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LTTE: Higher ed's anti-Blackness, in real time



Collegian | Christine Moore-Bonbright

Loren Branch, Guest Author

July 6, 2022

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This article by Dr. Sydney Freeman Jr. summarizes the reason why my previous role at Colorado State University will likely be the last time I work on anyone's college campus. I watched that position for years, joyfully accepted and moved across the country for it. A dream come true at the time.

I was on the most intentionally inclusive team I've ever experienced, with people I consider friends to this very moment. But the intentions of a few clearly did not reflect the institution as a whole, especially its leadership.

August 2019

I started the position.

Early September 2019

Students go **viral for doing blackface** with a "Wakanda forevaa" caption and the highlight of the President Joyce McConnell's **official statement** was essentially "due to the first amendment, there's nothing we can do."

Late September 2019

Someone writes "ni"er" (in what was believed to be blood and without asterisks) on the wall of a public outdoor bathroom. A bathroom I could see from my desk because it was managed by my department. A marking that could have easily been discovered by anyone, including one of our Black student employees at the time.

As the department's marketing and communications lead, silence wasn't an option, so my supervisor and I wrote a **statement** using a framework from **Dr. Rickey Frierson** (a friend and Black DEI director).

Within days of this statement's publishing, it came down the chain of command that all department statements had to be reviewed by the respective vice president's office and possibly the president's office. I wonder if that decision was made because we named oppression and racism or stated a firm stance against both. I can't find any of the full articles about the incident anymore so I guess this **one-sentence blurb** will have to do.

October 2019

CSU has an annual week of events and presentations called **The Symposium for Inclusive Excellence** (Diversity Symposium, at the time). During a breakout presentation, the speaker (a staff member) was verbally and visibly flustered from the start. Why? Because an old white man (campus role unknown, but gave me faculty vibes) showed up to argue that Black people "just have low IQs," citing standardized test research — yes, you read the event date correctly.

That conversation spilled over into disrupting the presentation and demanding the attention of all attendees to make that racist, outdated and false claim. Right on time, he was corrected by the reliable **Dr. Rickey Frierson** as students (including multiple Black folks) watched in horror/disbelief and I focused on containing my rage. I don't know if anyone ever submitted a bias incident report, but I didn't because I was unaware of the option, tired and what reason did I have to believe he would be held accountable?

January 2020

While celebrating a friend's birthday, a group of us (all Black, mostly university staff and mostly women and queer folks) attempted to enter Tony's Bar and Rooftop in Old Town Fort Collins. I got in first and after a bathroom break, realized no one else from the group was inside.

Upon walking back outside, it was made clear by the group's conversation with the bar's staff that multiple people right behind me were denied entry. After listening to the doorman's excuses for a minute or so, I could feel my anger bubbling over so I completely removed myself and walked home.

I later learned what happened from those who stayed, stood their ground, asked for explanations and informed the bar staff that these "policies" were overtly racist. Apparently, Tony's staff rationale went from "no gang colors" to "no rags or bandanas" to "no headbands" and other unwritten "policies" I don't remember.

Eventually, police showed up, condescendingly belittled my colleagues' experience, shined lights in their eyes and they were forced to leave the area — inevitably going home. Night ruined, tears shed and trauma endured. I quickly learned that problematic and dangerous incidents are a common occurrence at this particular bar. The **Yelp reviews** speak for themselves.

Mitchell Holston was one of the primary victims of this racist discrimination, who stood his ground from start to finish. In this brilliant and insightful **Facebook post**, he fully explains the incident and breaks down how all of the following applied to this situation: systemic racism, stereotypes, respectability politics, apathy of Black folks, and the "some of my best friends are Black" defense. He also shares the necessity of resistance and civic disobedience in these moments.

A bias incident report was submitted, which led to a meeting with the VP of Diversity and Inclusion's office (rest in peace, Mary Ontiveros). The outcomes of that meeting were typical higher ed responses of "our hands are tied," "committee" and "we're talking to the city to address this." Someone present for the incident shed tears while expressing how clear it was to them that no one but peers cared about their existence and safety.

