reappraisal of *Stoner* in recent years is predicated upon accepting the limitation of the humanities to the private realm.

We have seen how much of the positive reception to *Stoner* is predicated upon the idea that Stoner embodies a passion or love for teaching. Problematically, this love is explicitly tied to Stoner's brief affair with Katherine Driscoll. Not only does this breach protocols of professional conduct between teacher and student, the age difference between the two is also an issue of propriety, not to mention that Stoner is cheating on his wife. At this point, some people might object that these issues are reflective of contemporary sensitivity to social propriety, particularly in the wake of the 'Me Too' movement in which women were empowered to publicly share instances of sexual harassment and abuse. However, these issues are in fact brought up in text. During an awkward confrontation with his wife about his affair, Stoner sees himself as he imagines other people see him:

He had a glimpse of a figure that flitted through smoking-room anecdotes, and through the pages of cheap fiction—a pitiable fellow going into his middle age, misunderstood by his wife, seeking to renew his youth, taking up with a girl years younger than himself, awkwardly and apishly reaching for the youth he could not have, a fatuous, garishly got-up clown at whom the world laughed out of discomfort, pity, and contempt. (202)

Stoner, of course, rejects this image of himself but importantly the manner of his rejection reflects the change from sincerity to authenticity that Trilling described: “[Stoner] looked at this figure as closely as he could; but the longer he looked, the less familiar it became. It was not himself that he saw, and he knew suddenly that it was no one” (202). Stoner here does not simply reject that other people's impression of him is inaccurate, this imagined figure is not simply a miscarriage of his sincere feelings, rather he rejects the figuration itself, “it was no

one”, after he consults the authentic “himself”. Which is to say, part of appeal of the rhetoric of love is its claim to the kind of authenticity that prioritizes the formation of an individual self. One, which we shall see, is defined by an opposition to the middle-class sensibilities embodied in the marriage of Plath and Hughes.

Setting the stage for Stoner’s rejection of the figure of a middle-aged man desperate to recapture a lost youth by having an affair, the novel informs its readers through ironic use of quotation marks that contrary to what they might believe Stoner’s affair actually improved his relations with his estranged wife. The narration lapses into a passive-aggressive irony that is otherwise absent in the novel: “[Stoner’s relationship with his wife], according to “given opinion” ought to have worsened steadily as what given opinion would describe as his “affair” went on” (199). By itself this might be unremarkable but the novel makes its criticism of middle-class sensibilities more explicit in a later instance. Lomax who still holds a grudge against Stoner learns about his affair and seizes the opportunity to report it to the dean. Gordon Finch, the dean and one of Stoner’s only real friends, recounts the conversation:

We commiserated upon the necessities of bowing to the dictates of middle-class morality, agreed that the community of scholars ought to be a haven for the rebel against the Protestant ethic, and concluded that practically speaking we were helpless. (211)

Even though both men understand that Lomax is acting upon the grudge he has against Stoner, the fact that this proves to be the end of Stoner’s affair is significant. The irony-drenched conversation between Lomax and Finch pits the university, “the community of scholars”, against the tyrannical “dictates of middle-class morality” and “the “Protestant ethic”, upholding, that is, the prejudice of enlightenment over the unexamined opinions of the

less enlightened masses. The novel encourages its readers into holding a begrudging admiration for Lomax's cunning attack, voicing this reluctant respect in Finch's admission that "Oh, he did it beautifully" (211). Implicit in this admiration is the recognition that what Lomax says is true and inevitable. The force of public opinion proves to be overwhelming for any private individual, even if that rebel should operate under the auspices of "the community of scholars". In this formulation, the authentic love that sparks valuable intellectual work and social relationships is defeated by the uncomprehending masses who do not possess that same love.

The novel's association of the stultifying effects of institutional 'feeling rules' to "the dictates of middle-class morality" is unlikely to be a critique of social class. But considered side by side with the roughly contemporaneous example of Plath and Hughes, this assignment of blame reveals a fairly coherent reading of Stoner as a heroic figure which I think is instructive of why he reappears as a character worthy of literary attention today.

To explain why I think that a reading of that passage in *Stoner* as a critique of class is less plausible than a more abstractly conceived opposition to institutionalization, requires a further unpacking of the above quote. Finch does not only acknowledge the powerlessness of the university in the face of society's conservative morality, thus implicitly acknowledging its weakened cultural impact, he also acknowledges in his bowing to practicalities as an administrator, the professional pressures that are at play.

In essence, Lomax reciprocates Stoner's use of institutional bureaucracy to undermine what the other wants, only this time it is evident where power lies. Stoner's argument for the integrity of professional credentialization provided a cover for his prejudice against Walker who was lacking in the personal qualities Stoner thinks is necessary in an

academic. Lomax feigns a concern for the public image of the university in order to break up Stoner's affair.

However, Stoner's actions are ultimately futile, Walker sufficiently fit the image of a scholar, he is eloquent in academic jargon and could conjure a convincing argument about texts despite not being familiar with much of the canon, and so he was eventually accepted as a doctoral candidate. Lomax, on the other hand, was able to break up Stoner's affair while keeping his hands clean. The insidious way in which Lomax veils his attack by affecting solidarity with Finch and "the community of scholars" is presented as the truly contemptible part of the exchange. The duplicity of playing both sides against each other reveals Lomax as a man without principles or authentic beliefs. He does not care about the integrity of the profession, upholding middle-class morality, and he certainly does not have the love of teaching that binds the community of scholars. Thus, when Stoner hears about Lomax's veiled threat, he concludes by definitively saying: "I knew he hated me" (212). If love provided a means of binding affective response to rationality, thus justifying claims of universalization for humanities education, then the hate that Stoner ascribes to Lomax marks him as an individual motivated by an irrational, emotional reaction, exploiting institutional power to get what he wants.

Lomax plays the part of the antagonist in *Stoner*; he serves as the embodiment of Williams' fears that education was being made to serve utilitarian ends. In a later part of the novel, the stakes in this opposition between Stoner and Lomax is spelled out more explicitly as an opposition between treating studies "as if those studies were life itself" or as just "specific means to specific ends" (249). The universalizing move to extend intellectual work to encompass "life itself" offers comfort to those seeking to justify the value of a humanities education. But as we've seen above, while love might be useful in imagining the possibility of reaching others internationally or as a community of scholars, the reality of this form of

public-making seems stuck in a paradigm of domestication. Just as Plath and Hughes' romance was most useful to the Fulbright program in the image it presented of a happy marriage, Stoner's affair functioned usefully as an abstract passion that gives meaning to Stoner's personal and professional life. But the domestication of the affair is part of its necessary fiction. The affair exists outside of societal wisdom about infidelity, somehow improving Stoner's relationship with his estranged wife and daughter. Miraculously, having an affair preserves the integrity of the family. In addition, the affair—as most affairs must be—was carried out away from public view, in Driscoll's room or in a lodge on Lake Ozark. Both places become analogues of a home, with the former compared favourably to the house which Stoner shares with his wife which, begrudgingly: “he still had to call his “home”” (199), and the latter was where Driscoll deposited a “wedding band she had worn [... wedging] it in a crevice between the wall and the fireplace” (206). Paraphrasing Merve Emre, to believe in this abstract love is to indulge in the avoidance of material realities, imagining love as existing in a different time and space.

As Maggie Doherty points out, the world depicted in *Stoner* is a “vanished world”. Both Stoner and Lomax exploited the institutional power of professionalization but that power in large part existed because of the legitimacy conferred from the public demand for a humanities education as measured in student enrolment. In today's context, where the enrolment in the humanities is in decline to the point of crisis, professional justifications centred around developing ‘transferable skills’ offers faint hope and often comes with an air of desperation. Instead, the emphasis on love as a central theme of *Stoner* in secondary responses to the novel appeals to the private hope that one might gain access to a community of scholars, one that is mediated through texts. This allows one to imagine the potential of reaching beyond one's immediate time and space. But the abstractness that lends this love its universalizing potential also weakens its ability to address the specific circumstances which

might bring it into reality. Thus, while secondary criticism praises the love which Stoner embodies, they are also melancholic about the prospects of fostering this love in academia today. In the next section, I discuss how this sense of sadness is threaded into Williams' prose style.

