Sophie Spieler

THE WEALTHY, THE BRILLIANT, THE FEW

Elite Education in Contemporary American Discourse

[transcript] American Culture Studies

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Introduction

Tommy Hilfiger's 2013 fall campaign, somewhat enigmatically titled *cärpe-díem mañana*, centers around main protagonist Chloe Hilfiger's arrival at college. Shot at Princeton University, the campaign features all the staples of collegiate imagery: Gothic architecture, fall foliage, and groups of well-dressed students reading books. The campaign did not raise any eyebrows; after all, fashion brands have a long history of appropriating Ivy League aesthetics to sell their products. The image of the elite campus is a familiar sight in the marketing of high-end clothing ranging from traditional New England brands like J.Press and Brooks Brothers to newer labels such as Ralph Lauren and J.Crew. Hilfiger's campaign distinguished itself only through its elaborateness: His fictional Hilfigers, an "all-American family" pioneered three years earlier, were fleshed out in detailed character profiles on the brand's website and even, on occasion, operated their own Twitter accounts ("Fall 2013"). It was surely no coincidence, moreover, that the narratives about the family members were written by Lisa Birnbach, famous for her work in *The Official Preppy Handbook* (1980)[1]—another publication using and, in the process, shaping the collegiate aesthetics.

1 The Official Preppy Handbook was published in 1980 as "a tongue-in-cheek guide to one of America's obscure little subcultures," as one of its editors puts it (Wallace). It became a bestseller, inspiring a range of similar publications (e.g. *The Official J.A.P. Handbook* (1982), *The Official Slacker Handbook* (1994), or *The Hipster Handbook* (2003)), and is still regularly cited in a variety of preppy-themed blogs and magazine articles. Part of its lasting appeal, as Andy Selsberg argues, lies in its skilled navigation of the tension between elitism and egalitarianism: The Official Preppy Handbook "capitalizes on our ambivalence about exclusivity. We cannot shake the idea that self-reinvention is as easy as following a new dress code, but we also call out those poseurs who try to crash the party by dressing like someone they're not. The handbooks at once invite people in and close the gates."

Even though the campaign was not deemed particularly noteworthy or surprising, there is something curious, and curiously American, about its utilization of the elite educational space. In fact, in a different cultural context—the German one, for instance—the conjunction of fashion and the educational setting would be unusual and arguably unsuccessful. Hilfiger's penchant for collegiate aesthetics thus prompts a reflection about the meanings activated through the use of the elite campus: Which desires and values are written into the physical fabric of the elite college, and what does that tell us about eliteness and education in America, about class and consumption patterns, and, ultimately, about the complex semantics and cultural implications of a space whose meanings remain ambiguous and contested? Hilfiger's campaign, after all, did not only capitalize on the beauty of the Princeton campus landscape, but also on the conglomerate of cultural meanings this setting evokes: privilege, excellence, power, a legitimately beautiful and good life.

This study is concerned with elite education and its peculiar position in the American cultural imagination. Its primary trajectory is epistemological: I am interested in what we know about the elite educational space, how we gain this knowledge, and how the various sites of knowledge production navigate the tensions and contradictions invariably involved in these epistemological practices. My initial point of departure was an interest in the cultural representations and reverberations of social stratification, and in particular the negotiation of wealth and distinction. Since the elite educational system plays a decisive role in explaining, maintaining, and reproducing upper-class status and power, it provides an apt lens through which to engage the abovementioned issues.

My book departs from two preliminary theses that have inspired and guided my readings: First, I assume that there is a tension between certain American core values, such as equal opportunity and the American Dream of individual achievement and upward mobility, and the existence of a highly stratified educational system that selects not only on the basis of talent and skill, but also, much more profanely, on the basis of money. This tension causes a representational dilemma for the institutions themselves—how to communicate their eliteness without seeming elitist?—and is at the heart of most other discursive formations of the elite educational space. In fact,

all of the individual materials I interrogate in this study address the tension between elitism and egalitarianism in one way or another.[2]

Second, I argue that the elite educational space in the course of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century has appropriated a number of meanings that transcend academic education proper. These additional meanings are reflected, for instance, in a certain aesthetics that is associated with the campus—a semiotics of elite distinction employed, for instance, by Tommy Hilfiger and other brands—and I argue that this can be conceptualized as a specific type of charisma, operating in one way or another in all of the materials I discuss in this study. As a cultural signifier with charismatic overtones, then, the elite educational space is part of the ongoing negotiation and perpetuation of certain grand narratives and national myths in the United States, most importantly the myth of the meritocracy.

The elite educational space is thought about, commented on, praised, criticized, and imagined in a number of different cultural contexts. In order to achieve as comprehensive an understanding as possible of the epistemological dynamics surrounding elite education, my book follows an approach grounded in discourse theory, and investigates a number of heterogeneous discursive arenas—fictional and non-fictional texts; textual and audio-visual materials; written, spoken, and spatial forms of communication, all of which collectively produce the elite educational space in twenty-first century America. Building on these observations, I examine a range of different American (self-)descriptions of the elite educational space: scholarly and journalistic, institutional, and literary. In so doing, I am particularly interested in the occurrence and negotiation of potential fault lines and tensions in the discursive structure, the most important of which occur around the concepts reflected in the title of this study: the negotiation of class and capital, the notion of merit, and the meanings of eliteness in contemporary America. As the Hilfiger campaign indicates, moreover, knowledge about elite education is produced through a variety of semiotic channels: recurring images, symbols, and motifs; narrative patterns, metaphors, and allegories; the reiteration of iconic visualizations and well-established formulae. Form is foundational for the epistemology of elite education, and the poetics of the elite educational

2 In addition to elitism and egalitarianism, (populist) anti-elitism also plays a major role in American culture and politics. In the discourse of elite education as I conceptualize it, however, anti-elitist sentiment is relatively rare and thus does not figure prominently in my readings.

space will consequently be at the heart of my examination. The remainder of this introduction is divided into three sections: First, I discuss my study's context and relevance to the field of American studies; second, I outline my approach and method; and third, I offer a succinct overview of the four analytical chapters, briefly outlining their guiding questions and main insights.

Situating the Book: Context and Relevance

The dramatic rise of income inequality in the United States during the past few decades is increasingly gaining attention in American public discourse. Campaigning for the 2016 Democratic Party nomination, Bernie Sanders, for instance, called "the issue of wealth and income inequality […] the great moral issue of our times" (quoted in Knowles); pundits, scholars, and major national news outlets overwhelmingly concur.[3] Journalist and conservative commentator David Brooks, however, complains about this recent trend and argues that "America has always done better […] when we are all focused on opportunity and mobility, not inequality, on individual and family aspiration, not class-consciousness. […] We should not be focusing on a secondary issue and a statistical byproduct" (Brooks 2014). This is certainly a bold proposition to make in the post-crisis era, and even a cursory glance at the current socio-political landscape in the United States demonstrates that many disagree with Brooks's dismissal of class as 'a secondary issue and a statistical byproduct'.

