The Tree of Life: Observations From the Olive Grove

Kendall Lowery

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THE TREE OF LIFE: OBSERVATIONS FROM THE OLIVE GROVE

by

KENDALL LOWERY

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

PROFESSOR DRAKE
PROFESSOR NEIMAN

APRIL 29, 2022
Acknowledgments

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Abstract

Scripps College is famous for its olive trees and the award-winning olive oil that they produce. However, despite the considerable age of the trees, the campus community has only harvested the annual crop of olives for the past decade. In this thesis, I set out to learn why the trees were planted on the campus in the first place. To this end, I immerse myself in the history, culture, and commerce of the olive oil industry, and ultimately use the fruit as a lens through which we can explore the colonial history of Scripps College and Southern California. In order to construct my analysis, I delve into the architecture and landscaping of the Claremont Consortium, explore archival documents from Denison Library, and interview olive authors, purveyors, and growers. I argue that Scripps has used the olive tree in order to enact several goals: to strengthen the institution’s Mediterranean aesthetic; to call upon associations with Grecian academic prestige; to take advantage of the olive’s symbolism of nourishment, resilience, peace, friendship, and excellence; and to achieve the colonial goal of usurping the land from the Tongva people. It’s difficult to think of a plant that holds more symbolic power than the olive tree, which is precisely why it is such a powerful colonial tool. Olive trees have borne witness to countless years of history and oftentimes have stood in for history itself. The tree holds much more than its fruit: it contains the contradictions that define our own lives.

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Preface

Scripps College is famous for its olive trees. Many members of our campus collection of almost 100 *olea europaea* are just as old as (if not older than) the school itself. Each fall, students, professors, facilities staff, and community members convene to harvest the trees’ ripe fruits, which are then pressed into the school’s award-winning olive oil. Alongside the oil, the harvest produces a profound sense of community: one that seems aligned with the comforting, idyllic sense of time-honored tradition that is imparted by Scripps College.

But despite the age of the trees and the classic feel of the event, this annual tradition has only been around for the past 10 years. The trees have been attentively cared for since 1926, but the food that they produced was regarded as a nuisance for the better part of a century. Measures
were taken to prevent the trees from producing fruit, and when they inevitably did, the olives were quickly swept away and disposed of so as to not stain the campus pavement. An incredible amount of labor and resources have been dedicated to the longevity of the Scripps trees and the continual erasure of their natural crop. So, in light of all of that inconvenience, why were they planted in the first place?

This semester, I attempted to answer this fundamental question. In this thesis, I immerse myself in the history, culture, and commerce of the olive oil industry, using the fruit as a lens through which we can explore the colonial history of Scripps College and Southern California. In order to construct my analysis, I delve into the architecture and landscaping of the Claremont Consortium, explore archival documents from Denison Library, and interview olive authors, purveyors, and growers.

Ultimately, I argue that Scripps has used the olive tree in order to enact several goals: to strengthen the institution’s Mediterranean aesthetic; to evoke associations with Grecian academic and democratic prestige; to take advantage of the olive’s symbolism of nourishment, resilience, peace, friendship, and excellence; and to achieve the colonial goal of usurping the land from the Tongva people. Olive trees hold an incredible amount of symbolic power, making the tree an uncommonly effective colonial tool.

Around the world, the olive tree has been used by colonial powers to claim land and resources. The trees don’t only take up space; they are also accompanied by associations with specific religions, cuisines, and even systems of government. These connotations stand in for the absence of actual history that colonizers have in a region; thus, colonizers have continual incentive to put symbolic stock into the olive tree.
The boundless symbolic scope of the olive tree has fostered a vast array of lenses that I could have explored within my thesis — this variety posed a challenge within itself. A thesis in the humanities can involve essentially any topic. Unlike theses completed by STEM students, humanities capstone projects aren’t determined by an available data set or an ongoing experiment that has been completed alongside a professor, and they lack an explicit guiding structure. Projects like the theses produced by students in my own discipline (writing and rhetoric) can be quite varied in their execution, and this ambiguity can certainly be daunting. In order to home in on a subject, I had to follow the rumblings of my own intuition until I finally reached a topic that resonated with me and contained a gap that I could explore. Nevertheless, as I look back on my four years of writing and rhetoric courses, my arrival at the investigation of our campus olive trees and their history seems inevitable.

The past four years have allowed me to explore my intrinsic pull towards food writing while composing commentaries for a review-writing class. I gained a passion for interviewing during my time in my more journalistically-oriented courses. In another semester, my time creating and workshopping short nonfiction pieces allowed me to gain fluency in the genres that have shaped my thesis (argumentative essay and literary journalism). In other classes, I was given opportunities to explicitly engage in questions surrounding the rhetorical interaction between physical environments and their inhabitants. Finally, a class that I took in the fall of my senior year created a forum where I could investigate the rhetoric of the Claremont Colleges, Plato’s Grecian academy, and the broader American system of higher education. These courses have comprehensively shaped the content, form, and analysis of this capstone project.

Throughout this thesis, I’ve been motivated by my inherent interest in food as nourishment, industry, history, and symbol, and olives were the crop that explicitly pulled upon
all of the things that food can be. The rhetoric embedded in the olive tree was incredibly fruitful; my research and interviews showed just how much the crop draws people in, and I felt that same tug towards the tree throughout this project.

The pull of the plant has resulted in the creation of a decent number of books on the tree and its byproducts — the olive holds its own in the food writing genre. *Extra Virginity* by Tom Mueller has heavily inspired my initial approach to this project, and it is also the work that I am most inclined to emulate in terms of genre and style. The long-form essays within the book cover each stage in the olive oil lifespan, from field to pantry, and give people along the supply chain a platform to voice their opinions and concerns about the industry. I also drew inspiration from Peggy Knickerbocker’s exploration of oil production in *Olive Oil: From Tree to Table*. Additionally, my thesis has been written concurrently with my time in a class pertaining to the political economy of food, and many of the readings featured in the course impacted the content and style of my own work. Specifically, Charlie Leduff’s *New York Times* piece: “At a Slaughterhouse, Some Things Never Die,” exemplifies the balance of interview, historical context, and firsthand experience that I hoped to capture within my own thesis. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Leduff’s work covering the meatpacking industry was much more visceral in tone than most writing that I encountered on olives, but I sought to embed pieces of Leduff’s physicality in my own writing.