You Can Always Count On a Serious Writer For a Plain Prose Style

At the same time that critics and readers are praising *Stoner* for its treatment of the theme of love, they are often expressing an appreciation of the novel's prose style. In McGahern's introduction, we are informed that the novel is written "in plain prose, which seems able to reflect effortlessly every shade of thought and feeling" (vii). In Adam Foulds' review, he observes that "[Williams'] writing is factual, full of what the American poet Wallace Stevens called "the plain sense of things", a kind of steady, stoical reckoning with reality" ("Stoner, By John Williams"). Williams himself has delivered lectures on the varieties of literary styles, even going so far as to express his preference for what he called "the plain style" (Wakefield 10). The advantages of this 'plain style' are enumerated in Dan Wakefield's profile on John Williams, in which he quotes The American College Dictionary's definition of 'plain'. Some choice definitions include: "conveying meaning clearly and simply", "free from ambiguity or evasion", and "without special pretensions, superiority" (9). But what does it mean for a novel to be praised for its plainness? More specifically, in the case of *Stoner*, a campus novel in which the value of and passion for reading is a major theme, how does Williams' 'plain style' affect our understanding of the novel's message?

In contrast to previous sections where a lot of the reception to *Stoner* emphasizes the difficulty of academic work (Jeff Frank's "Love and Work") or lament the loss of

professional autonomy due to changing material conditions (Maggie Doherty's "Vanished World"), the plain style of the novel is said to be a source of pleasure and, potentially, of transformative change. The connections that lead from text to pleasure and transformative change can be traced in the way that McGahern links Williams' comments about academia's reading practices to the qualities of writing in *Stoner*. In an interview, Williams complains that students were being taught literature "as if a novel or poem is something to be *studied* and *understood* rather than *experienced*" (xiii). In the interview, Williams later responds to a question of whether literature should be entertaining by saying: "Absolutely. My God, to read without joy is stupid" (xiii). The value judgment that Williams makes here about reading practices that do not admit pleasure places him firmly within the camp of the "non-professional critics" or gentlemen amateurs. Using Michael Warner's archetype to characterise Williams' values helps us to situate a couple of things. Firstly, it establishes a historical context, Warner's essay shows that debates about the values of professional and non-professional reading practices were an active and contested affair in the period from 1875 – 1900. Past 1900, much of the ethic behind the practices of "professional critics" became dominant, including the idea that competent literary critics should resemble men of "scientific training" ("Rewards" 3), which is to say, dispassionate and methodical. Secondly, tracing this historical context provides a new way of interpreting current debates about academic style. Much of the contemporary discourse on academic style centers around accessibility and audience. There is this notion that if the humanities can be said to address humanity in general, then it would be undemocratic for the knowledge that it produces to be inaccessible to people who are not already familiar with its esoteric language. On the other hand, proponents of academic styles that are not immediately accessible to the general public argue that different stylistic structures allow for a broader range of expression that is crucial to the specificity and innovation of pioneering academic work. Eric Hayot articulates the

latter sentiment this way: “Why shouldn’t the open productivity of the literary—its astonishing, dynamic, and reproductive capacities in the realms of imagination, feeling, though, and aesthetics—be thought of as a feature of scholarship itself?” (68). This articulation seems in direct opposition to the celebration of *Stoner*’s plain style. While Hayot argues for academic styles that might be inaccessible to the public as enabling intellectual diversity and dynamism, *Stoner*’s plain style marks the novel with a universalism that contradicts its paean to academic work. Perhaps Anthony Domestico’s exhortation to resist spoiling the novel by applying criticism proves to be more prescient than anyone realised.

Style, then, is a result of interactions between a whole host of factors including the audience that a piece of writing is addressed to and even implicit judgments on different audiences. As Hayot points out, it is hard to miss the implicit charge of elitism in this quote about academic style: “If we thought more like carpenters, academic writers could find a route out of the trap of ego and vanity”.¹⁸ Academic writers should learn the humility of the simple carpenter or indeed of the farmer. It should come as no surprise that in Hayot’s survey of guides to academic writing, at least one should laud the virtues of plainness. Jacques Barzun writes: “I want to lay it down as an axiom that the best tone is the tone called plain, unaffected, unadorned” (Hayot 55). Hayot argues that this push for plainness and clarity is derived from strains of “antiintellectual, antihumanistic discourse that drives much popular discussion of the American university” (67). If this is right, then it poses serious questions about how affirming to literary studies and humanities *Stoner* and its positive reception in recent years really is.

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¹⁸ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Dancing with Professors: The Trouble with Academic Prose,” *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York, 2001), pp. 340. (Quoted in Hayot 53)

Certainly, Williams' emphasis on reading as a pleasurable experience rather than something to be understood intellectually will find him allies in anti-intellectual camps today. However, Hayot's essay's bloated list of writers of academic writing guides echoing similar sentiments should give us pause—among these writers, many of whom are academics themselves, at least some of them must have considered the anti-intellectual implications of their writing. I agree with Hayot that the lack of calls for accessibility in knowledge of other fields such as engineering or science betrays a prejudice against the humanities. But I also think that accessibility and plain style are an indication of a public making endeavour in the humanities that is absent in science or engineering. Simply put, academic studies in science and engineering do not address a public of general humanity or even a reading public but of specialists or interested amateurs. Now, Hayot and others like him have pointed out that this should be the case for academic studies in the humanities as well. While this is true, it also leaves out the fact that many people working in the humanities consider their work to be transformative.

The word 'transformative' should be understood here as being akin to spiritual conversion. We have already seen how *Stoner* dramatizes this transformative effect of studying literature in the way Stoner is described to see the world differently and feels a fraternity with the students around him after he experiences an epiphany while contemplating a Shakespeare sonnet. But this transformative effect goes beyond the fictional boundaries of the novel. When Williams describes literature as something to be experienced rather than understood, he also adds that literature is "an escape into reality" (xiii). Williams' comment suggests that just as Stoner's contemplation of literature transforms his relations to the world and the people around him, so too is the reader of literature transformed in a way that puts them more in touch with reality. McGahern offers another transformative possibility when he writes that "[*Stoner*] is distanced [from Williams' generation] no only by this clarity and

intelligence but by the way the often unpromising material is so coolly dramatized” (xiii). For McGahern, literature is able to turn the “unpromising material” of mundane life into meaningful drama and while he does not explicitly make the suggestion, his comments strongly suggest that readers are then able to better discern meaning in their own mundane lives. These transformative possibilities of literature are not contained to panegyrics of *Stoner* though. In fact, one major argument that Hayot makes against plain academic prose is the possibility for difficult or obscure prose to be transformative:

If I love academic writing as a whole—if it sends me to heights of happiness and despair—it is for the simplest and most selfish of reasons, which is that it has so often filled me with happiness, with desire, with a sense of direction and companionship, and sometimes with a feeling of immense creative power. But I know, beyond the self, for I have seen it in two decades of teaching and learning from others, including others I only know through the written word, that a self-chosen apprenticeship in academic prose can be transformative, that others I know and don’t know, faculty and students, have been not only stymied and frustrated but also expanded, glorified, and changed by their passage through the demands and possibilities of the writerly disciplines that govern scholarship in the humanities today. (66)

Quoting Hayot at length here is important as it underscores multiple similarities with *Stoner* and its reception. Namely, the use of love as a concept that justifies personal affective responses to rational, intellectual work, an evocation of a community of scholars mediated through texts (“others I know only through the written word”), and the appeal to a professional ethic that transformatively shapes its practitioners into better people (“expanded, glorified, and changed by their passage through the demands and possibilities of the writerly disciplines”).

Though the two contrasting approaches to writing style is engendered from differences in the kinds of audiences they are trying to reach, their similar commitment to the transformative potential of texts means that they imagine texts addressing readers as potential converts. Which is to say that both approaches engage in public making. But unlike many other forms of addresses “which specify in advance, in countless highly condensed ways, the lifeworld of its circulation” (“Publics and Counterpublics” 82), the transformative effect of literary address holds out the promise that its audience is not specified in advance. This is obvious in the case of plain style where the notion of clarity implies an ability to reach anyone. Even for those like Hayot who argue for the unique expressivity of inaccessible prose styles, there is the assumption that if one put in the work, one will inevitably be “expanded, glorified, and changed” by meeting the demands of difficult writing. At root, literary address places a supreme faith in the text’s ability to form a public. One finds evidence of this faith in defences of the humanities, particularly in those whose argument revolves around the lack of external justifications for the humanities. Take, for instance, Justin Stover, writing for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

The humanities have always been, just as their critics complain, self-contained, self-referential, and self-serving [... Yet, those who] believed in the humanities and knew from experience that the disciplines would bring students above the categories of nation, vocation, and time to become members of a class constrained by no such boundaries. (“There is No Case for the Humanities”)

Stover’s essay displays the same faith Kant placed in the “public of the reading world” to transcend the parochial concerns of any one individual. This faith exerts a subterranean influence on all literary styles whether plain or inaccessible.