A number of actors, in fact, explicitly and consciously employ the signifier 'class' in their diagnoses of the twenty-first century American malaise: The Occupy movement, for instance, claims to "kick the ass of the ruling class" (Occupy Wall Street); Brooks's own newspaper, *The New York Times*, features

3 A few recent examples of articles in major news publications that likewise emphasize the importance of addressing income inequality: "Today's Inequality Could Easily Become Tomorrow's Catastrophe" (Robert J. Shiller, *The New York Times*, 26 Aug. 2016); "Why Economists Took So Long to Focus on Inequality" (Justin Fox, *Bloomberg*, 4 Jan. 2016); "Income Inequality is the New Economic Issue" (Susan Milligan, *U.S. News & World Report*, 1 May 2015); "Inequality: The Biggest Problem American Business Is Facing in 2015" (Sanjay Sanghoee, *Time*, 7 Jan. 2015); "Why income inequality is America's biggest (and most difficult) problem" (Sean McElwee, *Salon*, 26 Oct. 2014); "The Rich, the Right, and the Facts: Deconstructing the Income Distribution Debate" (Paul Krugman, *The American Prospect*, 4 Jun. 2014); "For Richer, For Poorer" (Zanny Minton Beddoes, *The Economist*, 13 Oct. 2012).

a special section titled 'Class Matters'[4]; and Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* became a somewhat unlikely bestseller in the summer of 2014. Cultural production, too, increasingly engages with social stratification. Consider, for instance, the reality show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-14), the documentary *American Winter* (2013), and the sitcom *Two Broke Girls* (since 2011), all of which examine various facets of poverty in the United States. On the other end of the spectrum, a number of formats focus on the lives of the very rich: The *Real Housewives* franchise (since 2006) and *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (since 2007) as reality shows, the documentaries *Born Rich* (2003) and *The One Percent* (2006), as well as fictional series such as the teen drama show *Gossip Girl* (2007-12) allow their audiences to catch a glimpse behind the curtains of the 0.1 percent. Brooks's discomfort notwithstanding, then, class and social stratification seem very much on the agenda in contemporary America. The examples also demonstrate the complexity of class as a category that signifies a whole array of disparate phenomena, ranging from cultural practices and behaviors to health, life chances, and the body.

It is not surprising, then, that sociological and political science research increasingly engages with class-related issues—ranging from broad interrogations of the distribution of power in the United States to more specific examinations of institutions, practices, and patterns of behavior. Since social stratification is a discursive and aesthetic negotiation as much as it is a material reality, however, it should be the focus of cultural and literary studies scholarship as well; the initial idea that eventually led to the present study was therefore to explore the discursive and aesthetic negotiation of upper-class America from a cultural studies perspective. While 'class' is indeed gaining traction as an object of research in American Studies, most scholarship—situated mainly within critical poverty studies—foregrounds the lower classes and investigates the ramifications of poverty and destitution. Even books whose titles seem to indicate a more comprehensive approach—for instance Keith Gandal's *Class Representation in Modern Fiction and Film* (2007)—ultimately betray this bias.[5] My study thus intends to focus on the upper strata of society as

4 *Class Matters* was published in book form in 2005, exploring "the ways in which class—defined as a combination of income, education, wealth, and occupation—influences destiny in a society that like to think of itself as a land of opportunity" (blurb).

5 A similar imbalance can be observed in Vanishing Moments: *Class and American Literature* (Eric Schocket, 2006); *Narrating Class in American Fiction* (William Dow, 2009); and *Class and the Making of American Literature: Created Unequal* (ed. Andrew Larson, 2014).

the hitherto neglected part of the class equation, examining representations of eliteness, wealth, and upper-class culture.

Located at the intersection of cultural, sociological, political, and economic discourses around equality, stratification, and education, my study therefore has two main contributions to make to the field of American Studies: First, it brings cultural and literary studies to the study of eliteness in America, which has as of yet been almost exclusively sociological. Since the maintenance of the status quo depends in large parts on legitimacy derived from cultural practices—grand narratives, national myths, symbolic structures, token protagonists and recurring motifs—the critical interrogation of these cultural articulations seems to me an important part of the project of American Studies. Second, my study is part of the renewed effort within American Studies to re-introduce 'class' as a critical analytical category; after years of neglect, the exploration of class as a cultural and economic concept is gaining momentum. Its specificity—the fact that due to its material and hierarchical nature, it does not work analogously to other identity markers, such as race and gender—continues to be in need of adequate examination and theorization. In addition to these two aspects, my study also contributes to the continued examination of the foundational contradictions of Americanness. The tension between elitism and egalitarianism that is at the heart of my study is also, arguably, one of the central tensions informing the negotiation of American identity, politics, and culture in the twenty-first century.

Approaching American Elite Education: Theory and Methodology

I want to begin with a brief note on my theoretical and methodological premises. Elite education in twenty-first century America is a large, fuzzy topic that could be approached from a number of different perspectives, depending on one's initial assumptions and research interests. What intrigued me most about this topic, however, was its proliferation and the resulting epistemological variety of its many instantiations. As much the object of sober sociological analysis as of wild imaginations, elite education seemed to produce several competing and complementary visions of itself, using a range of different modes of meaning production—analysis, narrative, imagery, among others. Since it is these epistemological trajectories I want to trace, and these visions I want to understand and interrogate, my approach needed to be flexible enough to allow for the juxtaposition of different

materials and the combination of different strategies of reading them. In the following, I want to briefly outline my theoretical premises, which I take from Clifford Geertz, Eva Illouz, and, specifically with regard to class, from Pierre Bourdieu, and my methodological approach, which is grounded in discourse theory. To conclude this section, I give a succinct definition of what I mean when I talk about 'the discourse of elite education' and explain the time frame my book covers.

Very broadly speaking, my approach is grounded the notion of culture as text. In this, I follow thinkers such as cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who proposes a semiotic understanding of culture as an "interworked system of construable signs" (14), in the tradition of Max Weber's assertion that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (5). In this study, I want to trace some of these particular webs, these culturally constructed conceptual systems and the semiotic codes that govern them, in order to understand how they gain and maintain cultural legitimacy. Geertz argues that cultural analysis can be likened to constructing a reading of a manuscript, "sorting out the structures of signification [...] and determining their social ground and import" (9). Cultural formations, practices, and artifacts can thus be read and examined like texts, using the methodological instrumentarium provided by literary and cultural studies.