The varied olive writing that I encountered extensively discusses the history, symbolism, and economic implications attached to the crop. Within my thesis, I set out to deepen the analysis of the cultural place that olives hold by exploring their usage as a colonial tool. Documented discussion of the olive’s role in colonialism is quite limited, but this gap pushed me to dedicate a lot of my own work to exploring the crop through a colonial lens. Additionally, I haven’t come
across any other olive writing that analyzes the role of the trees on the scale of a small college campus. However, the benefits of this limited scope on the genre became obvious as soon as I started my work. The amazing archival materials that I was able to access were made available in large part because of the institution’s dedication to record-keeping and library resources, a locational focus aided in sharpening and grounding my analysis, and Scripps’ place as a member of the Claremont College Consortium fostered an incredibly generative comparative analysis of each campus’s specific aesthetic and landscaping choices.

Alongside my personal interest in the plant, my examination of the olive has been generated by a kairotic moment. Aside from this fall marking the tenth anniversary of the first Scripps College olive oil harvest, last fall’s harvest was the first time that we’ve been able to press our campus crop of olives since November of 2019. The 10-year milestone and return of the harvest have piqued my own preexisting interest in the trees, and I’m sure they’ll garner more attention as the 2022 harvest gets underway.

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic has also influenced my exploration of the trees and their byproducts. The shipping delays that took hold in 2020 have impacted countless industries, and olive oil is no exception. A vast majority of the product is exported from the Mediterranean (Spain is the most prominent producer of olive oil, followed by Italy, Tunisia, and Greece), and its quality is highly contingent on shipping conditions and lengths. As the product sits in a container or waits idle on a dock, it risks continual exposure to heat and light, which can change the entire character of an oil. My hometown of Long Beach, California hosts the second-largest port in the country, which generates nearly $100 billion per year and employs 370,000 people. Crane operators and port engineers were consistent attendees of my elementary school career fairs. While spending my middle-school summers at the beach as a junior lifeguard, enormous
freighters could be spotted every day, rising from the water like monstrous, angular islands. For as long as I can remember, the horizon over our ocean has been lined with container ships, but I’ve never seen the coast as crowded as it’s been over the past two years. Growing up in Long Beach infused me with an eye for where things came from, where they were going, and who created them, and prepared me to seize this kairotic moment within my senior thesis.

This moment seemed particularly suited to a deep dive into the history of our campus olive trees. However, the focus of my project was also shaped by the constraints that I encountered over the course of the semester. I had difficulty connecting with olive growers and agricultural workers for interviews, and additionally, though the industry is predominantly based in the Mediterranean, my contacts were based in the United States. These limitations (paired with the incredible resources that I found about Scripps’ olive trees) pushed me to pursue a thesis that was grounded in the specific location of our campus. More time and a greater thesis length would have given me the opportunity to explore a greater number of the myriad ways that olives have interacted with our culture, history, religion, economy, and food. Nevertheless, a comprehensive exploration of olives could fill innumerable theses, and I hope that I encounter more chances to counteract some of my current constraints and expand upon this project.

Like much of the other olive writing that I encountered, my work took shape as a long-form journalistic essay. My current focus on the relationship between colonialism and olive trees necessitated a discussion of a wide range of time periods, locations, and actors. Additionally, it was essential to consult a myriad of different people ranging from olive growers to food writers during my exploration of the product. Thus, my genre had to be nimble in scope and perspective — I gravitated towards long-form journalism as it allowed me to call upon a
variety of different historical eras, interviews, and sources within the creation and revision of my project.

Long-form journalism is also inherently more accessible than the genres that shape most other Scripps senior capstone projects. This approachability is deliberate: my intended audience is significantly broader than that of the usual thesis. I’m hoping to make my work accessible and engaging to the same audiences that would be interested in works like *Extra Virginity* — readers who follow food writing and are interested in learning more about a product that thoroughly permeates everyday life. Ideally, my thesis could be published by a venue that features long-form, highly specific journalism. Thus, though much of my writing work was classically “scholarly” in nature (many an afternoon was spent in Denison Library parsing through archival sources), I have aimed to maintain an accessible, engaging writing style that lacks the jargon found in the theses produced by students of other disciplines.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the past four years, it’s that accessible writing is some of the most difficult work to produce, especially when you’re writing a long-form piece. This thesis has pulled upon all of the skills that I’ve developed as a writing and rhetoric student. I dug deeply into the rhetoric imbued in the olive tree, grounded my learnings in accessible prose, and synthesized my analysis into over 30 pages of logical flow.

This piece also ties together the topics that have shaped and motivated my academic life. My exploration of the olive industry has also been inherently tied to my work as an economics major. In the Mediterranean, entire economies have been built around their local olive trees, and many of these trees have been generating community livelihoods for centuries. Olive oil runs the gamut from daily staple to luxury good and fills the plates and the pockets of many industry players — the existence of an olive writing genre points to the compelling nature of its economy.
Throughout college, my own writing in my economics courses was much more formal than the style of this thesis, but I sought to embed my financial insights in a much less archaic way than that branch of knowledge usually calls for.

In the moments that I felt myself being pulled toward a less accessible writing style, I grounded myself in the core subject of this thesis: food. Food is a topic where I’ve always had something to say — it has defined my closest relationships, joyfully punctuated my days, and shaped my professional life from my first-year food column at *The Scripps Voice* to my current freelancing work. This piece is much more formal than the blog posts, ad copy, and news articles that I’ve written in the past, but still draws upon the passion that I have for food and the descriptive writing that accompanies it.