Consider the peculiar way in which praise for *Stoner* is often tied to its modes of circulation and to the value of reading and higher education. The novelist Julian Barnes called it a “true “reader’s novel” in the sense that its narrative reinforces the very value of reading and study” (“*Stoner*: Must Read Novel of 2013”). Barnes describes his own reading experience of the novel which underpins how integral the idea of an illimitable reading public is to the value of reading and study:

And the first page lead to the second, and then what happened was that joyful internal word-of-mouth that sends a reader hurrying from one page to the next; which in turn leads to external word-of-mouth, the pressing of the book on friends, the ordering and sending of copies. (“*Stoner*”)

The public-forming impulse is so strong that Barnes understands his personal experience of being won over by the novel as an “internal word-of-mouth”, that is, he understands a change in his private opinion as the growth of a public community encompassed entirely in this mind.

Barnes is not alone in describing this effect that the novel has of compelling its circulation apart from how it has performed commercially. Mel Livatino writes about how a supervisor tearfully tried to tell him about *Stoner*:

At this point my former professor’s eyes welled up with tears, and he could say nothing more. When he spoke again, this man, whom I had known as a rigorous critic, could only bring himself to say: “I hope that you will read this novel”. (417)

Dan Wakefield describes how hearing the novel read aloud turned him into a convert,

The passages read were so eloquent, so moving in their understated passion, that I rushed out after the lecture, bought the book, and spent the rest of the day reading it. (10)

The frequency of these anecdotes in responses to *Stoner*, particularly when they emphasize the value of reading or the study of the humanities, suggests an intimacy to the modes of transmission of knowledge and education. But, even as this intimacy is corroborated by the novel's transmission from one reader to another and the narrative of Stoner's brief love affair with Driscoll, the attendant sense of sadness that critics report speaks to a breakdown in the communicative effectiveness of Williams' plain style. Insofar as the transformative effect of literary writing is conceived as the formation of a public based on a text's ability to foment personal change, *Stoner* might be said to be successful. But the irony of the situation is that this limited success might prove to be the extent of the novel's accomplishments, there is no "escape into reality" that Williams hoped, which is to say the novel never manages to escape the forms of circulation that positions it as having a personal significance for readers but not a public one.

Conclusion

The gulf between the public and private significance of a liberal education and of campus novels has been explored from different perspectives in this chapter. From the ways in which professionalization draws upon a Kantian heritage that associated disinterestedness with a reading public, to the doubling down on the rhetoric of love which provided a means of self-justification while narrowing the scope of humanities to the private realm, to the empty hope inherent in literary styles of writing that seek to form publics but cling on to sentimental modes of textual circulation. Through the juxtaposition of these perspectives and

the different ways that critics, writers, and even John Williams have read *Stoner*, the chapter demonstrates the way these perspectives condense the changing conditions of working in academia to generate readings of the novel that often lie outside of institutional reading practices.

However, these issues were not merely contained to the ways which we read campus fiction. As *Stoner* was being rediscovered as a forgotten example of a ‘Great American Novel’, turning the fictional University of Missouri into the repository of nostalgia and hope for what the work of academia could be, the actual University of Missouri (MU) was experiencing a crisis. In September of 2015, following years of mounting racial tension, students of MU organized protests over the lack of action taken to address racism in the university. As part of the protests, students occupied the campus quadrangle to call for the resignation of the university’s president. The protests attracted local and national media which descended onto campus. There was an uneasy standoff between the student protestors and media, students were wary of the media attention especially since their protests were in part a response to the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the discourse about racism in America reached a fever pitch and while the students were making a public statement, many of them were uncomfortable being in the media spotlight.¹⁹ When the news of the university president resigning spread, that uneasy standoff threatened to devolve into chaos, some students reportedly felt that they were in harm’s way or felt hounded by media.²⁰ Several members of the media attempted to enter the encampment that the student protestors built and in response some faculty members and students formed a human chain trying to keep them out.

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¹⁹ <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-missouri-hunger-striker-20151110-story.html>

²⁰ <https://www.chronicle.com/article/When-Does-a-Student-Affairs/237069>

In two separate incidents, communications professor Melissa Click and senior associate director of student life Janna Basler, were recorded attempting to prevent student journalists from entering the encampment. The video showed Ms. Basler physically blocking a student photojournalist and professor Click lightly swatting at a camera recording the incident.²¹ The video of the incidents went viral resulting in professor Click being fired and Ms. Basler was placed on administrative leave while the backlash blew over. In the aftermath, the arguments for and against what happened to professor Click and Ms. Basler often revolve around the public and private roles of the university and faculty. In a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, “When Does a Student-Affairs Officer Cross the Line”, student affairs administrators expressed different views about how to handle student protests, with one administrator saying: “You have to put your personal views aside, because you have a job to do [...] The state’s not paying you to go out and protest for them or against them”. This unwillingness to deal with the complicated and sometimes conflicting personal and institutional interests of university administrators, and the insistence on a clear separation between the personal and the professional is continued in the firing of professor Click. In the American Association of University Professors report on professor Click’s firing, they argue that there was indications of “political pressure”, citing letters released by more than one hundred Republican State legislators which stated:

The public spotlight that is now shining on Click because of her behavior has also revealed some of the ‘research’ she is conducting at the University. Our constituents have expressed outrage at the fact that she is using taxpayer dollars to conduct research on *50 Shades of Grey*, Lady Gaga, and *Twilight*. While we recognize that there may be some value in pop culture studies, her

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²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1S3yMzEee18>

behavior has the public questioning her ‘research’ and her unacceptable actions during the protest.

The motivation behind the antipathy towards professor Click’s unacceptable public behaviour and her research in pop culture is made clearer in a follow up op-ed written by one David L. Steelman who argued that this was all evidence of “narcissism, the desire to look only inward, and to worry more about the perks and privileges of faculty” (“Academic”). In short, the university has lost its way by focussing exclusively on the personal and private motivations of the people in it.

The rhetorical strategy of reducing “unacceptable” behaviour to the realm of the private works in the favour of a neoliberalist belief in the possibility of a disinterested, objective public opinion. This strategy proves useful as it facilitates the use of metaphors of domesticity and infantilization (see “The Coddling of the American Mind”). The educational paradigm that pays attention to the personal needs of students and faculty are ‘domesticated’ and deemed inferior to the paradigm of the unforgiving world of the marketplace of ideas, where competition ensures the best accounts of truth.

This chapter considers some of the mythological functions that make up the figure of the academic: the competing impulses of professionalization and amateurism, the passion or love that an academic has for their subject, and the transformative potential of study imagined in the form of textual circulation. Put up against the realities in MU, however, and all these functions seem to fall apart or turn against the academic. But even as the public scrutiny withered these myths, the events at MU prompts us to consider alternative forms of imagining the transformative value of higher education, one that focuses less on textual transmission and more on bodies in action. For instance, professor Marcia Chatelain, alumnus of MU, writes about how her education not only comprised of discovering “feminism and

theories of oppression” but also getting organised in student movements. She “found student activism, intellectual pursuits, and beloved community”. This is not to suggest that student activism is an essential component of higher education but that seeing that education at work in motivating action is important in community building. This is echoed in Curtis M. Taylor’s response to Ms. Basler’s involvement in the MU controversy. Mr. Taylor, who identifies as a gay person of colour, works as an assistant director of multicultural organisations and programming at Creighton University, told the *Chronicle* that even if Ms. Basler’s actions crossed a line that day, “she still taught Mizzou’s student activists something: “Even people who don’t look like me are here for me”” (“When Does...”).

To put this another way, in a surprising moment of lucidity from Stoner, he says: “So we are of the world, after all; we should have known that. We did know it, I believe; but we had to withdraw a little, pretend a little, so that we could—” (215). This quote occurs in proximity to other more well-quoted lines about love but has been ignored by the people who have read *Stoner*. In it, Stoner acknowledges inextricability of the private from the public and his aporia suggests a recognition that their retreat into the privacy they carved out for themselves ultimately did not allow them to do much. Theirs was a transient community built upon the premise of excluding the world mediated through their love of the texts they studied and the inscription of their mutual love in each other’s bodies as texts. But these texts could never have been read by the world of the reading public as disembodied intellects, the world reads by imposing meaning, as Lomax demonstrated when he feigned concern over a scandalized middle-class morality, as embodied beings. To make a case for the humanities, therefore, requires a shift towards an acknowledgment of its potential to build communities in action.

