

ERIK HOEL

HIGHER EDUCATION

GEOGRAPHY: From the air the lengthy sprawl of the University could almost be a body ringed by a cohort of kneeling worshippers. In fact, from the right angle and the right height, at precisely the coordinates where the local news helicopter hovers after game day to film the celebratory crowd, the outline of the massive University looks exactly like the supine body of Jesus Christ. And around him, mourners, blocky buildings leaning in to pray.

Structurally, this should be expected. For _____ is organized topographically, functionally, economically, and in a sense, theologically, around the University. From its towering epicenter the roads of _____ pierce outward like spoke-wheels through the surrounding areas. Areas which are organized like the concentric and descending tiers of Dante's Hell: first there are the buildings and open spaces directly associated with the University, followed by the towering concrete boxes of undergraduate housing with their messy balconies and overflowing trash bins, all of which are encircled in turn by the empty-bottle-strewn lawns of small houses occupied by a mix of graduate students and the recently graduated, then the non-pre-furnished apartments of townies, which finally give way to the small lawns of adjunct professors, researchers, and the professional class. It is only here, on the outskirts, that there are any children. Back at the center of _____ there is the main street X , lined with bars and coffee shops. X stretches between recognizable local landmarks Y and Z . There is a special place S_1 , at which we, the citizens of _____, congregate (although sometimes we congregate in slightly less special place S_2). We play frisbee on the hills and

expanses of _____, we run and bike over the snaking trails, we watch the sorority girls tan in long lines of pink flesh out on the quad. That's summer. In winter we are trapped for long periods of time in our studio apartments, we huddle inside the blue squares of light emitted by our laptops, we shuffle like marching penguins in school colors down main street *X*. Our mothers send us little hand-warmer packets to use in our gloves.

_____ is small enough that we run into people we know, but big enough so there are always new people to meet. We all live so close together in these concentric circles that at night we hear people's shouted arguments—girlfriends screaming and pushing their boyfriends in the shadows of parking lots, drunk dudes with red faces yelling into their phones. Monstrous garbage trucks come around at ungodly early hours and back up beeping for an eternity, causing the hung-over among us to clutch pillows over our heads and turn on a fan for white noise. Everything takes place within, between, or around, certain shared spaces and buildings. Everything is recognizable, viewable. There is the sense that _____ is bigger than any of us, that we are now a part of a structure, an organism that has endured and will continue to endure. The same spaces, colors, activities, repeating again and again, infinitely heavy as they trace out the only pattern they can. Is this how members of twelfth-century villages felt as they worked to construct cathedrals that wouldn't be finished in their lifetimes? And what, exactly, are we building?

Some of us were medieval history majors.



SCHOOL/WORK: So many of us in _____ moved here to attend its diadem, the University. We arrive as freshmen and are immediately thrown into the merry-go-round of rush week. We become Alpha Epsilon Pi, Kappa Delta Chi, Omega Psi Phi, Sigma Delta Tau. Those of us selected go to live in buildings with columns at the entrance and Greek letters on the façade, an overturned table and a broken plastic goblet on the lawn. At the beginning of each school year our parents take us to Target. There we surreptitiously

glance at the other students, marvel at how the fat haggard woman pushing the cart could produce the stunning willowy cheerleader next to her. For those of us just arriving four years seems infinitely long. It is impossible to think that in no time at all we will be crying at graduation, and moving to live farther out from the center of _____, or, god forbid, to another city. Most of us, even after we graduate, cannot bring ourselves to leave. So we work for [local big pharmaceutical / medical technology / IT staffing company], or as baristas at [local coffee shop], and we think that our relationship to the University won't change, but it does. _____ continues to be ours but its inner life is distant. This is like staying friends with a lover you've dated for four years: it is hard to understand why you still cannot touch them like you used to, you cannot go where you used to, everything has become surface and the sanctum is hidden.

Some of us in _____ never attended the University, but we are still defined by it, in the same manner as atheists are defined by an absence of God (some of us were religious studies majors). That the barriers of the University are so permeable means we are always attending.

The median age in _____ is thirty, and not including the undergraduates the median household income is \$50,000. Everything mixes. The coffee shops are full of students who stream TV on their laptops while studying, sitting next to groups of chuckling townies. There are poetry readings hosted in the multicultural student center, orchestras that play outside in the summer. There are Ultimate leagues that townies can join. Even the schedules of the students and non-students are the same. Both fly home on the holidays, leaving the streets spacious and interactions whimsical.

In psychology studies that students take for credit, or non-students take for the \$10 the poster promised, we are asked: "On a scale of one to five, how happy are you?"