My fascination with food made it easy to connect with my interviewees, as olives had already individually pulled us in and provided common ground. These conversations helped me contextualize the incredible power of the tree, not only to build rapport but also to create and sustain communities. For Formaggio Kitchen Founder Ihsan Gurdal, olive oil is the daily staple of his childhood in Istanbul, Turkey that he continues to cherish. For Peggy Knickerbocker, it’s a cooking implement that has slowly taken the place of all others. And, for Israel-Palestine Organizer Devorah Brous, it’s the tree that defines the two countries and their conflict. “This is a clash of cultures that is represented in the tree of life,” said Brous. “I call it the tree of life because it's the place where so many of the peoples of both nations are finding their connection to what was, what is, and also what will be.”
The Tree of Life: Observations From the Olive Grove

Scripps College is a renowned beauty. It sits within the city of Claremont, where desert chaparral has been uprooted in favor of towering trees. Trees have been integral to the city’s identity since its founding; a Claremont tree committee was established prior to a formal city council. Claremont’s attentive relationship to its vegetation has only been amplified at its consortium of colleges. In 1923, President Emeritus of Pomona College Dr. James Blaisdell proclaimed:

“My own very deep hope is that instead of one great, undifferentiated university, we might have a group of institutions divided into small colleges—somewhat of an Oxford type—around a library and other utilities which they would use in common. In this way I should hope to preserve the inestimable personal values of the small college while securing the facilities of the great university.” (Claremont Colleges Library, 2008)

The collection of Claremont Colleges now consists of five undergraduate colleges (Pomona College, Scripps College, Claremont McKenna College, Harvey Mudd College, and Pitzer College) and two graduate schools (Claremont Graduate University and Keck Graduate Institute). All of the schools aside from KGI share a contiguous campus that covers one square mile of the Los Angeles suburb. Every tree, shrub, and bush on each of the Claremont Colleges’ campuses has been vetted by their respective aesthetic committees and guidelines, resulting in the five distinct environments of the undergraduate schools. The feeling of each campus is unmistakable: on a stroll around the colleges, you can’t help but pick up on the pretentious grandeur of Pomona, the calculated domesticity of Scripps, the pre-professional push of Claremont McKenna, the blunt utility of Harvey Mudd, and the nonconformist lean of Pitzer. When you’re a member institution of a dense collegiate consortium, this visual and affective differentiation is anything but accidental — it’s a marketing tactic.
In the 1880s, Pomona College’s founders sought to create “a college of the New England type” in the West. Though this was initially achieved through a curriculum guided by the liberal arts, this goal also demanded the recreation of an academic aesthetic. This mandate spawned an emulation of an emulation. The Ivy League had modeled itself after the gothic style of centuries-old European institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge; Pomona sought to garner the academic prestige associated with these east coast institutions, resulting in a Californianized take on Ivy League architecture. Its large central quad, Ionic columns, and symmetrical building design harken back to a classic collegiate look, and courtyards, fountains, and touches of Spanish Colonial Revival architectural influence provide a western feel.

Half a century later, Scripps set out to cultivate its own campus aesthetic. As a historically women’s college, beauty and domesticity were paramount in its construction; former President Frederick Hard described Scripps as a “College in a Garden” (Marvin, 1987). In the early 20th century, a major part of female education centered around cultivating their intuitive aesthetic standard, and Scripps students were meant to develop this intuition by absorbing their beautiful surroundings. A wall encloses the perimeter of the campus, and each building is turned inward, away from the surrounding streets and town, prioritizing the protection of interior, private spaces. With its red-tiled roofs and sweeping lawns, the campus was still clearly influenced by the sensibilities of East Coast colleges. However, it drew its most notable architectural influence from its main academic guide: the liberal arts.

The liberal arts were originally developed from a Greco-roman curriculum. We credit Plato with officially formalizing this course of study, which took shape through discussion, teaching, and research in order to further his central goal of education: to promote the good of the individual and the safety of the state.
This academic legacy has contributed to the preservation of Greece as a beacon of democracy, the arts, and philosophical achievement. Scripps intentionally associates itself with Greek prestige through its curriculum, which requires engagement with most of Plato’s original seven disciplines: Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Music, Geometry, Arithmetic, and Astronomy. However, the school is still most explicitly tied to the Mediterranean basin through its aesthetic. Almost every building on campus is draped in cream stucco and topped with terracotta tile, clearly constructed in the Mission Revival style. Rosemary bushes, pomegranate plants, and, of course, olive trees serve to further immerse the campus’s inhabitants and visitors into the Mediterranean ideal that the campus attempts to cultivate. After all, olives take up a considerable amount of space on Mediterranean land and plates. While recounting her time researching the crop in Morocco, *Olive Oil: From Tree to Table* author Peggy Knickerbocker recollected a morning when “we drove from about 8:00 in the morning till about 2:00 in the afternoon, and didn't see anything but olive trees.”

Whether subconscious or intentional, when Scripps architect Gordon B. Kaufmann chose to design the college in the Mission Revival style, he wasn’t solely reconstructing an environment of academic prestige; the Platonic promotion of the safety of the state was unmistakably at play. In our cultural imagination, ancient Greece is predominantly remembered as the birthplace of democracy and western philosophy. The Greek legacy evokes imagery of Athenian assemblies, men lounging in togas, and chalk-white statues depicting gods and goddesses. In this collective memory, ancient Athens is enveloped in the warm glow of a safe haven, representing a morally and intellectually purer time that we can only aspire to emulate.

Scripps College’s Mediterranean-inspired architecture was constructed to deliberately call upon associations with this idealized version of ancient Greece — aesthetics are designed to
market ideology, and our campus design inherently promotes the safety of the state. Our nostalgic memory of ancient Greece obscures its racial, economic, and gendered inequalities, and associating with the civilization allows an institution to similarly distract from its own ongoing injustices. Therefore, the college’s aesthetic ties to idealized democracy safeguard it against disruption and allow it to continue its colonial project.

It’s all in the name: Mission Revival style is impossible to extricate from the goals of its colonial origins. It features many of the attributes found in the closely-related known Spanish Colonial Revival style, including “smooth stucco walls, low-pitched red-tile roofs, [and] wide, open, overhanging eaves with exposed wood rafters” (Carney). However, Mission Revival is distinctly Californian. Its initial boost in popularity was driven by the 1893 world’s fair, where architect Page Brown’s design for the California Building resurrected the state’s decaying Franciscan missions. At the time, California was reckoning with the construction of its own history apart from the narrative of the east coast. Just as eastern American history “began” with the arrival of the colonizers aboard the Mayflower, California latched onto its own colonial beginnings to construct its history. The Franciscan missions were the colonial strongholds from which indigenous communities were decimated, and from which the newly instituted European state that became California was established and protected. They were constructed with the central aim to promote the good of the European individual and the safety of the colonial state.