Chapter 2: Dear Committee Members

Julie Schumacher's epistolary novel *Dear Committee Members* (2015) received enthusiastic praise from readers both inside and outside of academia. The novel, composed entirely of letters of recommendation written by protagonist Jason Fitger, even won the Thurber prize for American humour, the first time that the award was given to a female writer. The effusive praise which the novel received is noteworthy given that, as we saw in the previous chapter, higher education and particularly the humanities faced challenges ranging from a fall in enrolment, lack of funding, to wider cultural debates on the role of universities in issues such as freedom of speech. An academic satire written entirely in a form that the author admits encourages writing that is "awfully dull" ("Gristmill"), while attempting to resuscitate the increasingly outmoded genres of the epistolary novel and academic satire seemed an unlikely candidate for critical and commercial success. Yet, that is precisely what *Dear Committee Members* turned out to be.

Three years after the novel's publication, Andrew Kay offers more context for *DCM*'s surprising success. For Kay, the golden age of academic satire spanned the years between "the 1990s and the very early 2000s" ("The Joke's Over"). During that time, the relative fortunes and cultural esteem of the humanities and English departments could still sustain mythical figures such as the "theory-brandishing rock star" which invited a satirist's mocking pen. But then "academe's devastation since the late 1990s has rendered it too grim and vulnerable a target of satirists" and the genre went into hibernation. Into this state of affairs arrives Schumacher's *DCM*, but with one crucial difference. *DCM* wielded its satire not to deflate the excesses of academe; instead the novel is an example of what communications professor Heather LaMarre calls 'Horatian satire' distinguished by its ability to dispense "ridicule that contains within itself the possibility of forgiveness, of reconciliation" ("Joke's Over"). Kay believes this possibility of redemption is the reason why *DCM* is so well-

received. The critical edge of satire is wielded with “mercy and generosity of vision” such that “even as it mocks”, it is rescued from “replicating the very smugness and narcissism it critiques” (“Joke’s Over”).

Standing in stark contrast to Kay’s optimism is Merve Emre and Jessica Gross’ “chat” about the novel in *The Awl*. Emre, in particular, has a bone to pick about the bromides the novel offers about the redemptive power of reading and writing; she explains: “Schumacher seems to want her fiction to perform the kind of ethical work that Fitger wants to claim for fiction at large. Unfortunately, the prose simply can’t carry the weight of the novel’s ethical ambitions” (“The Fall of the Humanities”). Certainly, it is unlikely that Schumacher’s novel can be expected to live up to Andrew Kay’s lofty aspirations for it, “cutting through the bitter partisan divide and using the power of enjoyment as a heuristic cue in the persuasion process” (“Joke’s Over”), no matter how potent its satire. However, in calling attention to the novel’s persuasive potential, Kay unwittingly touches upon an overlooked aspect of the epistolary form. Namely, as Sabina Vaught and Gabrielle Hernandez point out: “the epistolary genre is foundational to publics, as letters are the originary site of public and counterpublic knowledge production” (460).

Vaught and Hernandez’s essay, “To Whom It May Concern: Epistolary political philosophies and the production of racial counterpublic knowledge in the United States”, explores the ways in which the political prison letter genre poses a challenge to dominant state-sanctioned knowledge production by establishing a counterpublic that asserts its legitimacy while highlighting its production in a “liminalized” (461) site of knowledge production. Vaught and Hernandez’s approach provides a starting point for this chapter’s exploration of Schumacher’s *DCM* as an epistolary novel about academic satire. This path unsurprisingly is marked by contradiction. Schools and the institution of academia are *de facto* sites of knowledge production. Yet, as Vaught and Hernandez show, when state

education enters into the public sphere, it necessarily becomes open to “counter processes” and to the possibility of “sites of knowledge production [becoming] liminalized” (461).

DCM’s formal conceit of being composed entirely of letters of recommendation dramatizes the conflicting pressures that face the university as a site of knowledge production today. The repetitious and homogenizing nature of the letter of recommendation lays bare the dehumanizing logic of regarding people as human resources, yet these same letters also disguise that fact in their personalized address of individuals. The use of the epistolary form prompts the consideration of the university as a site of both public and counterpublic knowledge production. But it also prompts a comparative analysis of the forgotten genre of the letter series in American mass magazines. Daniel A. Clark in *Creating the College Man* writes about how these letter series, usually featuring an authority figure writing letters to someone attending or considering college education, “acted as gatekeepers and tutors” to the emerging middle-class readers who “wanted to be both taught and to be addressed as knowing” (18) the culture and values that would allow them to successfully navigate the nascent corporatized world.

This chapter seeks to establish a continuity between *DCM* and these magazine letter series about attending college.

The College Man at Home in the World

Julie Schumacher’s *DCM* follows the character of Jason Fitger through a year’s worth of correspondence that he writes in his capacity as a creative writing professor. The novel does not reveal any replies to Fitger’s letters, though often a reader is able to surmise from Fitger’s later letters what those replies might have contained. Readers are thus immersed in a

single perspective that can feel constrainedly solipsistic, as Jessica Gross points out, “this is a first-person point of view in a straitjacket. I found myself wishing repeatedly for reply letters” (“Fall of Humanities”). Gross’ metaphor evokes a reading experience that is characterised by a sense of physical constraint, isolation, and hints of a pathological mental derangement. If letters are truly the originary site of public knowledge production, as Vaught and Hernandez contend, then *DCM*’s inability to contend with perspectives other than Fitger’s seem to mark it as a failure. In fact, Schumacher’s novel seems to be proof of many criticisms about the humanities and college education, that it is elitist, self-indulgent, and bears little or no relevance to the conduct of life outside academia.

Given these criticisms it would be surprising to learn that at around the turn of the twentieth century when college education faced a similar public relations problem, part of the effort to change public perception were fictional serialized letters in which advice about going to college started to populate mass market magazines. Daniel A. Clark’s *Creating the College Man* traces the ways in which American mass magazines played a crucial role in selling the idea of college education as a replacement for the “hard-knock lessons struggling up from the bottom” (11) narrative that defined an ideal manhood encapsulated in the figure of the self-made man.

Clark’s book goes into detail about how representations of the college education experience appearing in magazines helped turn public opinion from one that dismissed college education as unnecessary and even antithetical to kinds of labour and challenges that American men needed to face and overcome in order to be successful. As Clark puts it, “the dominant idea of success in the nineteenth century—the autonomous, self-made man—was based around an economic world of small farmers and businessmen, as one scholar termed it, “traditional entrepreneurial individualism”” (4). Coming up to the twentieth century, however, Americans found themselves in a different economic world. One in which small

businesses gave way to larger corporations and the traditional routes of success no longer proved viable. Corporations simply did not have viable paths of ascension from their bottom rungs. Furthermore, the growing movement of women agitating for a political voice meant an increase in women entering the workforce which, along with other factors, threatened the masculinity of the self-made man. All this meant that ,culturally, the decline of the self-made man as a legitimate myth around which visions of success could be oriented, left a void that needed to be filled. The building up of college education as something to fill that void became a task that was taken up by magazines. Through the representations of the college education experience magazines sought to establish a continuity between the self-made man and the new collegiate man which condensed cultural acuity, hypermasculinity signified through participation in competitive sports, and an authority earned through success in ‘meritocratic’ academic systems.

Mass magazines were an important medium to transmit this reconstructed vision of ideal manhood to Americans due to their wide readership becoming, Clark argues, “the nation’s first truly national media” (10). The magazines employed various means to promote the college education experience, including editorials, serialized fictional stories that involved characters going to college or whose college education helped them achieve success, and advertisements that drew on the appeal in the changing perception of college to sell clothes or products. Particularly important to our discussion of *DCM*, however, is the genre of serialized letters about college education. Clark writes that “no magazine articles captured the profound generational angst, the question of how to prepare young men for a changing world, better than the [*Sunday Evening Post*] series “Letters from a Self-Made Merchant to His Son”” (10). The series was written anonymously by *Post* editor George Horace Lorimer and proved to be so popular that they were later republished as a collection. The letter series are written from the perspective of John “Old Gorgon” Graham to his son. The fictional Graham was the

owner of a Chicago pork packing firm that he had built up from scratch. Lorimer, writing in the voice of Graham, used the letters to address various social issues, but “significantly, the overarching issue Lorimer wished to confront—the most alarming one to him that surpassed all other concerns—was the passing of the torch from the self-made men to their more privileged sons, and through this issue, the greater problem of fashioning leadership, manhood, and success for a new industrial and commercial age” (11).