We stare at it for a very long time before marking down, carefully, "three."



ENTERTAINMENT: The majority of public entertainment in _____ involves the consumption of alcohol. We buy aluminum kegs of beer for our house parties, for playing beer pong in our basement with red solo cups, the crushed remains of which end up scattered all over the pavement, the dirt lawns. Sometimes the girls cut the cups up into patterns and hang them on strings in windows. But all of us line up the bottles we've drunk on the shelves of our common room, on the ledges, on the railings of our balconies: Bacardi Gold Rum, good for mixing with coke, same with Captain Morgan, whereas Seagram's is a cheap gin if we want to make G&Ts, and Jose Cuervo should only be used for shots that make girls scrunch up their faces. Meanwhile PBR is so ironically hip it's become post-hip and we're all a little uneasy about where it stands so we prefer the cheap mild-barf taste of "Natty Ice," or the unoffending Miller High Life, best bought in thirty-six packs, along with its slightly cheaper but significantly worse cousins Bud Light, Coors, Keystone, Michelob, all standing in contrast to the foreign relative that never quite fits in, Corona, and who could forget the constant, omnipresent, Smirnoff Vodka, the blueberry flavoring variant of which can be found in nineteen-year-old girls' freezers all over _____.

Those a little bit older than the undergraduates, the denizens of _____ in their mid-twenties, still rely on these old standbys but expand their tastes to incorporate things like Jim Bean for shots, maybe Wild Turkey or even the admiration-noise-provoking Jameson, and at bars order beers like Blue Moon, Stella, Sierra Nevada, Hoegaarden. Otherwise they get margaritas, or at the two-for-one nights they get sugary mixed drinks that taste like candy. Outside of bars everyone drinks on rooftops and in small gardens. They crush cans under shoes, throw them against buildings during block parties, find and carefully place them in the recycling bins when tailgating. Some drinking occurs at special places S_1 and S_2 , but mostly—if not inside someone's apartment/house, the moment we turn twenty-one or have a fake ID—at bars (see below).

That's the public entertainment. As for our personal entertainment, it goes (from most to least average time spent on): streamed television, video

games, browsing internet, porn, listening to music, movies streamed online, talking with friends, drugs, sports, sex, apps on our phones, cooking, getting coffee, reading.

There is no religion in _____, although certain boxes may be checked if we are pressed to check them by a survey, but such things are never lived. It's more like a placeholder: one day, in some time beyond _____, this will be my religion.

We use the [latest social media platform] to connect with and sext one another, a network across which sweep memes, files, discoveries of old TV shows, rumors, all on an invisible current. For a month we couldn't go anywhere without hearing the same pop song—girls would shriek when it came on at clubs; it would blare out the open windows of the concrete towers. Then there was the month when everyone watched all of *Seinfeld* on Hulu, the day when everyone watched a video of the University's school mascot twerking with a cheerleader, and so on.

At 10:00 p.m., when everyone in _____ is watching Netflix or Hulu or HBO-Go (alone or curled up with their significant other) the various internet providers of the city slow to a crawl. When the connection lags in a building, all of us inside, young women in pajamas bearing the school colors, or young men in boxers, lift up our laptops to improve the wireless signal, on our knees in bed with computers held high, as if in benediction, as if we are at church. When a new addition to the *Call of Duty* video game series debuts, people line up at 5:00 a.m. When the gaming store downtown opens at 9:00 a.m. there are over three-hundred people in line to collect their pre-orders. The University bookstore for textbooks is the only bookstore in town.

Mostly, though, we just hang out in apartments, which all look the same. There we play *Halo* together or make a drinking game of *Mario Kart*. We play beer bong and flip cup and Fuck the Dealer. We go to brunch. At brunch we talk about who hooked up with whom, we talk about classes. We talk about how annoying some people are. At brunch we take our morning-after pills, order a mimosa.



SPORTS: On Sundays during the fall in _____ the stadium emits a constant coliseum roar. Everyone within two square miles can hear the rising and falling of the human surf. Our faces are painted like tribes going to war, our voices rise in song together, the marching band urging us on, the school mascot dancing; some of us have fits, attacks of meaning and incoherent screams as the electricity of belonging sparks through us. We grow hoarse and drunk on the vital force yawning through the crowd. We make-out in the stands and trample trash underfoot. We are a tapestry of organized movement. We can be seen from space. We will not be denied.