It was also revealed that months earlier the office's paid-for and nearly complete marketing initiative to inform the campus about the bias reporting system was put on hold indefinitely after Joyce McConnell took over as president. Not to mention that my triggered response of walking away from that situation to contain rage (understandably) caused rifts between me and the only community of Black folks I had access to.

In the midst of it all...

A group of Black students got organized to protest and demand action. All were Black women. **Not Proud to Be** was consistent, concise and intentional. They talked and walked. After months of being ignored and belittled by the institution, they demanded a closed-door invite-only meeting with specific campus leaders, including President Joyce McConnell.

They made it clear that the meeting would start on time with doors locked and no one was to be permitted in after. With the meeting live-streamed on Instagram, McConnell was late and missed half or most of the presentation and forum before let inside.

They presented a previously shared list of demands with research and rationale for every single one. They shared experiences of their own and their peers', including the struggle of trying to make the campus a better place on top of coursework.

Some of the invited leaders asked valuable questions, expressed gratitude, shared insightful feedback and verbally offered support. All I remember of McConnell's words were repetitions of the same blanket statements about the then recently created "**Race, Bias and Equity Initiative**,"

A year after that meeting, NPTB shared **this video snapshot** of their battle at CSU. **This webpage** describes how the institution has "addressed" student demands.

Another related experience I remember is engaging with students at the first Black Student Activism Conference in February 2020. An undergrad student tearfully shared the experience of taking a semester off to recover from racial battle fatigue and trauma on campus. They have since graduated from CSU and after initially starting grad school there, ultimately completed their graduate education at another institution.

This is just a taste...

These are only the campus-related anti-Black moments I'm aware of during my time at CSU. There were other incidents ignored and swept under the rug while other identity and equity-based initiatives were thwarted and/or co-opted.

Off-campus: **Black Lives Matter protesters** were **beaten** during a "pro-police" rally in Fort Collins, **local teenagers** participated in the "**George Floyd Challenge**" with smiling faces (no photo in the article) and there's at least one **nearby city** that's basically a sundown town, and so on...

There are people on that campus and in that city giving their all to do incredible work. Nonetheless, the history of support and complicity for racism, bigotry and white supremacy is long and ongoing at Colorado State University, in the city of Fort Collins and in the state of Colorado — a genuine reflection of higher ed as an industry and the United States as a country.

I found out the hard way and I won't go into the all-time low mental and emotional state this series of traumatic events left me in ... but professionally, I struggled to be present, felt stuck in crisis mode and found myself asking: What am I doing here? What am I supporting? Do I really want to be overtly complicit in the apathy hurting my people?

Respectively, the answers were: The opposite of what I know and believe. White supremacy. And hell nah.

Loren Branch

Former assistant director of marketing and communications for CSU's Campus Recreation department