The “Letters” series bridged the gap between the paradigms of the self-made man and the collegiate gentleman by staging the transition as a literal generational change from father to son. Shifting the larger social and cultural issue into the realm of paternal advice reaffirms individual autonomy over considerations of societal structures. Instead of grappling with the new realities of the changing economic world as a societal issue, the forging of a new ideal manhood centered around the college experience places the burden on individuals to navigate these changing conditions. This has the effect of preserving the myth of meritocracy. As Clark shows in his book, the rehabilitation of the college experience in American culture was dependent on replacing in people’s minds the prejudice that a college education filled a young man’s mind with an inflated sense of self, emasculated him, and taught him nothing of practical applicability. Clark quotes a writer for the *Post* who warned that “much of [a student’s] time in college has been wasted in acquiring useless learning; that the dead languages which he has taken so much pains to acquire are not of the slightest help to him in buying, selling, or in the making of common records” (26). It was also common in the latter years of the nineteenth century for college men to be labelled “girlie, effeminate, and overcivilized” (35). But this negative stereotype of college men also meant that it could be reclaimed by a masculine effort that emphasized hard work, fraternalization, and the rugged masculinity of college athletics. This helped to establish the college experience as a

meritocracy. Sons of wealthy businessmen sent to college had to earn their stripes just like their self-made forebears.

The “Letters” series, in its conceit of offering advice to Pierrepont, ensured a sense of continuity from the self-made man to the collegiate gentlemen but in its domesticizing of generational masculine anxieties, it also signalled an important turn in the way higher education was positioned in the American consciousness. “Letters from a Self-Made Merchant to His Son” was only the most popular in the genre of advice articles in magazines at the turn of the twentieth century; the *Post* also ran “Talks with a Kid Brother at College” in which an older brother already established in the business world advises his younger brother on how the college experience would help him prepare for future battles in business. Alongside these advice columns ran fictional accounts of college life such as Charles Macomb Flandrau’s “The Diary of a Harvard Freshman” (Clark 197). Though Clark points to the proliferation of these articles and fiction in magazines to argue that these magazines actively created a new ideal of American manhood centered on the college experience, one thing he overlooks in his argument is how these articles addressed a new readership and brought about changes in public reading practices.

The numerous examples of advice columns appropriating forms of personal or private correspondence marks a significant shift in the conception of the relationship between the individual and society. Clark remarks on the growing importance of mass magazines as a medium of cultural transmission for the emerging middle class and notes that these magazines mediated the need to attain cultural markers that signified legitimate claims to wealth and a consumerism that was able to fulfil that need. The juxtaposition of editorial disguised as familial advice, fiction that pumped up the college experience as a path to ideal manhood and business success, and advertisements that appealed to collegiate associations to athletic masculinity and cultural sophistication, worked to give readers the sense that the

benefits of the college experience was a consumer decision that families faced. Clark's argument—putting aside concerns of being too reductive—can be summarized in the idea that mass magazines sold the college experience as a viable and in fact the most efficient path to commercial success to the American public. But what is overlooked is that the way the college experience is sold to the American public opened the door to the college experience being brought into the home.

Vaught and Hernandez argued that letters were the originary site of public and counterpublic knowledge production. Their work considers the genre of political prison letters written by Black American writers like Martin Luther King Jr. and George Jackson as powerful documents that resisted state and public forms of knowledge production by performing their legitimate authority as intellectuals from within a site of repression. Though the fictional letters of John Gordon to his son does not carry the same political urgency nor does it give voice to the repressed, I contend that the “Letters” series nonetheless appropriates this counterpublic forming potential of the epistolary to reconfigure the domestic household as an alternative site of knowledge production. It must be acknowledged here that this is not an argument by analogy. King and Jackson's letters drew on their legitimate claims as intellectuals to make a powerful statement on the repressive forces of the state marginalizing their voices. Gordon's letters by contrast draws on the cultural figure of the self-made man and the knowledge that he peddles is one of economic and business savvy.

To observe the appropriation of the epistolary form in forming a counterpublic site of knowledge production, is to note the depths to which the ethic and eventual goal of economic reward of the self-made man became embedded in the concept of the college experience and education. This is seen most clearly in the rise products which purport to bring college learning into homes such as the ‘Everyman Library’, an ostensibly comprehensive collection of the “World's Best Literature” (Clark 39), in a relatively compact forty-six volumes. The

historical entanglement of capitalism and the college experience and education in America was abetted by the appropriation of personal and private forms of communication such as the epistolary. The “Letters” series welded the legitimacy of a traditional ‘hard-knock’ education embodied by John Gordon to the college experience and education, it modelled an idealized familial relationship that readers were meant to imitate.

By contrast, the letters of recommendation in Julie Schumacher’s *DCM* are filled with Fitger’s inappropriate digressions—a gratuitous confession of Fitger’s own marital infidelity in a letter recommending a former student to a seminary—such that they can be read as instructive of how *not* to write a letter of recommendation. Taken as a whole, Fitger’s correspondence confirms the negative stereotypes about college experience and education that the “Letters” series worked so hard to dispel. But to what end could these seemingly juvenile jabs by a ‘bad’ actor serve? Reading as imitation was not a practice that was limited to the reading of magazines that painted a picture of idealized manhood. Indeed, around the time that John Gordon was writing letters to Pierrepont about college athletes and sterling examples of college graduates he should emulate, ladies culture clubs were reading works of literature in an effort to engage in “self-acculturation and community formation through shared scenes of literary discourse” (*Paraliterary* 25). These ladies literature clubs similarly conceived their activities of engaging in literary discourse as enabling the work of “the university [to take place] in our homes” (*Paraliterary* 25). Merve Emre sees these “self-organised groups” as representing “a middle way for social engagement that transcended the privacy of the domestic sphere but stopped short of full-on political mobilization” (*Paraliterary* 25). Ladies culture clubs, the “Letters” series, and mass magazines, transformed the domestic site of the home into a counterpublic site of knowledge production but it was one which offered limited autonomy to effect real change. They imbued private communication with a sense of public import.

In tracing a continuity between the letters of John Gordon to his son and Jason Fitger's letters of recommendation, we traverse a span of time over a century apart. Yet, the leap between time periods offers an important reading of Fitger. Merve Emre urges scholars to heed Anthony Giddens' observation that social systems tend to 'stretch' across time and space and to pay attention to "knowledgeable human agents" of change or reproduction of those systems (*Paraliterary* 52-53). Jason Fitger's status as a professor of creative writing places him squarely within the institutions of knowledge production. The college experience and education have been leveraged, through the elevation of private experiences to public cultural import, to perpetuate the entanglement of capitalism to education. Fitger's actions as a bad actor within this institution; the refusal to conform to the professional etiquette which the letter of recommendation demands, the insertion of personal and private details into professional and public correspondence. These gestures disrupt the smooth perpetuation of the college experience myth. In its insistence on a claustrophobic narrative perspective, it forecloses any allusions to the possibility of genuine counterpublic potential.

A significant function of the counterpublic is the legitimacy it commands *in spite of* processes of delegitimization through strategic appropriation. For Martin Luther King Jr., this meant invoking religious authority as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in the 'Letters' series the mythic figure of the self-made man lent credibility to the collegiate man, and ladies literature clubs evoked classrooms and shared in the aura of invited speakers like Henry James. In each case, an individual speaking with institutional authority gestures towards a new configuration of a gathering of people. In *DCM*, this effect is reversed. The legitimacy of higher education and the Humanities in particular, as preparatory to professional work is eroded precisely because of the repetitious wielding of its authority. Fitger contemplates the weight of this authority when he estimates that he has "penned more than 1300 letters of recommendation" and when he equates these letters to the

“thousands of lives for which [he] often finds [himself] feeling accountable” (Schumacher 38). Here, *DCM* acknowledges the importance of texts (letters of recommendation, certification, etc) in the functioning higher education. The interchangeability of letters of recommendation and students’ lives is, of course, an exaggeration but it is also representative of the capitalist logic of reducing humanity to the output of its labour. The banality of this metaphor and the sheer repetition of letters of recommendation in the novel emphasizes the absurdity of the idea that higher education should prepare students for a career outside of academia.