My own position toward the materials I analyze is informed by the work of cultural sociologist Eva Illouz, who describes her approach in *Saving the Modern Soul* (2008) as one that "move[s] the field of cultural studies away from the 'epistemology of suspicion'" (4). The task of cultural analysis, according to Illouz, is not to assess cultural practices against some predefined standard, but to gain an understanding of "how they have come to be what they are and why, in being what they are, they 'accomplish things' for people" (ibid.). Illouz thus emphasizes the importance of understanding the "mechanism of culture: how meanings are produced, how they are woven into the social fabric, how they are used in daily life to shape relationships and cope with an uncertain world, and why they come to organize our interpretation of self and others" (4-5). Now, Illouz's approach does not work equally well with all of the materials I analyze in this study—promotional brochures, for instance, are harder to approach in this way than, say, novels. But I take from Illouz the aspiration to meet the materials on eye level, so to speak, and to analyze them first according to their own professed claims and assumptions.

Though I do not employ his concept of the field in this study, my understanding of class is largely grounded in Bourdieu's work on capital and social

reproduction in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979) and *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (with Jean-Claude Passeron, 1970). In particular, Bourdieu's conception of capital as "accumulated labor, either in materialized form or in embodied form" (1986: 241) has informed my own understanding of eliteness as a category closely related to these different forms of material, conceptual, or embodied resources and assets—Bourdieu distinguishes between economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. A more detailed discussion of Bourdieu's understanding of class and capital follows in the first chapter of this study.

On the macro level, my book follows a discourse-analytical approach. Since the meanings of elite education in the contemporary United States are produced and negotiated across a wide range of different texts, images, and practices, and originate from a wide range of sources, discourse theory is the most suitable tool for selecting and structuring my corpus. 'Discourse' is perhaps one of the most elusive and ill-defined terms currently in circulation, and can mean a number of different things. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Michel Foucault acknowledges this ambiguity, and explains that he treats the term "sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements" (2005: 90). The central assumption of discourse theory is that meaning is constructed, contingent, and always in flux; a discourse, then, is conceptualized as the partial and temporary fixation of meaning within a particular field, a particular time, a particular cultural context (Jørgensen and Phillips 26). In their attempt to fixate meaning, discourses, however, are inherently unstable, as Foucault points out:

> We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (1978: 100-01)

Thus, the potential for subversion, the instability, and the tendency toward contradiction are endemic to the discourse itself. Discourse analysis as an approach is aimed at "map[ping] out the process in which we struggle about the way in which the meaning of signs is to be fixed, and the processes by

which some fixations of meaning become so conventionalized that we think of them as naturalized" (ibid.).

When I use the phrase 'discourse of elite education', I refer to the sum of all statements made about the topic at a given point in time and within a given cultural context—in this case, the United States in the twenty-first century. Positions within the discourse are subject to rules and norms that govern their circulation, determine their influence, and strengthen or undermine their power. The discourse of elite education, then, is both a practice and a regulated system of knowledge, and, as such, it is part of larger discursive structures—relating, for instance, to education as a whole or to social stratification in America.

I conceptualize the discourse of elite education as a multidimensional conglomerate of meanings informed by various forces that produce knowledge and opinions. In order to map this vast discursive landscape, I distinguish between three dominant subdiscourses: sociological and journalistic research, institutional self-representation, and literary narratives. Even though there are other discursive arenas in which elite education is negotiated implicitly—fashion and advertising, for instance, as the example of Tommy Hilfiger has shown—I chose to focus on research, self-representation, and fiction because these are subdiscourses that deal with elite education directly and explicitly. As such, their contributions to the overall epistemology of elite education carry more weight and are thus more relevant for my analysis.

The images of elite campuses generated in these subfields have gained entry into the American cultural inventory and permanently shaped the collective perception of elite education. Since I am interested in the different kinds of knowledge produced about the topic, I furthermore assume that the subdiscourses are characterized by more or less distinct epistemological modes: the critical-analytical, the affirmative, and the imaginative. These modes are tied to different communicative purposes, restraints, and expectations. Fictional texts, for instance, are not necessarily expected to analyze, explain, and introduce solutions (like sociological studies), or expose and criticize (like journalistic accounts), or inform, advertise, and propagate (like self-representational texts). Of course, literary texts can do all of the above, but they are free to risk contradiction and paradox to a degree that other text types are not. The discursive contribution of literary texts is of interest precisely because of their ability to embrace and capitalize on ambiguity.

On the micro level of individual analyses, I draw on a range of different methodological tools, depending on the discursive context and the specific

set of research questions. In the chapter on Princeton's self-representation, for instance, I use an approach grounded what has come to be known as the 'spatial turn' in order to read the university's physical space; in the last chapter, which focuses on the imaginative mode, I draw on Jane Tompkins's concept of 'cultural work'. Throughout the book, moreover, I rely on the concept of nodal points, developed in the post-structuralist discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.[6] Nodal points are privileged signifiers around which meanings congeal and become temporarily fixed, and which thus structure and organize the discourse (cf. 82). Other signs acquire their specific and contingent meanings from their relationship to the nodal point. In my conception, the three major nodal points 'eliteness', 'merit', and 'class' do not only structure and stabilize the discourse of elite education by fixating meanings and yielding a number of well-established narratives, but they also simultaneously hold the potential of challenging received wisdom and undermining established structures of meaning. This is why they are at the heart of my exploration.

The time frame this study principally covers is the early twenty-first century; my primary corpus includes texts published between 2005 and 2016. On the one hand, this time frame derives from pragmatic concerns of feasibility—combining the synchronic breadth of discourse analysis with a diachronic approach of historical comparison would have gone beyond what a dissertation can reasonably hope to achieve. On the other hand, the focus on the twenty-first century arises out of the discourse itself. In recent years, there has been a surge in publications on the issue, both in the critical-analytical and in the fictional realm, quite possibly as a reflection of the increased sociocultural and economic importance of elite educational institutions. Furthermore, the history of elite education is fairly well researched, and the dominant narrative that emerges from this research can be generalized as a teleological narrative of liberal progressivism, especially pervasive in parts of the

6 Political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe developed their post-Marxist and poststructuralist discourse theory principally in their 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Their intervention is theoretical and fairly abstract rather than concretely methodological. Since the trajectory of my book is not primarily theoretical, I will not offer a detailed description of Laclau and Mouffe's work (Marianne W. Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips offer a succinct and readable overview in their 2002 book *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*). For the purpose of my analyses, I draw primarily on their conception of the nodal point as a privileged signifier that structures the discourse.

critical-analytical discourse—a narrative of obstacles overcome and triumphs achieved: the end of the discrimination of Jews, women, and people of color, as well as change in admission standards, curricula, and educational objectives; all seems to move forward toward the perfect meritocracy. My book wants to intervene at the supposed endpoint of this story, at which the framework of meritocracy reigns supreme and is rarely questioned or challenged in any meaningful way.