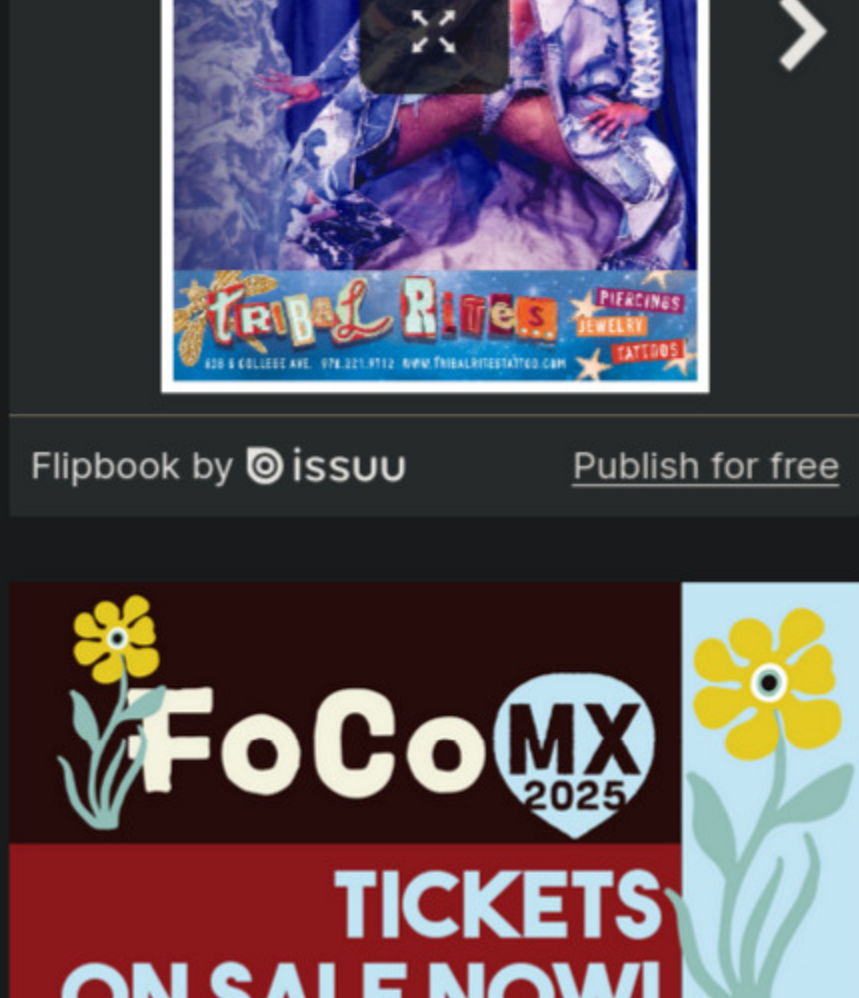
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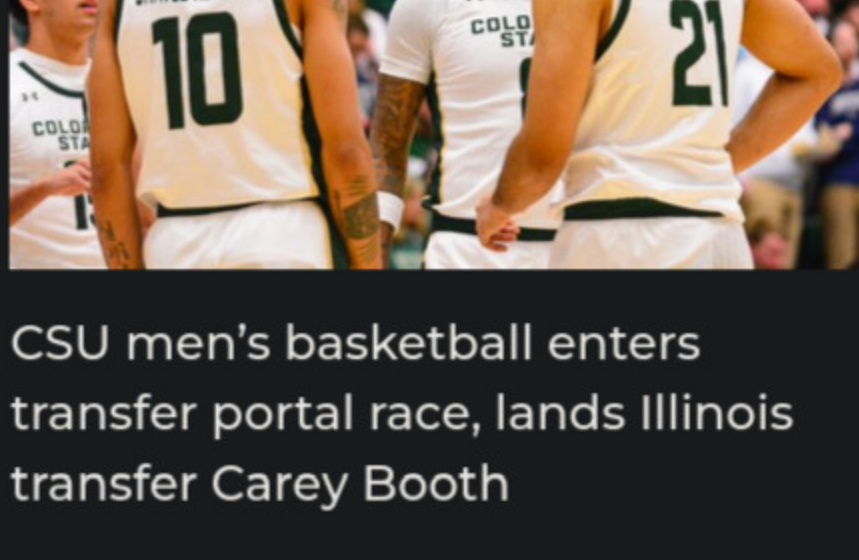