On game days everyone wears the school colors. Shops line the main street *X* that sell T-shirts with the University slogan on it for \$39.99. All the bars on *X* have flat screens hung so as to be viewable from every possible angle. When the bars show *The Game*, they overflow with people wearing the school colors, signifying unity. Sometimes people in other colors come, colors that will fight our colors in *The Game*. These other colors are dangerous, fanatic. They have come far into hostile territory. We know to avoid them when we are alone, but we are not alone here, no, there is strength in numbers, we will overwhelm the other colors, we will shout at them across the street, we will posture and taunt, we will charge and retreat until they leave our domain.



BARS: Thursday through Saturday are drinking nights. This three-note weekend provides the central *Hauptsimme* to the minor *Nebensimme* of the other weekdays (some of us are music majors). We generally start with pregaming, or smoking a little weed, or the collective high from getting ready amid the giggles of our girlfriends. Then a walk—a walk downtown, a walk to a friend's apartment, a walk to a bar. The slow conglomeration of acquaintances reaches a peak at 11:00 p.m. From then on the roving bands interact, merge, split off again, bumping and careening off in different di-

reactions, a gas heated to a frenetic storm. And there is that feeling in the air like a real storm coming, the drop in atmospheric pressure as the clock ticks toward 2:00 a.m. and the bars begin to close. Anything becomes possible. Aggressiveness throbs in the night. If you're a girl walking alone, you'll be catcalled, invited to fuck. If you're a guy alone you'll be threatened, have bottles thrown at you, called a fag, have broad men gone to seed lunge at you to see if you'll flinch. If you're driving that late on the weekend, black men and angry young bros will walk out into traffic, daring you to run them over.

In a club bachelorette parties of young women all made-up and out for the night dance in a circle, woo-hooing as they do shots at the bar. At their center stands a girl wearing a white or pink banner that reads *Bride-to-Be*. Such groups carefully watch each other's cups while the club's owner hides in the bathroom, lest someone slips drugs into the drug they are drinking.

It is when everyone is weaving back home drunkenly at night that the rabbits of _____ become most noticeable, hunched shadows and wet noses peaking out from underneath dark hedges, or racing across the sidewalk, startling the drunks. With dogs reigned in by strict lease laws, and with their natural enemy, the hawk, unable to hunt amid the close buildings and human activity, the rabbits take over the hedges, the small lawns, the gravel driveways. They huddle between the recycling bins. When we walk back home intoxicated during the hot summer nights they come to us as disconnected things, they look at us with dewy atavistic eyes, give us a glimpse into a whole world beyond, underneath, inside ours. A world of dirt and blood and birthing fluids and fear and family. We do not look too long at rabbits. But sometimes, if we are very drunk, we will chase them. Come here. We want to cuddle/eat you.



SEX: Unacknowledged by its brochures and alumni, sex is the fundamental selling point for the university. Unacknowledged also by the parents who years ago experienced _____ in its full elemental force, and who are

now dropping off their children here with a wave and a tear of remembrance at their “college experience.” Are they afflicted with some kind of sepia-tinted amnesia? Have all the times that the mothers had their faces cummed on after they vomited earlier in the night been erased? Does the time when he fucked a girl up the ass and then wandered away so drunk he later shit himself seem unrepeatable to the father? Is it possible that _____ wasn’t this way when they attended? It seems so solid to us here, now, an eternal fact. We feel that we are participating in a process that has been going on since before we were born and will continue after we die. We know, however, that there have been changes. Now there are apps for our phones that break all this down into the simplest of forms: yes I would fuck; no I wouldn’t fuck. It’s surprising to find out how many people you’ll fuck when everything is stripped away.

After all, college, and youth, are about self-actualization, as we’ve been told, and here in _____ sex is our utter expression of the self, the top of the self-actualization pyramid. Both genders are smooth, hairless, like dolls or children. By shaving our pubic hair we take control of our sexuality, our bodies. We buy butt-plugs and nipple-clamps, use them a few times, then never again. Nothing is as good as it seems online. We feel that our penises are too small, that our tits are too flat, that it’s weird that we can’t come when a guy is fucking us from behind. Modern masculinity is getting as high a pussy count as possible; modern feminism is talking about what your mouth tastes like after a blowjob. It’s a perfect combination. Sex is everywhere. It is in the laughter of a group of sorority girls, the biceps of bros. The sex here in _____ is not passionate or intimate or loving. Nor is it animalistic or perverse or kinky or primal. It is the sex of teenagers. It is pleasantly dumb. It is all about placing this here and that there, all about holding this up and putting this in, if only once, if only for a while. When we look up at the bro in front of us with his socks still on and his hard-on bobbing up and down in our face, or the ring of a sorority girl’s asshole under our thumb and the shaved cleft underneath, we know we

are fucking exactly how we should be fucking. After all, you don't have sex with individuals in _____, you have sex with archetypes: the bro, the sports guy, the sports girl, the gangster, the frat guy, the sorority sister, the townie, the young professional. There is freedom when we realize this; it would be strange to sleep with fifty different people, but sleeping with the same person fifty times is comfortable, easy—we always know what to expect. It is like a dance with thousands of people all wearing replicas of only a few masks. Things are permissible in such an environment that would never be elsewhere. There is a way in which no individuals ever have sex in _____, only the town itself does, shuffling its archetypes together at night.



