When I was younger I struggled, in the heavily philosophical manner that middle-schoolers are known for, with the concept of personal possession, with the words mine and my. It was in my nature, as it still is, to value giving over keeping, equality over accumulation; being characteristically shy, I would feel almost embarrassed to claim possessions as my own. It took a long time for me to really understand the root of this aversion: I hadn’t earned most of the things I owned. They were granted to me by the arbitrary hand of Luck, and while I could be grateful for them, I couldn’t be proud.

As I grew older I realized that most of my proudest possessions would not be in the form of physical objects, but in personal achievements. Those things that are mine with a pride utterly devoid of justification were earned through my own hands, my own mind, and the expression of that work is my pride. This is how I feel thinking of Cornell and every single person who walks its campus. They are mine: the people I love and those I’ve only glimpsed on the sidewalk; the grey T-Cat buses and their unfailingly late schedules; the sunsets over West Campus and the blizzards that hide the sun from view. These things will never have my name on them, but they are mine because I’ve earned the right to be among them, to count myself as a member of this community, because I’ve stamped my love here time and time again, I’ve signed it into every assignment I’ve turned in, every hour I’ve spent in the library stacks, every tennis ball I’ve picked up at practice and every time I’ve answered the question: so where do you go to school?
Last semester I left campus to spend five months at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. I went with the lust of a traveler and the curiosity of a critic, hoping to learn alternate ways to apply my environmental engineering studies to the real world and also wanting to recreate the Lord of the Rings journey for myself. What I found was a different world: a country more populated by sheep than people, a university spirit so uncompetitive that most students were unsure if varsity sports existed there, a total of three major highways in the South Island, all of which were two-lane and snaked through mountain passes and evergreen pastures. If I could take the beauty of Ithaca and expand it into an entire country, but a country barely larger (in size and in population) than the state of Oregon, I would have created New Zealand.

It was here, in this unfamiliar academic setting, as a foreigner and outsider, that my connection to Cornell became the strongest in my mind. I was Cornell to these people; I was the only representation of Cornell they’d ever known, and it was mine just as surely as my name is mine. I was Cornell’s adventurous spirit during the time we pulled the car off to the side of the highway and crested an unmarked mountain to find the best panoramic view, the times we’d free-climb jagged cliffs of limestone for the sheer thrill of it and share a beer at the top, the time it was raining hard enough to cause floods and we hiked a slippery path through glaciers in hopes of seeing rockslides. I was Cornell’s procrastinated hard work two weeks of final exams, when I realized I had been traveling instead of going to class, and managed to pull off As and Bs with the disciplined focus learned in the stacks of Uris Library at 3am. I was Cornell’s environmental voice when I joined sustainability clubs at the University of Auckland and spent lunchtimes washing reusable dishes for students to replace the cafeteria’s
throwaway plastic containers, and I was Cornell’s humanitarian plea when I participated in Live Below the Line, an initiative to raise money for the fight against poverty by living below New Zealand’s poverty line for a week.

Now when I think of *my Cornell*, it’s interspersed with the newfound love I have for my semester in New Zealand. The two are intertwined indefinitely because I never would have known New Zealand but for the opportunity presented by Cornell. This experience has given me the face of a new continent, but it’s also given me the opportunity to really miss the campus high above Cayuga’s waters. I’m proud and grateful for the life and love I see here and know that these four years, including my eye-opening semester in Auckland, are going to shape the rest of my life.