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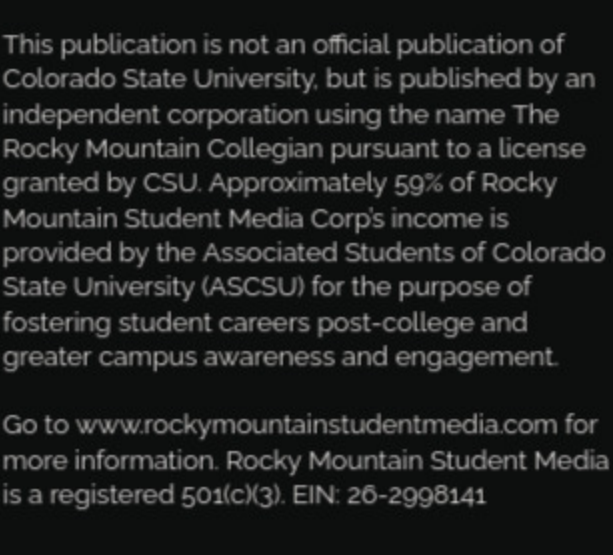
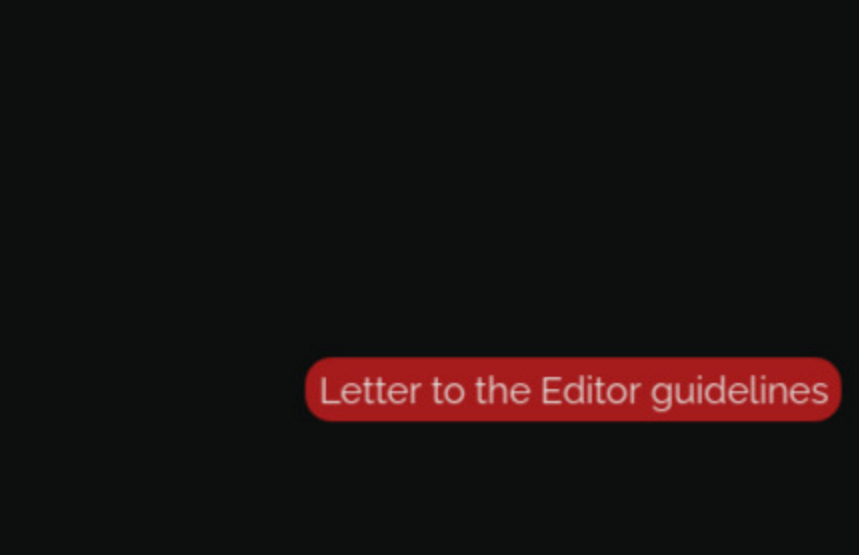