Mission Revival became the symbol of a newly synthesized Californian history. Tourists and residents alike took to the style in droves. As charted by Steve Carney for the Los Angeles Times, in the early 20th century,

“whitewashing any sins of departed conquistadores, Californians and newcomers alike bought into the idyllic, pastoral life the Mission Revival suggested. They started building homes that matched the idyll, and that same pride of place spurred efforts to save Father Serra’s originals.”
To this day, the Spanish mission is central to the conception of the state’s history. They’re widely recognized as the state’s oldest structures, are its most popular historic monuments, and have been adopted as a symbol of California. The state’s oldest and largest cities formed around the missions, including Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose, and San Francisco.

I’ve spent my whole life being educated in Southern California; I attended field trips to Spanish missions, road-tripped along the bell-lined 101, and even completed the infamous fourth-grade project during which I built my own scale model of a mission. Within our public school system, we’re explicitly indoctrinated into the romanticization of Spanish colonizers and the architectural remnants that they left behind.

Mission Revival isn’t the only persistent symbol of colonial power in California — Spanish colonizers also introduced the olive tree to the state. California’s first olive trees were planted in 1769 at the state’s first Franciscan stronghold: Mission Basilica San Diego de Alcalá. In the early 20th century, San Diego still led all California counties in the number of acres devoted to the crop. Unsurprisingly, this resulted in the county’s status as the hub of the American olive oil industry; the sooner olives can be pressed and bottled, the better the quality of the oil, so close proximity between the field and the press is paramount.

The peak of the San Diegan olive oil industry also coincided with Ellen Browning Scripps’ residence in the county, as well as with the era in which she was involved in the creation of Scripps College. By the early 1920s, the philanthropist had purchased the land on which her eponymous college was built. The construction of the college further removed the Tongva people from access to their land through its privatization, the usage of Mission Revival architectural style, and the constructed landscape, which heavily featured *olea europaea*. According to
Landscape Operations Manager Joya Salas, the fruiting variety of our trees are even named Mission olive trees, alluding to their colonial function.

The trees originally took root in the corner of a courtyard in the Clark dormitory, in the earth under what is now the Dorothy M. Drake Wing of Denison Library, and in the space now occupied by the Bette Cree Edwards Humanities Building. Though their existence is well documented through photography and student memory, their presence on the campus wasn’t written into the institutional record. During my exploration of the archives at Denison Library, I was unable to find any records of campus plans where landscape architect Edward Huntsman-Trout acknowledged the trees. He created extensive itemized lists of the trees he planted, their prices, and written instructions that shaped the flora of the campus, but *olea europaea* was nowhere to be found.

I can only conjecture as to why the trees were left off the list — were olive trees so abundant at the time that their addition wasn’t worthy of written acknowledgment? Were the trees so inextricable from California’s colonial history that they were seen as a natural extension of the Mission Revival architecture of the campus (rather than an additional landscaping element)? Did the grove of olive trees predate the construction of the college?

The existence of Scripps’ significant grove of olive trees continued to evade written documentation well into the 1950s. In a 1955 pamphlet titled *Trees and Shrubs of Claremont, Calif.*, author C. Burnell Olds charts roughly 40 pages worth of the town’s flora. However, despite Scripps sporting roughly 100 olive trees, the only olive trees mentioned by Olds are found on Pomona’s campus. We may never get a definitive answer to why Scripps’ abundance of olive trees was ignored in historical records. Nevertheless, though they weren’t adequately
documented by Olds or Huntsman-Trout, the trees left a considerable impression on Scripps students.
Figure 1: Students lounging in Olive Court, found between Toll and Grace Scripps Clark Hall. The students adopt poses ranging from casual group conversation, to intent focus on a book, to thoughtful solitary contemplation. I have adopted similar studious postures when I’m attempting to avoid eye contact with a college tour group. This patio was supposedly once a popular space to socialize on campus, and was named for an olive tree that once shaded a corner of the courtyard. (Denison, 1930-31)

Figure 2: Another photo of students gathered in Olive Court, adopting somewhat more relaxed postures. One student leans nonchalantly against one of the arches that frames the patio. (Robert, 1929-1980)

Figure 3: Olive Court, with plants growing in the fountain. The olive tree within the photo looks either older or less tightly-trimmed than it appeared in figures 1 and 2. Plants have also been given leeway to grow in the Olive Court fountain. (York Studio, 1929-1980)

Figure 4: Two students read a book under an olive tree in Olive Court, Browning Hall at their backs. They exhibit the same concentrated posture and refused acknowledgement of the photographer as the students depicted in figures 1 and 2. (York Studio, 1930-1974)
Figure 5: Two students and a cat walking in the Scripps Olive Tree Grove. This grove was eventually the site of the Bette Cree Edwards Humanities Building. The Margaret Fowler Garden can be seen to the left in the background. The presence of a cat imparts a distinctly domestic energy: the same energy that historically women’s colleges are usually designed to foster. (Dubinsky, 1950)
By the 1960s, the college had outgrown the limited classroom space offered by Balch Hall. When they set out to construct a new academic building, the administration quickly settled on using the location occupied by Scripps’ Olive Grove. However, students weren’t happy about that plan. The student reaction made a considerable impression on then Scripps president Mark H. Curtis, who recounted the incident in a letter to Stefanos Polyzoides, professor of architecture at USC, in February of 1992 which is worth quoting at length:

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Prof. Stefanos Polyzoides
School of Architecture
University of Southern California
University Park
Los Angeles, CA 90089

February 28, 1992

Dear Prof. Polyzoides:

You may have heard of me. Counting Mrs. Shirk, who served on an interim basis, I was the fourth president of Scripps College and my tenure extended from 1964 to 1976. I was pleased to get an announcement yesterday that at Lang Gallery the college is mounting an exhibit of the designs of several talented California architects of the early twentieth century including those of Gordon Kaufmann. I am particularly delighted to learn that you are not only helping to sponsor the event but will deliver the opening lecture on the collaboration of Gordon Kaufmann and Edward Huntsman-Trout in designing the exquisite set of buildings and grounds that set Scripps apart as special place of beauty.