Chapter Structure

As its title suggests, the first chapter, "Exposition: Approaching the Elite Educational Space," serves to contextualize and situate the three analytical chapters that follow. Theorizing elite distinction and historicizing elite education, the chapter introduces the three key concepts that dominate the epistemology of elite education: eliteness, merit, and class. The second chapter, "Critique: Elite Education and Its Discontents," begins the inquiry into the epistemological practices surrounding the elite educational space by focusing on the critical-analytical mode. In this chapter, I map the critical landscape and identify two major analytical concerns that structure it: on the one hand, the politics of admission and exclusion, and on the other hand, comprehensive critiques of the 'cultures of privilege' produced in and through the elite educational space along with their broader socio-cultural and political implications. My main argument in this chapter is that all of the studies are written in the mode of the jeremiad and thus ultimately validate and re-affirm the system the ostensibly seek to critique.

The third chapter, "Affirmation: Self-Representation at Princeton University," moves from the critical-analytical to the affirmative mode, and accentuates the epistemological contribution of elite colleges themselves, asking which nodal points structure their self-conceptualizations. Using Princeton as a case study, I show how the university's self-representation responds to a media discourse that marks elite education with the notions of impossibility and pathology by creating what I call a 'meritocracy of affect'—a flexible structure of meaning production that integrates neoliberal and humanistic conceptions of eliteness. The meritocracy of affect, I suggest, is embedded in and stabilized by three complementary epistemological frames: diversity, the good life, and community. In my discussion of the individual frames, I focus

on the negotiation of class, merit, and eliteness, but also address a number of ruptures that occur in their respective instantiations.

The fourth and last chapter, "Imagination: Fictionalizations of the Elite Educational Experience," explores the mode of imagination. A long history of fictional renditions of the elite campus has permanently shaped the image of collegiate America, and the imaginative mode has the capacity to include and put in dialogue the various tensions and contradictions that characterize elite education in the United States. In this chapter, I use Curtis Sittenfeld's 2005 campus novel *Prep* as a point of departure to discuss these dynamics. In the first section, I situate the text in its discursive context by discussing reviews and academic responses. In the second section, I read the text itself and discuss the cultural work it potentially engages in, in particular with regard to class, merit, and eliteness. I argue that *Prep* can be seen simultaneously as an expression and a subversion of the neoliberal imagination: The novel subverts the "normalcy of mobility" (Jones 12) by presenting a protagonist who refuses to conform to the merit narrative, and thus forces the reader to think anew about class, capital, and the role of merit. In so doing, however, it ultimately creates a neoliberal reader—a reader who is offended by the protagonist's passivity and stasis, who wants her to follow the cultural script of eliteness qua merit, and to do so convincingly and gladly. At the same time, *Prep*'s insistence on the importance of class in all of its manifestations runs counter to the neoliberal unwillingness to even acknowledge socio-economic stratification.

I. Exposition: Approaching the Elite Educational Space

1. Introductory Remarks

In order to build my argument on firm theoretical ground, I want to begin my examination of the discourse of elite education with an expository chapter, in which I address and explain the central terms and concepts, offer some historical context on the emergence and development of elite educational institutions in the United States, and introduce the three categories that inform my readings of the various materials that constitute the discourse of elite education: eliteness, merit, and class. As indicated above, my research interests and my approach evolved from two initial hypotheses about the cultural formation of eliteness and education in the United States: First, the tension between elitism and egalitarianism that informs American culture and politics, and second, the agglomeration of a range of cultural meanings around the elite educational space—a kind of semiotics of elite (educational) distinction. In the following, I want to explain these two guiding assumptions in a little more detail, before introducing my study's three central analytical categories: eliteness, merit, and class.

2. Starting Points: Eliteness and Education in American Culture

Throughout American history, the existence of elites and the question of the legitimacy, usefulness, and alleged inevitability of elite influence have preoccupied scholarly discourse and public debate alike. Cultural critic William A. Henry III, in his polemic *In Defense of Elitism* (1994), in fact argues that "the great post-World War II American dialectic has been between elitism and egalitarianism" (3). It is from this dialectic that my first guiding assumption

derives: Given the centrality of the notion of equal opportunity for the self-description and legitimation of the American social order, the existence of a highly stratified educational system is bound to cause fundamental cultural and socio-political tensions, in particular if the system's reward structure is all too easily swayed by the undue influence of what Bourdieu has called economic, social, and cultural capital. It is fair to assume, moreover, that debates about elite education form one of the primary discursive arenas in which the tension between elitism and egalitarianism is actualized and negotiated, heightened or relieved, and thus an arena worthy of scholarly attention.

Starting with the Puritan belief in predestination and the elect, elitist thought has continuously been an integral part of the American experiment (cf. Wolin vii). Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, for instance, famously disagreed about the role of the 'natural *aristoi*' in the young Republic: While both shared the belief in a "natural aristocracy among men [based on] virtue and talent" (Jefferson in a letter to Adams, quoted in Lerner 95), they were divided on its political implications. Whereas Jefferson argued that the natural aristocrats should be actively sought out and employed in public service, Adams was wary of the potentially uncontainable influence this New World nobility might exert. The notion of a '*natural* aristocracy' moreover indicates one of the central conflicts in the discourse, namely to what extent eliteness is rooted in innate qualities, or learned behavior and work, or inherited privilege, respectively. A century later, another major American thinker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, argued in his lecture on aristocracy that "the existence of an upper class is not injurious, as long as it is dependent on merit" (42), thus resorting to a legitimatory concept that is among the primary preoccupations of this study. The tension between elitism and egalitarianism, in Emerson's view, could be resolved by guaranteeing that privilege had to be earned and hence would be deserved in some way.