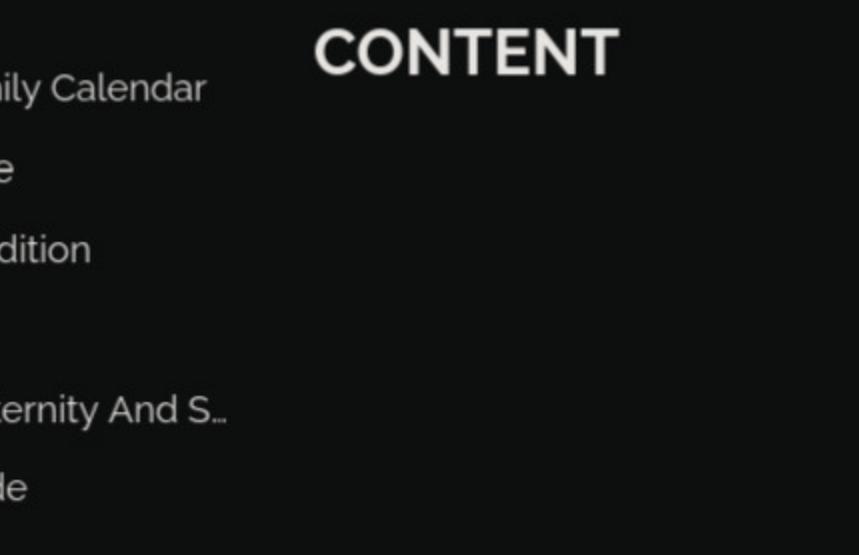
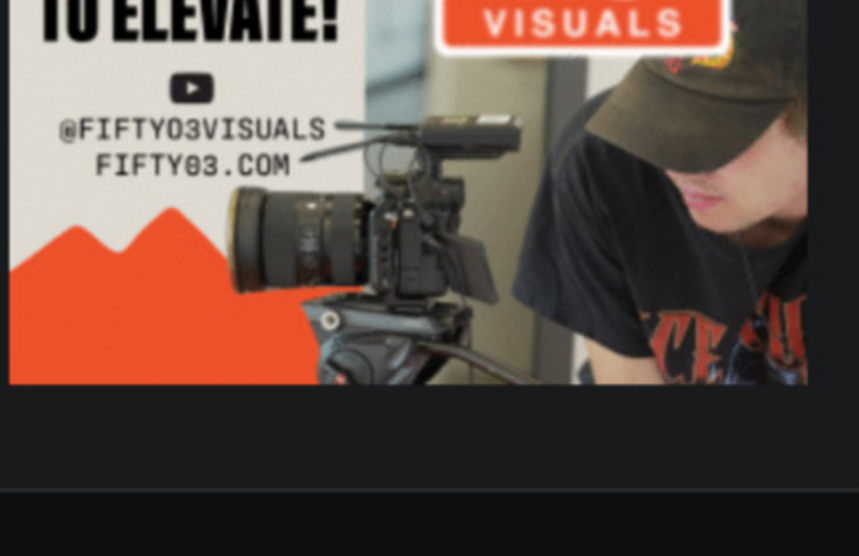
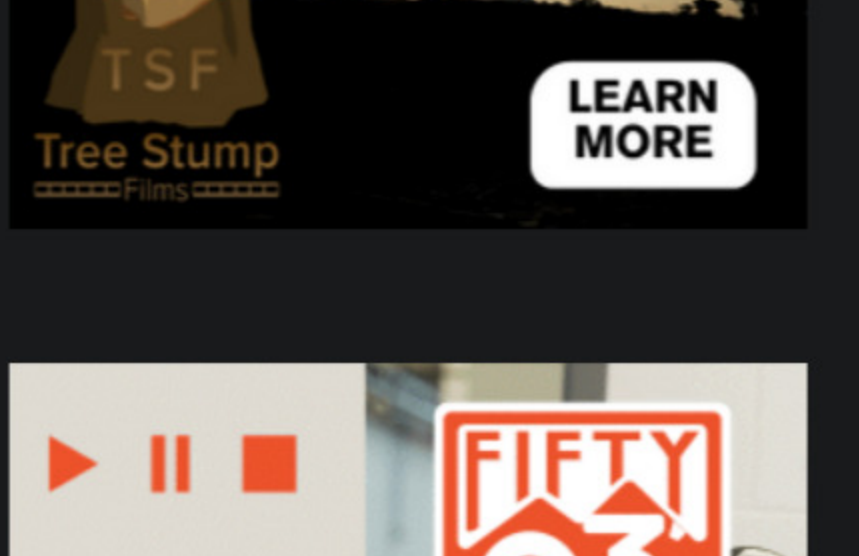
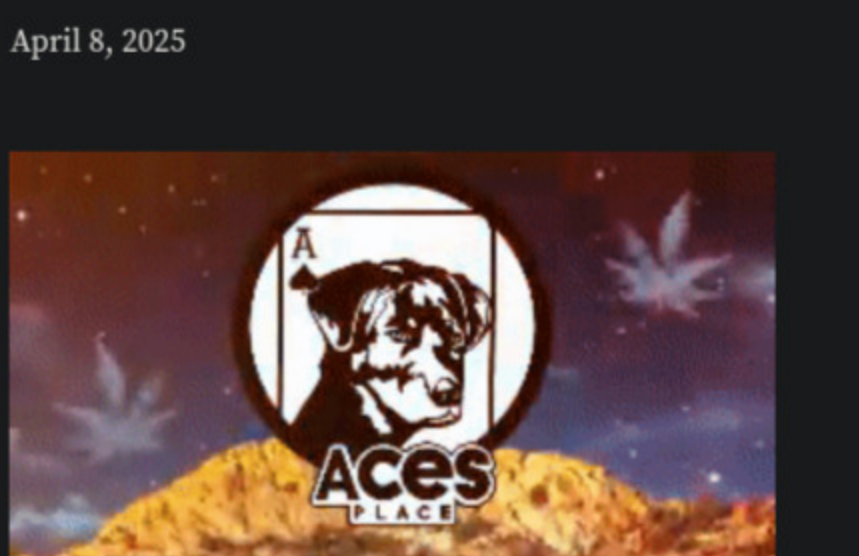