This confrontation with the dehumanising logic of capitalism and the drudgery of the bureaucratic labour that sustains it forms the moral thesis of Schumacher’s novel. As Fitger expounds in one of his letters: “The reading and writing of fiction both requires and instills empathy—the insertion of oneself into the life of another” (38). This is expanded upon in the conclusion of the novel when Fitger writes to his ex-wife: “You and I are both in the business of believing in, and promoting, things that don’t yet exist. The leap of faith: it’s equal parts wishful thinking, vicarious ambition, and bullshit, and yet...” (179). The romantic sentiment espoused by Fitger suggests a vision of a brighter future predicated upon an empathetic connection to others. Yet, unlike Stoner who saw in the university the possibility for a genuine counterpublic, Fitger is entrenched within a bureaucratic system that suffocates any possibility of that happening.

In the end, the inefficacy of Fitger’s gestures of resistance is itself a damning critique of liberal education’s purported ability to allow individuals to escape locality to address the public at large. The dream of the *World’s* best literature sitting comfortably on the shelves of a home library can only ever amount to a false and illusory public.

Complaint as Resistance

The genre of academic fiction has long grappled with academia's relationship to capitalism. We have seen how the idea of higher education as a path to a successful career not only served as a means justifying the transfer of wealth from generation to generation but also created a sense of public engagement from private action. More recently, academic fiction is predominantly concerned with the way that universities have compromised their pedagogical and intellectual principles by their capitulation to the demands of capitalism. Yet, as Christopher Findeisen points out in his essay on sports campus novels, academic fiction has been disappointing in their attempt to articulate a resistance to capitalism in higher education. He writes:

This is why perhaps our richest form of representing the inequities of higher education—academic fiction—is so often committed to discursively framing its resistance to one form of commercialism while, at the same time, being deeply committed to a politics that legitimates a different form of commercialism altogether—a commercialism that is not hostile to, but rather totally consistent with, the dominant social and economic order. (Findeisen 78)

In other words, the identification of commercial interests predominating higher education is an inadequate diagnosis of the problems plaguing universities. Findeisen shows that sports campus novels all too often demonize money as a corrupting influence in academia, implicitly arguing that the removal of money as a concern in academia would cure it of its ills. This logic can lead readers to problematic conclusions, especially when it appears in the context of campus novels that revolve around athletic competition. In brief, sports campus

novels presenting money as the problem risk legitimising competition as a natural state of society and that human worth can be determined through competition.

In fact, the attraction of this reading of academic fiction as espousing a return to ‘pure’ competition extends beyond sports campus novels to novels that have little to do with competition at all. In 2017, Eli Wald, a professor of Law, wrote an 87 page long analysis on John Williams’ *Stoner*. In a move that would have appalled John Williams, Wald submits that traditional readings of the novel, which tends to consider Stoner as a heroic figure that embodied the value of hard work, fails to account for Stoner’s ineptitude in utilizing his social capital. In Wald’s own words, Stoner is a “victim of his limited knowhow, relationships, and financial resources, that is, of his limited endowments of cultural, social, and economic capital” (4). The failure of academic fiction to present a real resistance to dominant social and economic orders that Findeisen warns of, is in full display in Wald’s reading of *Stoner*. Rather than prompting a critical examination of the encroaching professionalization of the university and its ties to capitalism, Wald instead urges readers to expand their definitions of capital to include more than just economics. In a stunning confirmation of Findeisen’s thesis and Williams’ worst fears of utilitarianism in study, Wald encourages readers to think of “hobbies, languages, literature, music, and travel, not to mention self-esteem” as “cultural capital assets” (85). The economization of human “relationships, communities, and networks” (85) speaks to the pervasive way in which commercialism has seeped into the roots of academia and into literary representations of academia.

Findeisen’s assessment of the rampant but subterranean commercialism of higher education which compels the interpretation of all aspects of human life in economic terms provides a useful lens with which to read Julie Schumacher’s *DCM*. The framing device of

letters of recommendation means that *DCM* cannot escape addressing in some way the viewing of human beings in economic terms.

Fitger throughout the novel is, in essence, tasked with the responsibility of communicating to prospective employers the economic, cultural, and social ‘capital assets’ of the people he is writing letters of recommendation for. Within the confines of this formal limitation, Fitger embarks upon a personal crusade to disrupt the bureaucratic processes that these letters play a part in. Often these acts of disruption can be juvenile and petty such as when Fitger complains to a manager of a catering company that the food they served was so greasy it gave him indigestion while recommending a student for a job there. Undoubtedly, it is these moments in the novel (of which there are many) which prompt Jessica Gross’ ire when she surmised that Fitger’s letters are “wish fulfilment” (“Fall”) on Julie Schumacher’s part. Yet, these complaints are not completely frivolous and I would argue that they are more shrewd than they might first appear.

Consider Fitger’s letter to Associate Vice Provost Millhouse (40-43) in which he claims that “the purpose of this letter is to bolster the promotion and tenure case of Professor Martina Ali” (40), but in which he proceeds to splice complaints about the disruptive construction which has forced the English faculty to work in degrading and unhygienic conditions. Interspersed between his actual recommendation of professor Ali, these complaints cannot be dismissed—the bureaucratic process for tenure recommendation requires at least six letters of support and the department is so understaffed that Fitger’s letter *has* to be taken to account (40). Yes, the tactic is unprofessional and likely to come across as childish, but its effectiveness cannot be denied. It does not mean that Fitger managed to change the working conditions of the English faculty but there is a real significance to registering one’s complaint in an official channel that cannot be dismissed easily. To paraphrase Sara Ahmed, when you complain about a problem, you become the location of a

problem. There is a power in wresting control over bureaucratic processes that are designed to dismiss one's opinions and subvert them into paying attention. Fitger's letters might not be written in prose that can "carry the weight of the novel's ethical ambitions" ("Fall") but they model a genuine form of resistance that Findeisen calls for in his essay.

Relatability is a Detestable Word

The campus novel genre has always had a relatability issue. Often writers of campus novels are themselves academics working in the same departments that they depict and there is always the threat of descending into an exercise in narcissistic navel-gazing. Consider the barely submerged pleasure with which Elaine Showalter confesses that she has served as a model for a character in two different campus novels: "Once a voluptuous, promiscuous, drug-addicted bohemian, once as a prudish, dumpy, judgmental frump. I hope that I am not too easily identified in either of these guises [...] although I can tell you that I preferred being cast as the luscious Concord grape to my role as the withered prune" (I). Morris Zapp, the blustering and arrogant professor, that served as a caricature of the confidence and excesses of American universities in David Lodge's campus trilogy is infamously patterned after Stanley Fish. Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* courted controversy over a racially passing protagonist that bore similarities to *New York Times* literary editor, Anatole Broyard, though Roth insists that his friend professor Melvin Tumin was his direct inspiration.

The preponderance of characters drawn from real life in campus novels is so clichéd that it is often the subject of sardonic contemplation. Showalter recalls "Sanford Pinsker, who is American, [speculating that] all English professors are frustrated novelists, attracted to fiction as a neat payback and a fast buck: "Which self-respecting lit professor hasn't thought—either out loud or in private—about knocking off a tale of the assorted troubles at

his or her version of Eyesore U?”” (4). Yet, even as Showalter concedes that “because we professors now live in the age of celebrity, publicity, and fame, being a character in a satiric academic novel, even a nasty one, may be a kind of distinction” (5), nonetheless this aspect of the campus novel is always steeped in the guilt of the “insider’s gossip pleasure” (4). The reputation for self-indulgence, narcissism, and vindictive airing of petty grievances has long been associated with the campus novel genre.

Thus it is not a surprise that *DCM* has been criticised for precisely those things. In Merve Emre and Jessica Gross’ review, when discussing whether the novel’s protagonist Jason Fitger is likeable or relatable, Emre takes the opportunity to rail against the logic of these questions in the context of reading literature. Emre says:

Relatable is just a detestable word. It’s so utterly narcissistic; how does this relate to me? Why should it? And it simply doesn’t say enough about the actual quality of prose. (Dear students: please never use the word “relatable” to describe a character or book.) As for Fitger, I wouldn’t read too much into the weak feeling of “liking” or “not liking” a character, which strikes me as equally underspecified. I think it’s enough to say that Fitger is of a piece with the letters he’s writing: one-dimensional, repetitive, and banal. (“The Fall of the Humanities”)

Emre positions the work of the literary critic and of discerning readers as judgments on the quality of the text, cleaving the professional from the personal. However, this cleavage might not be as easily achieved as Emre suggests.