Skepticism as to the legitimacy of elite power—the question, that is, whether the privileges of the rulers really are 'dependent on merit'—has likewise always been an crucial part of the discourse, with criticism and doubt voiced on both ends of the political spectrum. While liberal perspectives tend to denounce the incompatibility of elitist sentiment with the democratic principles on which the United States was founded, conservative commentators, too, often find fault with the prospect of elite influence. William F. Buckley, Jr., for instance, once stated that he would "rather be governed by the first 2,000 people in the Boston telephone directory than by the 2,000 people on the faculty of Havard University" ("Transcript for July 11"), though whether

this position reflects the traditional American mistrust toward intellectuals or simply Buckley's bias as a 'Yale man' remains uncertain.[1]

As two archetypal poles of the American imagination, elitism and egalitarianism thus have been at the heart of the nation's socio-political discourse ever since its inception. Recent years, however, have again revived the issue's urgency. The debates surrounding charges of elitism during the 2012 presidential campaign, for instance, demonstrate quite strikingly the ambiguity of eliteness in contemporary American society. Disagreement as to whether the next president of the United States ought to be a member of the elite or a bona fide 'Average Joe' dominated much of the campaign efforts, as both candidates tried to outperform each other in their demonstration of allegedly intimate familiarity with 'common folk'. Both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney were furthermore praised and vilified alike for their obvious affiliations with certain types of elite distinction, as journalist Anne Applebaum argues:

> Both Obamas come from what might loosely be called the intellectual/academic meritocracy, the 'liberal elite', the post-WASP Ivy League, easily caricatured as the world of free-trade coffee, organic arugula, smug opinions, and Martha's Vineyard. The Romneys, by contrast, belong to the financial oligarchy, the 'global elite', the post-financial-deregulation world which is just as easily caricatured as one of iced champagne, offshore bank accounts, dressage trainers, and private islands.

Alluding to matters of education and wealth, patterns of consumption, political ideologies, and social behaviors, Applebaum's assessment touches upon many of the socio-cultural and political issues involved in studying the contemporary elite. It might be added, moreover, that the boundaries between the different cultural types of elite distinction are blurry—Romney, for instance, also hold degrees from Harvard University, and while Obama's net worth is only a fraction of his contestant's, he is certainly affluent as well.

Applebaum's caricatures furthermore point toward the highly emotional and opinionated nature of the debates surrounding eliteness in the United States. Comments on elite distinction almost invariably betray a strong bias

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1 William F. Buckley Jr. (1925-2008) was among the most prominent conservative American thinkers and commentators of the twentieth century. In 1951, he published *God and Man at Yale*, a critique of liberalism and secularism at his alma mater that started his career. He founded the *National Review* in 1955 and hosted the public affairs show *Firing Line* from 1966 until 1999.

for or against eliteness, and are often determined by dogmatism and monomania. Anti-elitist sentiment, in particular, is a common and pronounced occurrence across the political spectrum, as journalist Tom Lutz explains: "We have billionaire antielitists, tenured antielitists, rightwing nutjob antielitists, leftwing wacko antielitists, famous artist antielitists, and Congressional antielitists." Lutz's list again illustrates the cultural versatility of the concept of elite distinction—it is unlikely, after all, that the many anti-elitists he references would agree on which particular elite it is that they so vehemently oppose. Anti-elitism can be directed against a diverse array of people or groups, as long as they are in possession of an excess of capital—economic, cultural, symbolic, or social. The strong opposition to any kind of eliteness seems to be a sentiment at once comfortable and comforting to many American subject positions. One is thus hard pressed to find, in the overall discourse of elite distinction, many instances of affirmative treatment of the notion of eliteness. The educational space, however, is a particularly interesting discursive arena because while anti-elitist sentiment is fairly common here as well, it remains one of the few epistemological realms in which the term 'elite' holds a certain socio-cultural cachet and is used as mark of praise instead of criticism.

The Elite Campus as a Cultural Signifier

The second hypothesis that guides this study is related to the cultural meanings attributed to the elite educational space. In his recent book, *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be* (2012), cultural critic Andrew Delbanco reflects in some detail on the role of college in the United States and concludes that "[c]ollege is our American pastoral. We imagine it as a verdant world where the harshest sounds are the reciprocal thump of tennis balls or the clatter of cleats as young bodies trot up and down the fieldhouse steps" (2012: 11). Though Delbanco himself unfortunately does not elaborate on this reading of college as a pastoral space—except for alluding, somewhat ominously, to the "specter of mortality" (ibid.) that shadows the campus—his assessment is instructive in a number of ways. First, it demonstrates that the collegiate space is indeed a space that is "imagine[d]"—in the minds of individuals, in novels and films, in the fields of cultural criticism and scholarship, in the larger realm of public discourse—and, in the process, equipped with different, perhaps even contradictory meanings. Second, the notion of college as pastoral indicates that these various imaginations of the collegiate space reflect not only socio-cultural or political expectations but also allude to the sphere of the aesthetic,

the sensual, and the iconic. The pristine campus, almost otherworldly in its beauty and wholeness, does not only guarantee intellectual stimulation and social advancement, but also holds the promise of life in a charismatic, inspirational environment. Third, Delbanco's reflections point to a peculiar ambiguity in the imagination of the collegiate space in its cultural context: On the one hand, it is often seen as a place that is separate and offers respite from the 'real world', an almost utopian place that is distinct from its surroundings; on the other hand, the campus is read as and expected to be a microcosm of society at large. Last but not least, the remark points to a blind spot of sorts that is fairly characteristic of the discourse on higher education in the United States: Delbanco fails to mention that only a very specific kind of college may lend itself to a conceptualization along the lines of the pastoral; after all, he is not referring to an urban community college or to, say, a large Midwestern state university. Instead, he is concerned with a fairly small segment of the vast landscape of American higher education—the private, four-year liberal arts college. It is thus the elite educational space that, quite tellingly, is here turned into the generic American college.

In identifying the elite educational space as 'our American pastoral', Delbanco mobilizes the strong connection between the aesthetics of the elite campus, the narratives it generates, and its broader cultural meanings, particularly in the production of national myths. This demonstrates, once again, the importance of including the study of form and aesthetics in the discussion of eliteness in America. In *The Machine in the Garden* (1964)—perhaps the most famous account of pastoralism in American literature and culture—Leo Marx distinguishes two modes of the pastoral, "one that is popular and sentimental, the other imaginative and complex" (5). Marx interprets the sudden intrusion of the machine into the bucolic landscape as the symptomatic moment of American pastoralism, signifying the ambivalence and specificity of the American pastoral landscape with its emphasis on transformation and change (343). While this does not quite capture what Delbanco had in mind, pastoralism has also been described more broadly as a mode expressing "a natural desire for simplicity and innocence, a golden age, a world of leisure, song and love" (Sinfield 32), or, with Roger Sales, as representing the 'five Rs': "refuge, reflection, rescue, requiem, and reconstruction" (17).