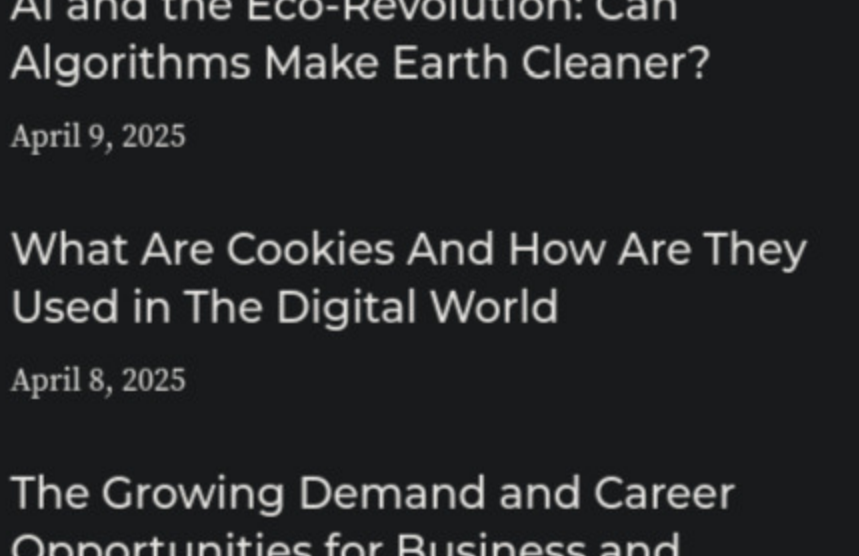
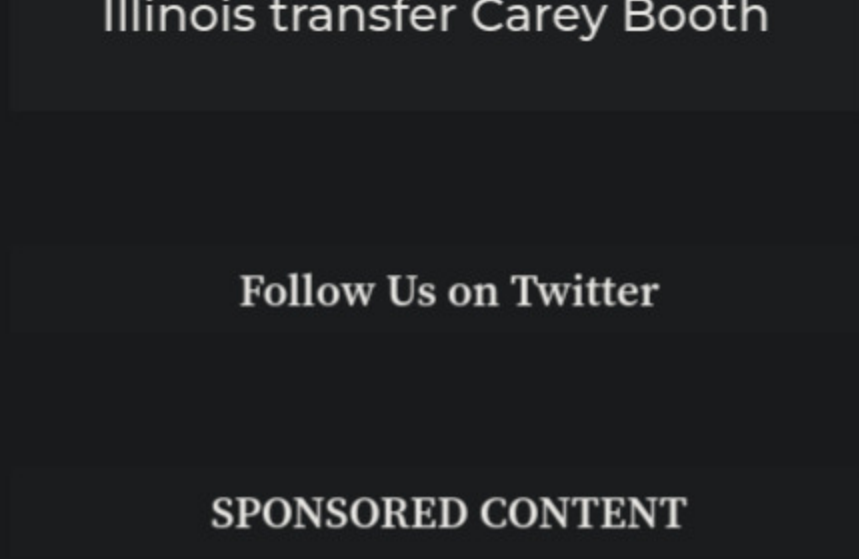
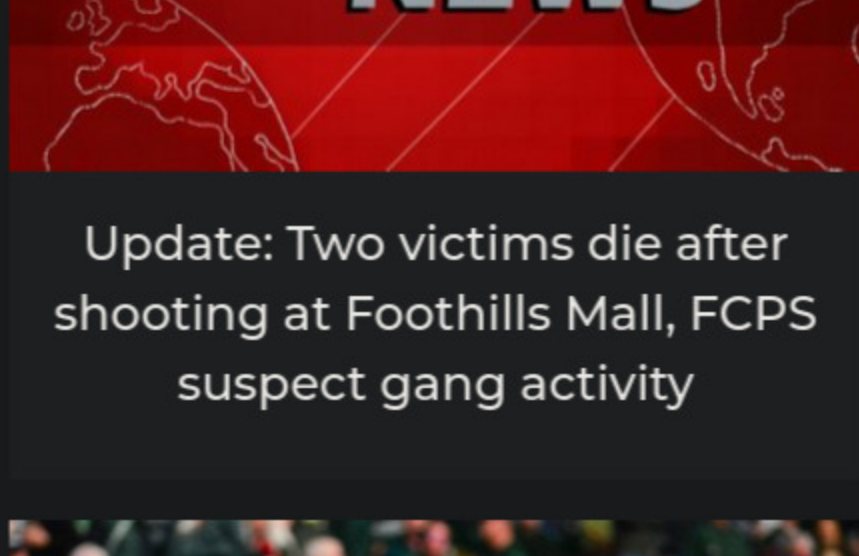