As we have seen in our analysis of the reception to *Stoner*, the personal affective responses to the novel often intrudes into works of critical literary analysis and in fact, the reading of *Stoner* as a model professional depends upon the conception of professionalism as an authentic personal commitment to the affective, imaginative, and intellectual possibilities

of scholarship. Yet, despite the emphasis on the novel's affective impact there is a notable lack of discussion of Stoner as a relatable character. One could account for this by interpreting Stoner as an ideal figure of authenticity within an increasingly professionalized institution; Stoner's quiet heroism a shining beacon that does not guide one safely to shore, rather a dimming indicator of how far we've lost our way. The relatability of Stoner as a character in this case is more of a moot point as readers do not seek to identify with him, instead his authenticity is a nostalgic possibility all but lost in the current corporatized state of academia.

The question of relatability in the context of *DCM*'s Fitger is illustrative of the novel's significant differences from *Stoner*. Whereas *Stoner* ultimately condemns an institution that increasingly precludes the possibility of authentic scholarship, *DCM* questions the individual's culpability as an actor within that institution. If relatability is to be understood as a desire for personal identification with a character, then the avenues of identification between reader and character are worth analysing, particularly in the genre of the campus novel where those avenues are so inviting to identification yet also fraught with uncertainty. The most lucid and penetrating explanation for this comes from Steven Connor, who writes:

In the case of the campus novel, we may say that there is a simultaneous sense of confidence and uncertainty in [the] structure of address. The campus novel appears to be addressed to an ideal audience constituted by the more generalised experience of higher education, an audience who can be flattered, entertained and reassured by the recognition of a familiar world and by their sense that, after all, the experience of higher education was still available only to a small minority of the population. But it is also addressed to the outsider or non-participant in university life. This is not just a matter of an awareness of (at least) two different kinds of typical reader for the academic novel; it is a sense of the dividedness of

actual readers, who may feel that they both do and do not belong to the academic world through which they may or may not have passed. (73)

Connor asserts that the campus novel is public-forming, to use the parlance of Michael Warner. More specifically, he argues that the public to which campus novels address themselves are unstable, always uncertain of their status as ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’ of the world that these novels depict. This essential ambiguity about the typical reader of campus novels speaks both to the transformative potential aspired by higher education and increasingly also to the precarity of the university as an institution.

In *DCM*, this uncertain structure of address is heightened by the literal addressees of the letters of recommendation. Fitger’s letters are addressed to both people within academia and companies apparently at a great remove from it, such as “Avengers Paintball Inc.” (22) and “Annie’s Nannies Child and Play Center” (37). Furthermore, the novel quickly establishes that these letters might not even be read since they are usually just formalities that grease the wheels of bureaucracy more than they serve to extol the virtues of their candidates. Fitger in a fit of pique digresses in the middle of a letter of recommendation to directly address his ex-wife who sits on the committee: “Janet: I know your committees aren’t reading these blasted LORs—under the influence of our final martini in August you told me as much” (12). The lack of any response letters further exacerbates the feeling of solipsistic futility. While readers are able to surmise that a response has been received and the essence of their content from the tone of some of Fitger’s letters, with most of Fitger’s letters, especially those for non-academic jobs, we are given no indication of their outcome. Of course, it is not expected that one should receive replies to letters of recommendation but the effect of including only Fitger’s letters emphasizes the empathetic feeling of isolation with Fitger as well as reveal the growing disconnection between the work of the university and society.

In a postscript to one of Fitger's letters, he writes: "Belatedly it occurs to me that some members of your HR committee, a few sceptical souls, may be clutching a double strand of worry beads and wondering aloud about the practicality or usefulness of a degree in English rather than, let's say, computers. Be reassured: the literature student has learned to inquire, to question, to interpret, to critique, to compare, to research, to argue, to sift, to analyze, to shape, to express. His intellect can be put to broad use" (98-99). Having written more than "1,300 letters of recommendation" (38), Fitger's postscript is quite belated indeed. In this moment of self-reflection, Fitger reaches towards a common opinion of higher education and makes a comparison between two different disciplines. His rhetoric shifts from the previously articulated transformative effect on students' imagination, empathy, and intelligence to an enumeration of verbs. Fitger adds further that: "The computer major, by contrast, is a technician—a plumber clutching a single, albeit shining, box of tools" (99). Fitger is being uncharitable to 'computer majors' and plumbers but the unflattering comparison here illustrates an old prejudice that separates 'technical' work from 'intellectual' work. Furthermore, the implied universality in application of intellectual skills runs into the very logic of instrumentalization of higher education that Fitger wishes desperately to escape. The "broad use" of intellectual skills, Fitger suggests, is a safer bet for a greater return on investment than the specialized but obsolescent-prone tools of the technician.

What has thus remained unsaid explicitly is that the novel's conceit of being presented in the form of letters of recommendation means that the novel cannot avoid directly addressing the issue of the instrumentalization of higher education. Instrumentalization is closely aligned to the professionalization we discussed in the chapter on *Stoner*. What unites both concepts are how they define value purely in terms of economic contribution. The genre conventions of the letter of recommendation requires its author to condense a person's worth to a list of relevant skills, making empathetic attention a very difficult thing to accomplish.

But more than that letters of recommendation also renders their authors complicit in the instrumentalization of higher education. Professors unable to adequately provide students with an imaginatively, intellectually, and empathetically fulfilling education as teachers, settle by writing documents that certify their capability in providing economically productive labour. Fitger feels this pressure too. Growing increasingly distraught as the novel progresses, he grasps at his identity as a writer of fiction, signing off his correspondence with “Author, *Stain; Alphabetical Stars; Save Me for Later; and Transfer of Affection*” (125), before finally, dejectedly, adopting the sardonic: “Jay Fitger, Winner’s Circle. American Letter of Recommendation Society” (148). To appropriate a concept from Michel Foucault, one might say that Fitger is losing his author-function.

Foucault’s essay “What is an Author?” (1969) finds the philosopher attempting to “characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society” (305) that entails from the term ‘author’. Foucault coins the term ‘author-function’ in order to emphasize the way that the term ‘author’ *does* something to what people attach it to. In saying that a book has an author, we ascribe values of literariness or cultural importance, among other things, to the object and its supposed creator, more than just asserting a referent. Foucault elaborates: “we can say that in our culture, the name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others: a private letter may have a signatory, but it does not have an author” (305). Thus, when I said earlier that Fitger is losing his author-function, signified by his alteration to his valediction, it does not merely mean that he is no longer a writer of novels, it is also a reading that authorship as constructed in the novel can no longer exist.

As previously stated, *DCM*’s moral thesis is that “the reading and writing of fiction both requires and instills empathy—the insertion of oneself into the life of another” (38). Fitger losing his capacity to serve as an author-function condemns him to merely a function

of an institution, writing endless letters of recommendation. In this light, *DCM*'s conclusion where Fitger admits that his "literary career, if not dead, is at a profound and dismal standstill" (178) reads as a defeat and his reluctant acceptance of the title of department chair a symptom of his continuing subjugation under the institution. However, this is where the form of the novel complicates the idea of the author-function and elevates the letters of recommendation from being "one-dimensional, repetitive, and banal" ("The Fall of the Humanities").

The author of *Dear Committee Members* is Julie Schumacher, a member of the faculty in the University of Minnesota's creative writing program but it is also equally true that the author of the novel is Jay Fitger. After all, the novel is composed entirely out of the latter's correspondence and as the cover of the novel informs the readers, it is a "*New York Times* Bestseller". That is, this collection of Fitger's writing is an object that is a successful part of the literary marketplace. On this metatextual level, then, Fitger's literary career is not dead. Of course, it would be ludicrous to suggest that Fitger, or even Schumacher, in any way anticipated the novel's success in the marketplace but its success is a lucky coincidence that reinforces what the novel is trying to achieve in its formal conceit. As Foucault noted: "Discourse that possesses an author's name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten; neither is it accorded the momentary attention given to ordinary, fleeting words" (305). These letters of recommendation are typically private, in the sense that they are not meant for the public, yet they are also disposable and interchangeable pieces of correspondence, primarily serving a formality in the hiring process or conferment of awards and scholarships. The attention conferred on letters of recommendation is thus "ordinary" and "fleeting". Yet, *DCM*'s formal structure insists on Fitger's authorship of these letters in a way that demands a more careful and empathetic attention and inverts the 'private' nature of these correspondences.