Aside from commending you for these efforts, I have another reason for writing. I want to tell you a little-known anecdote which, I think, helps one see a connection between the work of Kaufmann and Huntsman-Trout and the later developments on the campus. During the twelve years of my presidency, most of the buildings that were not designed by Gordon Kaufmann appeared on the campus. To be sure, Ted Cifley, who had worked with Kaufmann, and Jack Warner, who had great respect for his distinguished predecessor, as architects of the major building of this period, did their utmost to preserve the spirit and harmony of the original creators. How well they succeeded is illustrated by this anecdote.

The first sit-in that occurred at Scripps in the decade of the sixties was not about Viet Nam nor the movement for human rights but about the Olive Grove that once completely filled the space where the Humanities Building now stands. Jack Warner and I had decided that that was the proper site for the new major office-classroom building which he was to design. We had reached that decision just as he had one morning quickly sketched a ground plan that showed that a building did not need to replace the Grove but could be added to it.

The next day, before I had had a chance to explain any of this to students, faculty or alumni, a crew appeared on campus to take soil samples and drill test holes in the Olive Grove. This activity started the rumor mills and I got back from a meeting in Los Angeles at 2:30 P.M. to discover my office filled with angry students who were protesting any measure to do away with the Olive Grove.

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Generally, I had had good relations with the Scripps students and they were usually ready to accept my explanations of troubling matters in a reasonable way. This time, however, it took me nearly an hour to persuade them that there could be a way to build in the Olive Grove without destroying it. And even when they departed, many were still dubious.

The next morning, I discovered that my session with the students was not to be the end of the matter. I received a couple of angry telephone calls from alumnae who warned me that I, a newcomer to Scripps who could obviously have no real feeling for the place, would not be allowed to desecrate one of the "holy of holies" on the campus.

Taking counsel with an alum who was a member of the Board and a strong supporter of my policies, I learned that Edward Huntsman-Trout was still living and that he might be willing to offer me some advice about a site for this major new building. I immediately called him. After I informed him about the purpose of my call, he--to my astonishment and delight--said that the only place for such a structure was the Olive Grove. When I mentioned that many persons had protested that placing the building there would violate his design of the campus, he replied that the reason his plan called for an Olive Grove at all was to save the land at the spot it occupied for a major development like a new humanities building. I asked whether I might quote him to that effect and he promptly responded, "Of course." When I explained that Jack Warner's plan did not call for the eradication of the Olive Grove but for a building schedule that would allow us to move the olive trees into a holding bed at the east end of the campus and then the replanting of eight of them within the courtyard of the new building and the rest around the outside, he exclaimed: "All the better."

The story ends here. I drafted an announcement to publicize Huntsman-Trout's pronouncements to all constituencies of the College. It silenced further criticism because it assured students and alumnae that a later generation of college architects and administrators were keeping faith with the original planners of the campus, even if at first they had been unaware of how they were acting in accord with the intentions of such far-seeing individuals as Kaufmann and Huntsman-Trout.

I hope this story is of interest to you.

Cordially yours,

Mark H. Curtis
President Emeritus
Association of American Colleges

Figure 6: 1992 letter from Former President of Scripps College Mark Curtis to USC Professor of Architecture Stefanos Polyzoides discussing the student protests to protect the campus’ Olive Grove. (Curtis, 1992)

This letter both provokes questions and provides answers about the relationships that students, administration, and Huntsman-Trout had with the olive grove. Curtis introduces the event to Polyzoides as an anecdote that provides insight into the nature of the “special place of beauty” that is Scripps College, explaining that “the first sit-in that occurred at Scripps in the
decade of the sixties was not about [Vietnam] nor the movement for human rights but about the Olive Grove that once completely filled the space where the Humanities Building now stands.” (Curtis, 1). The nature of the student protests and their relationship with the campus olive trees elicits questions that get to the core of the very nature of the institution. As Curtis divulges in the letter, students felt called to protest the removal of the olive trees before taking action against human rights violations or the Vietnam War. Curtis says that these were the first protests on campus during the ’60s, and yet Scripps students “took the trees” in 1968, as the decade was coming to a close. In an era remembered for its student activism, it’s worth interrogating why this culture wasn’t prevalent at Scripps.

It’s essential to not only consider the root cause of the protest but also how the conflict between the students and Curtis played out. The former college president provides some insight as the letter proceeds:

“Jack Warneke and I had decided that that was the proper site for the new major office-classroom building which he was to design. We had reached that decision just after he had one morning quickly sketched a ground plan that showed that a building did not need to replace the Grove but could be added to it. The next day, before I had had a chance to explain any of this to students, faculty or alumnae, a crew appeared on campus to take soil samples and drill test holes in the Olive Grove. This activity started the rumor mills and I got back from a meeting in Los Angeles at 2:30 p.m. to discover my office filled with angry students who were protesting any measure to do away with the Olive Grove. Generally, I had had good relations with the Scripps students and they were usually ready to accept my explanations of troubling matters in a reasonable way. This time, however, it took me nearly an hour to persuade them that there could be a way to build in the Olive Grove without destroying it. And even when they departed, many were still dubious. The next morning I discovered that my session with the students was not to be the end of the matter. I received a couple of angry telephone calls from alumnae who warned me that I, a newcomer to Scripps who could obviously have no real feeling for the place, would not be allowed to desecrate one of the “holy of holies” on the campus.” (Curtis 1-2; emphasis added)
From Curtis’ perspective, the students who “were usually ready to accept [his] explanations of troubling matters in a reasonable way” had become uncommonly agitated when confronted with a potential threat to the campus trees. Though we’re not offered an explanation of what other troubling matters Curtis had explained to the students, having to discuss a contentious subject with them in his office for an hour was apparently an extraordinary occurrence.