Judging from these different conceptualizations, one might well claim that there is a certain element of the pastoral—a gesture toward pastoralism, as it were—that is very much definitive of cultural negotiations of the elite campus in America. Andrew Ettin describes such elements as "pastoral insets"

(75), while Marx uses the phrase "pastoral interlude" (25) to describe instances of the pastoral occurring in otherwise non-pastoral contexts. These interludes find expression in the countless descriptions of the picturesque elite campus that occur in so many of the materials that constitute my corpus. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920), for instance, protagonist Amory Blaine describes Princeton as "lazy and good-looking and aristocratic—you know, like a spring day" (23); similarly, the protagonist of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) remembers his first encounter with the prestigious Hampden College, mediated by a brochure: "Even now I remember those pictures, like pictures in a storybook one loved as a child. Radiant meadows, mountains vaporous in the trembling distance; leaves ankle-deep on a gusty autumn road; bonfires and fog in the valleys; cellos, dark windowpanes, snow" (10). Finally, Lee Fiora, protagonist of Curtis Sittenfeld's novel *Prep*, which I discuss in detail in the last chapter, acknowledges the role of the pastoral qualities of the campus in her decision to apply to the Ault School:

> Ault had been my idea. I'd researched boarding schools at the public library and written away for catalogs myself. Their glossy pages showed photographs of teenagers in wool sweaters singing hymns in the chapel, gripping lacrosse sticks, intently reading a math equation written across the chalkboard. I had traded away my family for this glossiness. I'd pretended it was about academics, but it never had been. (25)

Pastoral insets, however, do not only occur in fictional texts. To name but one example: Mitchell Stevens, author of *Creating a Class* (2006), which is subject of this study's second chapter, begins his account of the admissions practices at an elite college with a chapter quite tellingly titled "A School in a Garden," and offers the following description of the school grounds:

> Set at a high elevation overlooking farmland, sleepy towns, and hardwood forests, the College enjoys a geographical prominence commensurate with its stunning campus. Lovely old buildings from the early campaigns resemble pieces of a giant chess set, carefully positions around shade quadrangles. Slate roofs and mullioned windows convey a sense of history. A few of the facades are illuminated in the evenings, making them visible for miles into the surrounding valleys. The most impressive route of arrival carries drivers through a sweeping lawn dotted with perennial beds and specimen trees. Lovingly tended, the trees are a special point of pride. (5)

Interestingly, even the inevitable gestures of competitive self-assertion bound to surface in the discourse of elite education are often rendered in the rhetoric of the pastoral. Hard work, intellectual exertion, and exhaustion, seemingly at odds with the placid tranquility of the pastoral campus, are framed in romanticized terms. Donna Tartt's Richard Papen, for instance, explains how Hampden College, "suffused with a weak, academic light," evokes "long hours in dusty libraries, and old books, and silence" (6). In *Education's End* (2007), law professor Anthony T. Kronman fondly recalls his days at Williams College:

> We met once a week, in Professor Lawrence's home at the end of Main Street, a few blocks from campus. Each session lasted three hours. We broke in the middle for tea, and there were always fresh cookies (courtesy of Mrs. Lawrence). The fall came on, the days shortened, the air grew chilly. The Berkshires were covered in scarlet and gold. When we arrived at Professor Lawrence's home, late in the afternoon, we found a fire going, and his two golden retrievers asleep like bookends beside the hearth. (4)

Kronman's account neatly illustrates some of the most prevalent aspects of the picturesque elite educational space: the intimacy between teacher and students; the ease and effortlessness of work; the inspirational quality of the pastoral landscape. Furthermore, the activity of work and its attendant technology are pastoralized by framing them with the fire and the sleeping golden retrievers, which together echo the "scarlet and gold" of the pastoral landscape. However, it is not only the older accounts of elite educational experiences that exhibit this tendency. A student quoted in *Harvard Magazine*, for instance, who is said to study from 3 to 5 am before going to rowing practice at 6, describes her experience as follows: "'Lamont [library] is beautiful at 5 am—my favorite time, […]. Sunlight streams in'" (Lambert). Similarly, the *Yale College Viewbook*, a 65-page full color brochure advertising Yale, is full of photographs showing students working in a number of scenic settings, sitting on the well-manicured lawns or in the beautifully decorated libraries. Other promotional materials follow this strategy of combining the ambitious with the arcadian, thus providing sources of self-affirmation for the elite community.

Though a significant amount of material deals critically with the elite educational space without glamorizing it, the collective "longing for the picturesque" (Tartt 5), shared by protagonists and audiences alike, continues to permeate cultural negotiations of the elite educational space. Thus, in his 2012 coffee table book *The Ivy League*—with its cloth binding and high quality photographs itself an exemplar of the fetishization of the picturesque elite cam-

pus—Daniel Capello speaks of the Ivy League's "intangible, enthralling It factor" (11) in trying to describe the special quality of these schools, an auratic quality that is allegedly so mysterious as to be virtually unnamable.

The effects of pastoralism thus are not limited to the individual pastoral insets describing physical spaces but, like Marx's pastoral landscape, expand their meanings into the broader realm of the cultural space. In *The Machine in the Garden*, which has been described as "a minority report on the national psyche" (Sanford 274), Marx conceptualizes the American pastoral as one of the core constituents of a national mythology, one that posits a distinctive contrast to the European roots of pastoralism. As a cultural negotiation of escapist fantasies, anxieties, and fears that are channeled in a romanticized aesthetics that they then continually point beyond, the pastoral ideal becomes, in Marx's words, a "distinctively American theory of society" (4) that revolves around "the root conflict of our time" (365). The elite college pastoral can be described along similar lines. As a cultural signifier, the elite educational space amalgamates pastoral aesthetics and narrative structures with a number of highly productive American grand narratives and thus becomes both representative and generative of a national mythology.

The proliferation of pastoral and picturesque insets notwithstanding, it thus seems more productive to conceptualize the campus pastoral more broadly as an imaginary space, a collective fantasy of collegiate life that is firmly situated in the American cultural inventory. This fantasy plays with and instrumentalizes pastoral tropes and narrative structures—the retreat to the 'golden age' of college, the inspirational qualities of beautiful spaces, and the return to the 'real world'—but complicates them in a variety of ways.