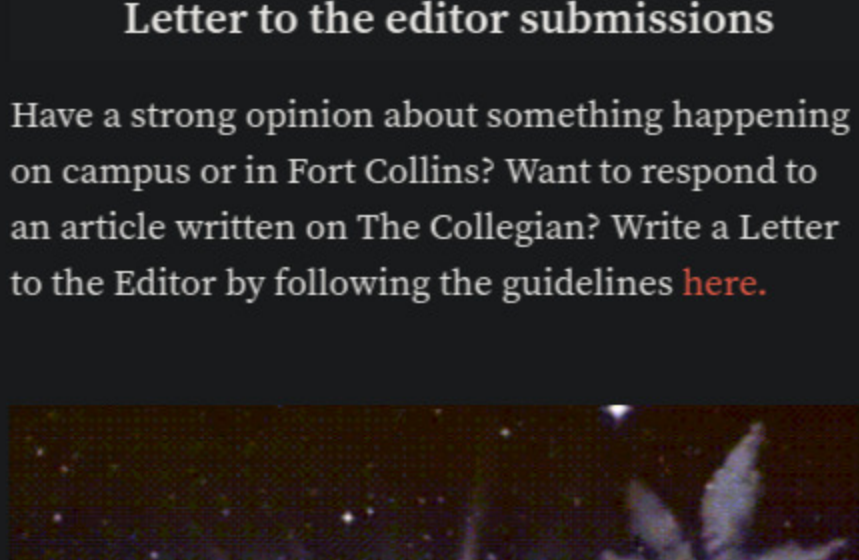
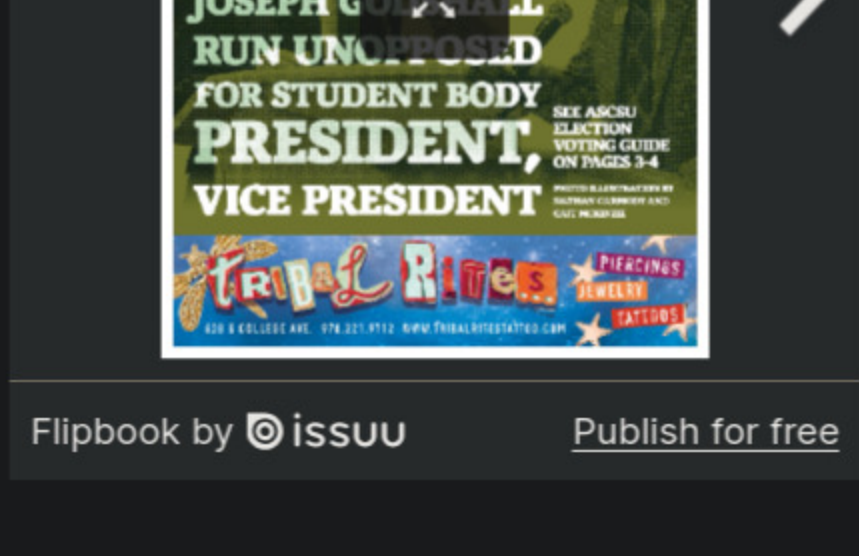
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