Scripps alumna Sue Talbot ’69 provided student insight into the protest in a 2011 interview, where she recalled that “it’s true, we did in fact sit down in front of the bulldozers. They were not running at the time but we did our protest…. Anything that… disrupted our daily life was kind of a bigger thing than was going on in the bigger world.” Talbot reveals that during their defense of the trees, Scripps students recreated the tactics that they’d likely observed from other protests that had been covered by the media. However, the students clearly knew that in this instance, they would never be harmed. That same protective privilege was not afforded to protestors who demonstrated against other causes, who inhabited different bodies, or who were otherwise deemed as a threat to the safety of the state.

When considering the lack of student activism alongside the aesthetic change to the campus environment that eventually sparked community protest, it makes you question what the campus is designed to imbue within its students. When constructing the historically women’s college, Huntsman-Trout and Kaufmann set out to create an intentionally insular, domestic environment. The campus is encircled by walls, and luxurious, homey student housing accommodations are one of the key attributes that Scripps is known for. Talbot’s interview reveals the effects of this environment; students’ attention was directed towards their immediate surroundings, and events in “the bigger world” seemed comparatively smaller. The Claremont bubble isn’t a coincidence: it was designed that way.
As Curtis’ letter comes to a close, he provides some insight into the intentions of one of the campus designers:

“Taking counsel with an alum who was a member of the Board and a strong supporter of my policies, I learned that Edward Huntsman-Trout was still living and that he might be willing to offer me some advice about a site for this major new building. I immediately called him. After I informed him about the purpose of my call, he—to my astonishment and delight—said that the only place for such a structure was the Olive Grove. When I mentioned that many persons had protested that placing the building there would violate his design of the campus, he replied that the reason his plan called for an Olive Grove at all was to save the land at the spot it occupied for a major development like a new humanities building. I asked whether I might quote him to that effect and he promptly responded, “Of course.” When I explained that Jack Warneke’s plan did not call for the eradication of the Olive Grove but for a building schedule that would allow us to move the olive trees into a holding bed at the East End of the campus and then the replanting of eight of them within the courtyard of the new building and the rest around the outside, he exclaimed: “All the better”.” (Curtis 2; emphasis added)

Here, we find a potential answer to Huntsman-Trout’s lack of acknowledgment of the grove within his landscaping plans: he predominantly viewed the trees as a placeholder for future construction. Huntsman-Trout knew that the trees were going to be displaced and that the water, soil, and care that was dedicated to the trees would serve a temporary, purely aesthetic purpose. However, the natural Californian chaparral couldn’t be allowed to assert itself in the center of campus. Rather than nurturing a garden of indigenous plants, Huntsman-Trout used the grove of nearly 100 olive trees to reassert the campus’s Mediterranean facade.
Figure 7: A view through the olive branches from vantage point of the second floor of the northernmost side of the Bette Cree Edwards Humanities Building. (Denison, 1970)

Figure 8: An olive tree is lowered by a crane into Lyddon Court, watched by a person and a dog. The presence of pets on campus reinforces its domestic feel. The juxtaposition of the olive tree and the massive crane speaks to the physical lengths that the institution was willing to go to protect its olive trees and to leverage their symbolism. (Denison, 1968-1970)

Figure 9: Replanted olive trees in Lyddon Court. The trees are arranged in the same formation that they once held in Scripps campus’ original Olive Grove, giving the impression that this predominantly domestic space is generously providing space for academic pursuits (not the other way around). (Denison, 1970)

Figure 10: Another photo peering through the olive branches of the Bette Cree Edwards Humanities Building. The branches provide a bit of privacy to the second story balconies, continuing Scripps campus’ proclivity towards the creation of private space.
Ultimately, 60 trees from the olive grove were dug up, boxed, stored, and replanted around the building that had displaced them in the first place. In an interview by Enid H. Douglass with President Curtis for the *Scripps College Oral History Collection*, he expressed his relief at the success of the transplantation of the olives, saying “I was afraid we're going to lose some. We lost only one. [My wife] said, ‘I used to go down and talk to those trees everyday and encourage them to grow.’” (161).

Following the student protest around the olive trees, the college’s administration appeared to prioritize communication on tree wellbeing to the student body, treating the matter with a surprising level of sensitivity. In a 1999 email to the Scripps community, then-President Nancy Y. Bekavac broke the news of the removal of a tree from Elm Tree Lawn in an uncommonly earnest manner, writing that “on solemn occasions, it is best to cite a poet. Homer wrote: As the generation of leaves, so is that of men. Iliad, V1.146 Now, we must reverse the insight -- leaves, and trees, are like human beings. They are mortal.” Perhaps Bekavac wanted to avoid the accusation pointed at President Curtis — that she was “[desecrating] one of the “holy of holies” on the campus.” (Curtis 2) Perhaps she was just deeply passionate about preserving the “green cathedral” (Bekavac) of Elm Tree Lawn. Perhaps she was simply one to lean into her classics background. Whatever the case may be, the level of gravity imbued in opening an email with a funereal quote from Homer and ending it with the ever-foreboding “Et in Arcadia ego” is surprising when you realize that the message is dedicated to explaining the justified removal of a single tree from campus. The existence of this email points to the administration’s recognition that the Scripps student body is incredibly attentive to the environment of the campus, as well as their desire to reassure the community of the college’s aesthetic preservation.
In 1984, this aesthetic preservation was all but guaranteed by Scripps’ addition to the National Registry of Historic Places. It is the only one of the Claremont College campuses to be registered — Pomona’s Helen Goodwin Renwick House is the only other 5C property to be listed on the registry, and it makes up a minuscule part of the college’s campus. Furthermore, in the early 2000s, Scripps became the first campus to be awarded a Campus Heritage Grant from the Getty Grant Program. This award was created to assist colleges in “managing and preserving the integrity of their significant historic buildings, sites, and landscapes” (Getty) that were deemed at risk of change. The grant documented the appearance, history, and original design of different sites on campus, such as Sicilian Court, Iris Court, and Margaret Fowler Garden. Following this survey, the sites were adjusted to recreate their original design. The grant also resulted in the creation of the *Scripps College Landscape & Architectural Blueprint*. Put simply: the institution’s dedication to aesthetic preservation and maintenance is singular among the Claremont Colleges and significant even on the national level.