What, then, is the merit of reading the cultural negotiation of elite education through the lens of the pastoral, even though it is doubtless an incomplete characterization? First, this reading sheds some light on the emergence of the elite educational space as a cultural signifier that in the course of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century has appropriated a range of cultural and ideological meanings. Second, it points to some of the discursive mechanisms that serve to legitimize the elite status of certain institutions and the actors associated with them—the more one thinks through the allegedly 'unnamable' It-factor diagnosed by Capello, the more one realizes that it is, of course, namable, because it is constructed, contingent, fabricated. Nonetheless, the aesthetics of the pastoral romanticizes the specific socio-political position elite colleges inhabit and, in so doing, deflects from less picturesque issues. Third, focusing on elite educational spaces as picturesque imaginations and cultural

constructions automatically raises questions about the actual spaces to which these fantasies are attached. The spatial boundedness of elite education allows for a reconsideration of the fairly un-pastoral facets that the aesthetics of the picturesque tends to veil, even though and because they shape and define the elite educational space: class and capital. Keeping these two guiding assumptions in mind, I now want to turn to the three categories that are at the heart of my exploration of the discourse of elite education—eliteness, merit, and class—and introduce each of them in detail.

3. 'Very Important, Very Powerful, or Very Prominent': Eliteness in America

In *Beyond the Ruling Class: Strategic Elites in Modern Society* (1963), sociologist Suzanne Keller writes about the inevitability of elite influence: "The existence and persistence of influential minorities is one of the constant characteristics of organized social life. Whether a community is small or large, rich or poor, simple or complex, it always sets some of its members apart as very important, very powerful, or very prominent" (3). While few scholars would dispute this, academic inquiry into the composition and distribution of power remains replete with terminological confusion and conceptual obscurity. Reflecting on the complexity of the possible structural distinctions, Anthony Giddens points out:

> We should be able to recognize […] that there can exist a 'governing class' without it necessarily being a 'ruling class'; that there can exist a 'power elite' without it necessarily being either a 'ruling' or a 'governing class', that there can be a system of 'leadership groups' which constitutes neither power 'elite', nor governing class' or 'ruling class'; that all of these social formations are compatible with the existence of an 'upper class'; and finally, that none of these categories prejudices the question of the relative primacy of the 'political' and 'economic' spheres within the class structure. (3)

Fraught with a variety of terminological and theoretical complications, the conceptual terrain of eliteness is far from easy to navigate. As the terms discussed by Giddens suggest, stratification in contemporary Western societies like the United States occurs simultaneously along several different dimensions—economic, social, political, and cultural, among others—and every

critical interrogation of eliteness has to decide which of these hierarchies to emphasize, and which conceptual frameworks to apply.

My research interests are located in the realm of culture, discourse, aesthetics, and narrative—the stories that we tell ourselves to explain why things are the way they are, the myths that encourage us to dream of better futures, the ideas that are sold to us with the promise of change and mobility; but also, in turn, the critical or potentially subversive narratives and artifacts that challenge or undermine the status quo. Since this book thus interrogates the epistemological structures and practices surrounding the elite educational space, I do not use the term 'elite' as a precise sociological category; that is, my primary concern is not to determine or discuss who does or does not belong to the American elite(s), whatever its exact conceptualization may be. Instead, I am interested in the cultural negotiation of elite distinction, in the aesthetic and discursive practices and patterns surrounding those educational institutions and their members, who are deemed or deem themselves "very important, very powerful, or very prominent," as Keller puts it (3). Thus, I use the term 'elite(ness)' and the concept of elite distinction as a signifier of a number of related ascriptions I discuss in more detail below. In addition, I ask how the materials themselves use the term or related terms, and to what effect.

A Cultural Studies Understanding of Eliteness

The term 'elite' entered the English language by way of the French verb *èlire*, which, in turn, derives from the Latin verb *eligere:* to choose. Whenever we speak of an elite, then, we speak of an individual or a group that was *chosen*—presumably by someone, presumably on the grounds of something, presumably for some kind of purpose. At the same time, the term 'elite' always implicitly includes reference to 'the masses'—the great number of people who have not been chosen and thus do not belong. The concept becomes meaningful only through the implied exclusion of its opposite; there can be no 'fortunate few' without the 'unfortunate many'. An elite community consequently needs gatekeepers who decide on whom to admit and whom to exclude, and on what grounds—a position that is particularly important in the context of education.

The history of the usage of 'elite' reflects its semantic versatility. Emerging in eighteenth-century France, the term was first used by the aspiring bourgeoisie as a democratic battle cry against the nobility and the clergy, signifying the preference for individual achievement rather than lineage and familial

connections as criteria to decide on who ought to fill society's top positions (Hartmann 2007: 9). Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, the term's meanings began to change profoundly. The dramatic growth of the population across Europe and the United States brought with it urbanization and the emergence of an increasingly self-conscious working class, developments that seemed to threaten the position of the bourgeoisie and gave rise to various strands of pseudo-scientific and elitist thought. Informed, among other things, by Gustave Le Bon's highly influential *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), the meaning of eliteness then shifted from a qualitative to a quantitative conceptual framework, from signifying non-hereditary qualifications to being posited as the opposite of 'the masses'.

It is in this context that the first three classic elite theories were formulated by political scientist Gaetano Mosca (*The Ruling Class*, 1896), economist and sociologist Vilfredo Pareto (*The Mind and Society: A Treatise on General Sociology*, 1916), and sociologist Robert Michels (*Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchic Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, 1911). By the middle of the twentieth century, the concept of elite distinction, along with the term 'elite', had become discredited due to its affinity with and utilization by fascist thought. Michels, for instance, had joined Benito Mussolini's Fascist Party in 1926. Beginning in the 1970s, the concept was slowly reformulated and ultimately reintroduced to critical (sociological) scholarship and public discourse. In Germany, this reformulation consisted primarily of adding qualifying prefixes that were meant to stress performance-based aspects or a certain sense of moral obligation—*Leistungselite*, *Wertelite*, and, more recently, *Verantwortungselite*—while in the United States pluralist and functionalist conceptions of elite influence gained currency. These developments and semantic modulations suggest the enduring appeal of the concept of eliteness, an attractiveness that prompts recurring attempts at updating the concept and endowing it with new legitimacy.

As is the case with many concepts that circulate both in academic and in popular discourse, the term elite is often used without any explicit definition or distinction from other, related terms. Examples of this tendency can be found, for instance, in Ross Douthat's *Privilege* (2005), which I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 2. Published under the label 'Sociology' by Hyperion Books, it was written by a journalist with no sociological training, and could be described more adequately as a mixture of autobiography, cultural critique, and political commentary, relying heavily on anecdotal evidence and personal experience. Douthat uses terms such as "modern elite" (11), "rul-

ing class" (63), and "privileged class" (12) synonymously and without offering definitions for any of them. He does not venture to distinguish between the different axes of stratification: economic, political, or cultural. Douthat's usage is symptomatic of the manner in which eliteness is talked about, and it demonstrates the concept's discursive advantages and pitfalls: Convenient in its vagueness, it encompasses a diffuse conglomerate of socio-economic, cultural, and ideological factors, and often obscures rather than illuminates the specifics of these different dimensions.