RELATIONSHIPS: The majority of all relationships in _____ exist as an existential wisp, consisting entirely of questioning texts and a make-out sessions that become embarrassing the next day. The rate of actually hooking up with someone may be as low as 25% for all situations that start promisingly. But even with that low rate there's still room for a large number of sexual encounters. Like an astrophysicist calculating the Drake Equation, we should approach the problem by low-balling some conservative numbers. (Some of us are astrophysics majors.)

For instance, let's say that x arrives in _____. As a typical college student, x goes out 3 times a week (Thurs, Fri, Sat) and hooks up with someone 1 in 6 times they get shit drunk (every time he/she drinks). In total, x is in _____ about 40 weeks a year, factoring in vacations, so, in total, x would sleep with 80 people in the 4 years of university.

Of course that assumes person x stays single the entire time. But since relationships here develop not by going on dates, but by hooking up with someone enough times that a relationship spontaneously occurs, the relationship dynamic for the entire population of _____ is easy to predict. So easy that we can accurately specify the Markovian dynamical equation

governing both the number of relationships and the number of hook-ups in _____ as

$$N_{R(t_0)} = N_{R(t_{-1})} - \left(N_{R(t_{-1})}B\right) + \left(N_{S(t_{-1})}HC\right)$$

where for any moment in time t_0 (with t_{-1} being the moment prior to t_0), N_R is the number of those people in couples, N_S is the remaining number of single people, B is the breakup rate (a constant), H is the hook-up rate (a constant), and C is the coupling rate after hook-ups (a constant).

This simple equation governs much of our lives here. The number of relationships, and therefore the number of hook-ups, is naturally self-limiting. The more hook-ups that occur, the more relationships are formed as some of those hook-ups turn serious (represented above by the coupling rate C). Thus the total number of people available to hook-up with decreases. As the number of relationships grow, the growth rate of new relationships decreases, as there are fewer single people (lowering the hook-up rate), until the decay rate (represented by the break-up rate B) drives down the number of relationships, freeing people up by creating more singles. Hence, an equilibrium is established for the population, a set point based on the ratio between the decay rate and the hook-up rate multiplied by the coupling rate. This equilibrium point may fluctuate due to outside perturbations. During fall semester, as the number of single undergraduates drastically increases, the number of undergraduates who are bar-age jumps, and professors and grad students emerge from vacations and traveling, there is a frenzied period of hook-ups, followed in late October by a rectifying bounce in the number of relationships. During the summers, when the number of single people decreases, the number of hook-ups decreases in turn, such that dynamics during the summer are governed almost entirely by the relationship decay rate.

This dynamical equation is close to the population equations governing growth in fish hatcheries, predatory/prey relationships, and periods of abundance/scarcity in food cycles.

Some of us are evolutionary biology majors.



OVERHEARD BY US: “My girlfriends and I started taking shots in the afternoon cause I was like see you bitches and then I was watching the sunset and talking about how beautiful it was then somebody was like, um, that’s totally the sunrise, and I was like what?! Twelve hour blackout haha.”



“These two black girls were seriously fighting out on the lawn of my fucking building at night. Fighting as in spitting, kicking, slapping. One threw the other into a wall—I was like, Oh shit! Haha. We kept telling them to stop but they like, couldn’t even hear us. Like animals fighting or something. Actually trying to kill one another. So they are like, tangled together, and my bro started calling 911, but the girls were getting close to the road, like they were trying to push the other one into it. And the street is like, still pretty busy, so there are a lot of cars whizzing by. So I ran over and got between them. One girl had literally ripped out the other girl’s weave. Both of them were covered in blood. But I grabbed each of their wrists, ‘cause their hands were in each other’s hair, and I bent back their arms so that they both fell down, kneeling in front of me, and I said, in this really deep voice—It’s over. I swear, as I was standing there with both of them kneeling in front of me by twisting their arms I was thinking like—damn, it’s good to be a man. Later before the police showed up one went one way and the other went another. The weave was still lying on the ground. I had got blood on my arms and I like, ran back to my apartment to get to a sink so I could wash off, thinking, like, shit, hope I don’t have fucking HIV.”