I feel echoes of the Platonic goal of the “safety of the state” among all of the registrations and grants awarded to Scripps. From the colonization of the land by the Spanish, to the incorporation of the city of Claremont, to the purchase of the land by Eleanor Scripps, to the holistic aesthetic renovation of the land, to the official protection of the campus under the National Registry of Historic Places, the Tongva land that hosts Scripps College has borne layer after layer of dissociation from its original stewards. The architecture and olives associated with the Mediterranean are powerful symbols — powerful enough to garner funding and legal protection so that the land is frozen in its current aesthetic form. We have not deemed this piece of land worthy of historic protection — we have deemed a specific, distinctly colonial moment of this land’s history worthy of preservation. The *Scripps College Landscape & Architectural*
Blueprint is over 100 pages long, yet it only dedicates two sentences to acknowledging the indigenous people who inhabited the land for the vast majority of its history: “People have inhabited the Claremont area for thousands of years. Prior to being claimed by Spain and established as a territory of the Spanish crown, the land in and around Claremont and throughout the San Gabriel Valley was inhabited by the Tongva, or Gabrieleño, people.” (10).

In another section of the Scripps College Landscape & Architectural Blueprint, the campus’ olive trees are finally acknowledged and cataloged in written form. The “Scripps College Tree Tour,” found in appendix G of the blueprint, was produced by Cy Carlberg, Megan Ritchie ’02, and Jim Sherman and details 24 types of the campus’ most notable trees. However, within their descriptions, *olea europaea* is the only plant that is cited as holding symbolic meaning for the school and its students; according to the tour guide, “olive trees are an important symbol of peace and learning at Scripps.”

However, Scripps is far from the only community that finds significance in the olive tree. For millennia before Scripps’ founding, olive oil has been used in religious rites, as a medicine, as a contraceptive, as a component of skincare and soap, as lamp oil, and as one of the most popular ingredients in the world. Olives and their products hold symbolic significance in many different religions, including Hellenism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Olive trees are resistant to drought, disease, and fire, making them some of the hardiest plants around.

After considering their symbolism and cultural weight, it’s unsurprising that they seem to inspire a decided devotion in the people who reside among them or enjoy olive products. Olive oil in particular seems to have a distinct ability to draw people in. “I started using exclusively olive oil and not using butter,” said Knickerbocker. “It just kind of hit me in every way.” In a conversation with Formaggio Kitchen Founder Ihsan Gurdal, he revealed a similar devotion to
the ingredient. “I love olive oil. I’ve lived all my life with it... I grew up in Istanbul, so all the
dishes were olive oil based,” said the ingredient importer. "There’s a great guy in the New York
Times that wrote an article on using olive oil. He's like, 'don't restrain yourself, don't listen to the
snobs that say, "put a little drop of this, a little drop of that." Try to use it freely.' I'm in that
category... my wife would be the first one to say ‘you're wilting the greens!’.”

The olive tree also holds a cultural cache outside of its prominence in the food world. The
olive branch is depicted on the emblem of the United Nations, and olive wreaths crowned
winners of the ancient Olympic games. An olive branch laurel is even the logo of our own
student newspaper, The Scripps Voice. As explained by 2019 Editor-in-Chief Maureen Cowhey,

“the olive branch not only draws on the famous Scripps olive trees that shade our
campus, but also the laurel wreath is the symbol of the humanities and great writers... [as
well as] a reminder of Scripps students’ commitment to activism. The very olive trees
that are still standing on campus are only present because of Scripps students coming
together to protect them during the construction of the Edwards Humanities Building.”
(“A New Logo for a New Era”).

Though I don’t necessarily agree with Cowhey’s interpretation of our trees as a testament to
Scripps students’ commitment to activism, I agree that our campus olive trees have been imbued
with that meaning as the campus culture has shifted. 54 years after students defended the trees, a
vibrant culture of student activism has become yet another selling point for the college
experience. Thus, despite the 1968 defense of the olive grove being the first Scripps sit-in of the
decade, it has been reframed to give the impression of a lengthy history of activism at Scripps; a
history that, according to President Curtis, didn’t exist.

Those same Scripps olive trees were one of the first things I noticed when I made my first
drive up to Claremont on a blazing hot summer day in 2016. Our college tour group took refuge
in their shade as our guide chatted about our mascot, the goddess Athena. Associating the
campus with ancient Greece was my immediate reaction. In my mind, Scripps became a
miniature Athens, gifted with an abundance of olive trees; a Mediterranean utopia governed by philosophy and logic; a benevolent institution that promoted the same values of peace and friendship that were imparted by its olives.

It’s difficult to think of a plant that holds more symbolic power than the olive tree, which is precisely why it is such a powerful colonial tool. From California to Argentina to Australia, the olive tree has acted as a sort of flag that colonizers would plant in the ground to claim it as their own. The symbolism that the olive tree evokes acts as a surrogate for the absence of actual history that colonial powers have in a region. The presence of the tree evokes a myriad of connotations: emotive, religious, nourishing, and more, that stand in for remembrances tied to a specific community, city, state, or country. Due to their resilient nature, many trees have survived for millennia, making some of them older than any religion, nation-state, or rite that they’re associated with. Olive trees have borne witness to history, and oftentimes have stood in for history itself.

Colonizers planted olive trees to claim land, to extract agricultural value, and to harness the plant’s symbolic power. However, ever since the advent of suburbanization in the mid-20th century, the colonial demand for olive trees has been predominantly driven by aesthetics over agriculture. “In the suburban world… people are not really putting love and care into the trees as much as wanting the trees to look beautiful,” said Community Organizer and Herbalist Devorah Brous. “What you hear and see a lot of is ‘I don't want to maintain it, it's just going to take so much energy and it's going to cost money for me to bring in someone to clean up the stains on the asphalt and harvest all those olives.’”