The inversion of the private nature of letters of recommendation by publishing them as a novel and thus inviting a public readership becomes an explicit aspiration of the novel when Fitger eulogises his graduate student who has committed suicide due to the stress of losing his scholarship funding and being unable to finish writing his novel. Fitger writes:

I suppose this is the last letter of recommendation anyone will write for poor Browles, so let me say this about him. Socially, he was awkward—shy, I suppose—and his writing at times was subpar; but an idea had presented itself to him, knocking at this brain like a nighttime traveller, and instead of shutting the door in its face, Browles built it a fire, he drew a chair for it up to the hearth and spent half a decade trying to decipher and then convey what it struggled to tell him. He was patient and industrious and quietly determined. Buffeted by setbacks and rejection and his own limitations, he persevered. Furthermore, he was kind—an admirable person. I wish I had told him these things directly, rather than saving my praise of him for letters and e-mails sent to other people: a correspondence Browles would never benefit from or see” (171)

The making public of private correspondence here is motivated by empathy. In admitting his regret in never telling Browles what he thought of his student, Fitger voices a hope for a more empathetic treatment of people within academia. In *DCM*, academia functions as a private sphere in which secret correspondence conducted in the guise of professionalism but where personal vendettas often play a large role in determining the course of students’ lives. The novel’s formal conceit thus represents a thematic shift towards a concern about its public which, within the text, are the people who do not strictly belong within academia; the students who have run out of funding, the graduated students looking for employment who are uncertain of their future, the companies those students seek employment at, and the larger public. *DCM*’s direct address hails people both within and outside of academia and the one-sided nature of its correspondence invite interlocutors. The

prevalence of reviews of *DCM* adopting variations on the form of the letter of recommendation—Dear Reader, I highly recommend...—suggests the effectiveness of this conceit in engaging readers as interlocutors.²²

Merve Emre's aversion to question of relatability is insightful but probably in ways she did not intend. *DCM*'s formal structure positions Fitger as a writer of letters of recommendation more than as an author. But in so doing the novel challenges readers on the dominant conception of the author-function particularly as it relates to the campus novel. Fitger's early success with his semi-autobiographical expose of his scandalous experience in a creative writing program, *Stain*, depended upon readers' desire to locate its author and determine its veracity. As we have seen at the start of this section, this is true for a lot of campus novels. *DCM*, however, complicates this readerly desire to search for the author. It hails readers not primarily as outsiders to privileged inside knowledge but as equally divided readers that do and do not belong to the university. Fitger is a divided protagonist that is ambivalently relatable. Through the course of the novel, readers sense that the work that he is involved in is not too different from the work that is to be performed by his students outside of academia. This ambivalent relation to the author is in stark contrast to its treatment in *Stoner*.

In *Stoner*, William Stoner's relation to the book he authors is one that closely follows what Foucault describes as the "kinship between writing and death" (301). Foucault traces this kinship to oral narratives and traditions in which storytelling is a means of forestalling

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²² Numerous reviews on the novel's Amazon and Goodreads page employ the LOR form. Some of which can be seen at the links below. Furthermore, Katy Waldman's review for *New Yorker* and Rebecca Schuman's review for *Slate* both uses the epistolary form.
https://www.amazon.com/Dear-Committee-Members-Julie-Schumacher/product-reviews/0345807332/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_paging_btm_next_3?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews&pageNumber=3
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/19288259-dear-committee-members?ac=1&from_search=true

death. As this relationship evolved to the time when Foucault wrote his essay in 1969, four years after the publication of *Stoner*, “Writing is now linked to sacrifice and to the sacrifice of life itself; it is a voluntary obliteration of the self” (301). This obliteration of the self is not merely self-destructive but meant to confer some degree of immortality. It is as if the author in writing the text passes into it. Thus Foucault writes: “If we wish to know the writer in our day, it will be through the singularity of his absence and in his link to death, which has transformed him into a victim of his own writing” (301). This is ultimately a romantic notion. Just as Stoner had entertained the idea that he was in the presence of the authors of the books he had read, his own dutifully produced work of scholarship enters him into an ethereal realm to await reanimation when a new reader picks up his book. This notion centers the author. It is no wonder that *Stoner*’s rise in literary prominence has also seen a concomitant re-evaluation of John Williams as an important American author.

DCM does not go as far as to repudiate this desire for the author and the idea of the authored text as living legacy. But its attention on people and work outside the academy and its desire to bring a literary education to bear on those realms constitute a reframing of the campus novel genre. In a world where universities are justifying the cutting back on programs because they “can’t be all things for all people”, the need for a conceptualization of the university as part of the public has never been more urgent.²³

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²³ I owe the observation of the use of “can’t be all things to all people” as justification for decreasing funding to Kevin McClure. <https://twitter.com/kevinrmcclure/status/1145829471611707393>

Conclusion

Writing in his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci set out a brief but influential schema for education, concluding with the thought that

If our aim is to produce a new stratum of intellectuals, including those capable of the highest degree of specialisation, from a social group which has not traditionally developed the appropriate attitudes, then we have unprecedented difficulties to overcome.²⁴

In the time since Gramsci wrote those words, little progress has been made towards the vision that he had in mind for the intellectual. On the contrary, the rapidly changing media landscape, culminating in the ubiquity of social media today seems to present insurmountable obstacles to the development of the “appropriate attitudes” conducive to a society of intellectuals. Edward Said took Gramsci’s sketch of the intellectual and sharpened its confrontational edge. Said, in *Representations of the Intellectual*, emphasized the intellectual’s undaunting pursuit of knowledge and truth which he reckoned inevitably meant making public statements against the acceptance of “easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say” (23).²⁵ For Said, this duty of the intellectual, “the struggle to balance the problems of one’s own selfhood against the demands of publishing and speaking out in the public sphere” (23) means that the intellectual always stands in some relation to “loneliness” (22).

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²⁴ https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/prison_notebooks/problems/education.htm

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<https://cbs.asu.edu/sites/default/files/PDFS/Said%20Representations%20of%20the%20Intellectual.pdf>

In my reading of both *Stoner* and *Dear Committee Members*, I have tried to attend to the ways that William Stoner and Jason Fitger negotiated that balance between their private desires and speaking out in the public sphere. In particular, I have tried to be attentive to how these characters' actions reveal patterns of social engagement. Whether through the imagination of an assenting public brought together by the mediation of texts or evoking the community forming power of privately organised groups like ladies culture clubs, these novels evince the same dutiful need to reach out to the public. At the same time, their failures should give us as readers pause. The sadness associated with Stoner and his life demands readers to search for redemptive qualities so he wouldn't be read as a failure. Fitger fights a losing battle trying to demand that the recipients of his letters of recommendation view the people he is recommending as human beings and not a checklist of character attributes.

Given these novels' bleak outlook on successfully navigating the demands of private and public life as an intellectual, what chance do academics working in higher education stand now when our sense of the public is so rapidly changing? Even as social media has opened up our private lives to public scrutiny and provided more platforms for individuals to engage in public discourse, it has also fragmented our sense of a general public. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* regularly features articles calling on academics to 'go public' even offering advice on how to accomplish this feat. Articles like Leonard Cassuto's "How to Go Public, and Why We Must" are typical in the way they conflate the public and "a big world out there that needs to hear from us".²⁶ But as we've seen from responses to *Stoner* and *Dear Committee Members*, even within academic circles there is no universal consensus to the way these novels are read. The unappreciated but principled stand to affirm the value of

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²⁶ <https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-to-Go-PublicWhy-We/242155>

study in the humanities for many readers of *Stoner*, merely confirms the protagonist's squandering of his "social capital assets" for others.

Campus novels expose academia's shortcomings even as they perform the possibilities of individual private action within its flawed systems. Their fictional professors model behaviors that might otherwise be inaccessible to a newcomer to its circles, as Elaine Showalter confesses, "novels taught me how a proper professor should speak, behave, dress, think, write, love, succeed, or fail" (2). But they often also fail to depict real forms of progress from problematic "discursive and institutional practices" (Findeisen 78) that exclude those who do not already enjoy privileges of access to higher education. In short, campus novels have failed to address the various publics that might benefit from its instruction. But campus novels, like the intellectuals they depict and Edward Said addressed in his lecture, have a duty to make an "everlasting effort" towards reaching out to its various public in a project that is "constitutively unfinished and necessarily imperfect" (23).

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