“But that’s because I had already heard about it! So I was like, drunk ‘cause we had been playing Circle of Death and so later in the hallway to the bathroom I asked him about it. And he was like—well, do you want to see it? and I was like, hell yeah, let’s just go into the bathroom. But then he was

like, I couldn't just look at it I'd have to like, do something with it. And I was like that's so unfair, I am not some slut, I just wanted to see it. Like just fucking whip it out instead of making all these demands."



"I vomited on my cat."



"So like all of them begin beckoning me, and at the center is the girl wearing the pink fucking banner thing and the tiara and stuff. And the rest of her bridesmaids or whatever are all buying shots and like, herding me and her onto the dance floor. I'm trying to talk, you know, like, hey, when are you getting married, like make conversation you know? But it's really hard to, cause there's neon lights and smoke and you know the music at that place is just impossibly loud. Anyways so she starts grinding with me, and I'm like, pretty drunk, but also like, well this is fucking weird. And then she pushes me against the wall of the club, and all her friends are like standing watch, all gathered around but facing the other way, right, and she starts pulling at my belt and she whispers in my ear—I'm here tonight because I want cock. And she got pretty far into my pants, I mean, and then I just like, booked it basically, and left. That's why you guys didn't see me. 'Cause I walked home alone afterwards. And as I was walking back home man I just felt so impossibly sad. Like, what the fuck? Like, how is everybody just okay with this? Is this what everybody does?"



"So we were standing next to one another at the urinal, right, and he's like, big, kinda fat, bald, maybe like forty or something. Total townie. So I'm finishing up and he's still staring straight ahead but he just goes—Nice boy band haircut. And he was grinning. And so I'm drunk so I'm like—Nice oh wait you don't have any hair. And the fucking dude just looks over at me and like, with his tongue he like pushes up and out and then reaches

up and removes his upper teeth. He removed his fucking upper teeth. And now he's holding them, and like, gums at me—Do you wanna die boy? Oh man I was outta there so fast I was zipping up my fly in the parking lot. Dude it was fucking wack.”



MISCELLANEOUS: Other facts about _____ that don't fit into any of the above categories. We fear that our chorus has failed to adequately convey what it is like here. For we have tried to tell of what _____ is, of its mechanisms, its trajectories and vectors, its relations, but how can we capture its internal, intrinsic contents? Some of us are philosophy majors, so we know that Thomas Nagel, a late-20th century philosopher, showed that no matter how much scientific knowledge you have you could never know what it is like to be a bat. Its bat experience is always inaccessible, trapped within its bat perspective.

So then how can we hope to express what it is like to live in _____? Should we tell of being out on the docks at night and seeing the lithe barefoot form of our best friend race down the wooden boards and catapult himself off? What of how we have been high in the park and gazed at the languid faces of clouds? We have laughed hyena laughs in great circles of friends smoking cigarettes, laughed so hard we collapsed. How to express the feel of vomiting, that stomach clench and awful upwards rush, the convulsions, then the sweetest of reliefs. Of going into the bathroom of a house party of someone we barely know, everything around us a foreign collection of objects, of sticking our index finger down our throat and jiggling it until we cough up the clearest pools of alcohol? How to express how it feels when the music at the club is as loud as the soul-vibrating hum of Jupiter's magnetofield, when the smoky air has become a drunk liquid throbbing with light, and even our skeletons have synesthesia? Or that empty feeling, that new awareness of being unfilled that occurs when a cock leaves you, an emptiness not present before the sex began? Or binge-watching a TV show

and getting to that point where the sexual tension that has been building up for five seasons is finally released and the main characters kiss and we squeal alone in our beds at the laptop screen. How about seeing some undergrad girl bend over to reveal a tight thong that must press right up against her little asshole, and then hurrying to our apartment and pulling down our pants to masturbate furiously into the sink. But we have also walked by the music building and stopped in our tracks to watch, through a window, an Asian girl playing the violin, her eyes closed in rapture. We stayed as long as we dared.

And sometimes our hearts beat their thin rapid beats along with the rabbits, their globular eyes looking at us as we shotgun beers at dusk on someone's lawn. Nobody gets old in _____ and nobody ever dies, we will always be young and red-faced and dancing amid sparklers and marching bands and the souls of everyone who has come before us. How can we ever say goodbye to all this freedom?