Unsurprisingly, Scripps College was not immune to these suburban tendencies. When olive trees were brought to campus, their fruit was an afterthought — they served a purely
aesthetic purpose. Though the branches of our olive trees have prevailed and provided shaded refuge from the sweltering Claremont summers for almost 100 years, we’ve only harvested their fruit for the past 10. This change has been accompanied by the undesirable asphalt stains dreaded by so many suburbanites. In early November of my freshman year, my college campus was covered in black splotches. Olive trees line the pathways that lead me to my classes, and every year, as the temperature drops, so do the pitted fruits. It’s impossible to avoid the squelch of sole against seed, and before long, everyone’s shoes are stained with the dark extract.

The olive stains have prevailed due to the efforts of Scripps students, professors, and staff. In the early aughts, students began investigating whether the plants could provide more than a shaded place to sit before classes. “They quickly found out some interesting things,” said Politics Professor Nancy Neiman. “None of the trees were actually fruiting because we had sprayed them so that they wouldn’t drop olives… because the priority was of course the aesthetics of the campus.”

Thanks to a considerable amount of time and money, our campus is able to maintain this Mediterranean aesthetic. However, for the olives to survive in Claremont’s arid climate, they still require supplemental water and attentive care from facilities staff. “There’s a huge commitment from the groundskeepers,” said Landscape Operations Manager Joya Salas. “Spring is when the trees flower and it can get pretty messy and, of course, fall is when our olives fruit, and when the fruit drops it can be messy as well. During our Olive Harvest event, we try to collect as many as possible so this does minimize the mess to a certain extent.”

Unpredictable climate conditions also increase the stress on our trees and groundskeepers. “Even if you water them, the heat you know causes some stress on them too,” said Groundskeeper Ramon Estrada. “Sometimes there are things that are hard for us to avoid,
but we always try to do the best for every tree.” Despite the generous amount of water and labor poured into sustaining the trees, they were not allowed to fruit prior to student organizing in the early 2000s.

Four years after the first group of students tried to initiate the olive harvest in 2008, a new group of students, Neiman, and Head of Grounds Lola Trafecanty were able to secure funding to harvest and press the olives after convincing the Board of Trustees to allow the trees to bear fruit. By November of 2012, the Claremont community came together to harvest olives from the 85-year-old trees. Over 1,500 pounds of Scripps’ fruit were carted 115 miles and pressed in Ojai, creating the first batch of Scripps olive oil.

On a whim, Trafecanty drove a couple of bottles over to the Los Angeles International Extra Virgin Olive Oil Competition held at the Fairplex in Pomona, California. The competition is the second largest in the country, only following New York; the 2022 competition consisted of 517 extra virgin olive oils from 246 producers across five continents. “It turns out that that olive oil competition is one of the five big olive oil competitions, and it just happened to be right around the corner,” said Neiman. “We entered thinking why not? And we won! We beat out the Italian olive oils, we beat out the Greek olive oils, it was really kind of cool.” In the following years, the Scripps’ oil continued to medal at the Los Angeles International Extra Virgin Olive Oil Competition, and the revenue generated from selling the bottles funded grants for student-led sustainability projects.

The Scripps olive trees have survived relocation and have gone on to create acclaimed olive oil once they were allowed to bear fruit. They have flourished due to almost a century of attentive care and countless gallons of water. However, they face an uncertain future due to the looming climate crisis. Due to the tree’s resilient nature, there isn’t much quantitative data on
how climate change has affected the industry. However, in my conversations with industry experts, they shared the plant’s vulnerabilities that they’re concerned about. “You always hear [about] good harvests, bad harvests, but the people that we work with haven’t come out and said ‘this is due to climate change,’” said Gurdal. “But I’ve heard ‘[there were] early frosts and we didn’t catch up.’ Bug issues are usually the biggest complaint… Two years ago there was an insect that really damaged the olive groves all over France and Italy and people were going bananas. We went from buying close to 200 liters to 90 liters that year... everybody was apologetic, but there was nothing they could have done.”

Nancy Jenkins, food writer and author of *Virgin Territory: Exploring the World of Olive Oil*, also cited concerns about how environmental shifts were affecting ancient trees. During our conversation, we spent time discussing the ancient olive trees of Puglia, Italy, some of which were planted by the Greeks in the 10th century BC. These same trees are currently being threatened by a mysterious disease, which doesn’t seem to bother the younger trees. “They’re handsome, massive, each one is an individual,” said Jenkins. “It’s heart-rending to think that they could disappear in our lifetime, having survived for thousands of years.”

Drought is another climate-related concern that is sure to shape food systems in the coming decades, but surprisingly, Jenkins is more worried about too much water than too little when it comes to olives. “Somebody once told me that the only thing that would really kill an olive tree is too much water,” said the author. As climate change causes extreme weather events to increase in frequency, they could threaten the conditions necessary for olive growth. If heavy rainfalls drench the groves, they have the potential to create gullies and flush the topsoil away, which poses a major problem for the trees. Jenkins also expressed concerns about how changing
temperatures would affect the harvest season, as warmer temperatures have the capacity to make or break the quality of olive oil.

Extreme weather conditions also have the potential to worsen the battle over water, soil, and olive trees between Israelis and Palestinians. During my conversation with Devorah Brous, we also discussed her organizing work within Israel and Palestine. “These olive trees are kind of like soldiers on the frontlines,” said Brous. “You have Palestinians that are hiding in the trees and Israeli snipers that are targeting the removal of those trees so that the Palestinians can’t snipe from those trees. And then you have Israelis burning down forests and preventing Palestinians from accessing their trees for harvest, which is the livelihood of a Palestinian village. And you just can’t even imagine how fraught the whole conflict is.” Palestinians have already lost access to so much of their land and resources due to Israeli apartheid, and olive trees are a significant financial, cultural, and material facet of this loss. Over 850,000 trees have been uprooted, many (if not most) of which are older than the Israel-Palestine conflict itself.

The olive tree holds much more than fruit. The plant is associated with both peace and genocide. Trees that have survived for millennia are newly vulnerable to the ravages of climate change. They inspire devotion and incite conflict. They act as a colonial tool while simultaneously inspiring activists and organizers to strengthen their communities. Brous said it best when she dubbed olive trees the tree of life. Olive trees enact our history, present, and future. They connect us to and alienate us from the land that we reside on. Ultimately, they hold all of the contradictions that color our existence.
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