I chose eliteness as one of the key concepts for this study for a number of reasons. First, compared to the other terms discussed by Giddens above, 'elite' is neither as straightforwardly economic as 'upper class' nor as explicitly political as 'ruling class' or 'governing class'. It thus calls for a more open and inclusive conversation about economic and political dynamics, while also allowing the inclusion of cultural factors. Second, despite its semantic instability, the term can be used quite productively within cultural studies. Eliciting ambivalent, if not downright divisive responses, the notion of eliteness refers to fantasies, fictions, and ideologies rather than any kind of actual, quantifiable 'reality'. This does not mean that the realities inevitably underlying such fictions are not my concern, but my analysis is primarily interested in the cultural imagination. Third, an investigation of eliteness seems to be particularly fitting in the American context, as the concept does allude to some form of meritoriousness. Distinction, the term 'elite' implies, is conferred upon those who deserve it on the grounds of their actions and achievements. The affinity between the concept of elite distinction and grand narratives of capitalism and neoliberalism—often told in the ideological framework of the meritocracy—is written into the term itself.

At the same time, the prevalence of anti-elitist sentiment in the United States complicates this picture in interesting ways. In this context, the distinction between different types of eliteness—financial, social, intellectual, among others—becomes particularly important. Some of these types seem to be more compatible with core motifs in American culture than others, so that extreme wealth, for instance, is often seen as less offensive than extreme intellectualism. Political bias plays a crucial role in these dynamics, so that both anti-elitism and the celebration of eliteness take different forms in Republican and Democratic circles—Mitt Romney's wealth and Barack Obama's ties to prestigious educational institutions, for example, were alternately criticized and praised during the 2012 presidential campaign.

Despite its elusiveness and contradictory history, a closer look at the usage of the term 'elite' suggests that there is indeed a kind of master narrative in the discourse of elite distinction as to what the concept of eliteness signifies. Thus, in my understanding, the concept has three comparatively stable connotations: First, it signifies exclusivity and a process of selection; second, it alludes to excellence and exceptionalism; and third, it connotes power and influence, be it social, political, or economic. Not all materials that constitute my corpus use the term 'elite' itself, but all of them draw on related concepts that carry roughly the same three connotations. The most prominent of these related terms, in the educational context, are 'exclusive', 'selective', 'prestigious', 'distinguished', 'competitive', 'privileged', and 'affluent'. In addition, fictional and non-fictional texts alike use the proper names of existing elite institutions for similar semantic purposes. Like the concept of eliteness itself, these terms revolve around the sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary issues of money, talent, and power.

Education in the American Imagination

Throughout history, higher education has held an ambivalent position in the American cultural imagination. Colleges and universities have been met with skepticism and praise alike, celebrated for their emancipatory and equalizing potentials and dismissed as unnecessary, snobbish, or out of touch with the 'real world'. The Puritans cherished education as spiritual aid and means to implement their religious mission, and consequently invested time and money in the establishment of educational infrastructures.[2] As the nation grew, however, and in particular in the nineteenth century, voices critical or dismissive of formal education emerged. Countless stories of education gained beyond the confines of educational institutions exist, most famously perhaps that of Melville's Ishmael, who proclaims in *Moby Dick* (1851) that "a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard" (122). Echoing this type of sentiment, writer and philosopher Elbert Hubbard, for instance, wrote in an 1899 essay: "It is not book-learning young men need, nor instruction about this or that, but a stiffening of the vertebrae which will cause them to be loyal to a trust, to act promptly, concentrate their energies: do the thing" (quoted in

2 For more information on the Puritan view of education, consider John Morgan's *Godly Learning: Puritan Attitudes towards Reason, Learning and Education, 1560-1640* (Cambridge UP, 1988).

Lemann 51). This principled dismissal of formal education can be traced well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Lemann points out that many of the "celebrity representatives of the possibility of success for the common man" (50)—Andrew Carnegie, Edward Bok, and Benjamin Franklin, among others—had very little formal education and started to work early in their lives. The prominent figure of the so-called self-made man, populating for example the stories of Horatio Alger, did not succeed by means of education but through luck and/or hard work. This 'worldly' paradigm of dismissing formal education is complemented (and, to an extent, complicated) in contemporary discourse by recent stories of Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg, both elite college dropouts turned business tycoons.

Anti-intellectualism—what Richard Hofstadter in his seminal book *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* calls the "national disrespect for mind" (3)—has a long tradition in the United States, and is often conflated with anti-elitism. On the one hand, this is epitomized, as Douthat suggests, by titles such as John LeBoutillier's *Harvard Hates America* (1978), which claims to expose the elitism, hypocrisy, and essential un-Americanness of Harvard University, and similar fringe publications. On the other hand, it became quite visible in the highly charged rhetoric of the 2012 presidential campaign, during which the Republican candidates, in particular, stood out in their disparagement of 'too much education'. Mitt Romney—himself a graduate of Harvard and Stanford—suggested that Barack Obama had lost touch with the American people because he had "spent too much time at Harvard, perhaps" (quoted in Shahid), while Rick Santorum called Obama a "snob" for advocating for universal college education, cautioning his audience against the inevitable liberal indoctrination awaiting everyone who would dare to venture into the groves of academe (quoted in Somnez). As these examples illustrate, anti-elitist and anti-intellectual sentiment remains alive and well at the same time that the Ivy League and its peers constitute something of a public obsession.

Parallel to this dismissive paradigm of conceptualizing higher education, however, a decidedly more positive attitude emerged. From the early days of the Republic onward, education was thought of as an important engine of social mobility, a vehicle to be used by men and, later, women to advance their position in society. The 'education-as-equalizer'-paradigm, as one might call it, found its perhaps most famous expression in Horace Mann's 1848 report as Commissioner of Education for the state of Massachusetts, in which he argued elegantly for the importance of education in democratic societies: "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer

of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery" (quoted in Stabler 70). This notion reflects not only the fundamental American value of equality of opportunity, but also the optimistic belief that education, more than any other social mechanism or institution, would provide the means to realize this goal.

As Lemann points out, however, the "rhetoric of opportunity" (51) had until the mid-twentieth century largely been used to advance "free public schools, paid for by taxpayers' money, open to all […]—not to argue for selective private institutions for higher learning" (81). Only in the 1950s, in the context of the Sputnik crisis, did efforts to increase access to elite higher education gain momentum. Many of the leading figures in mid-century higher education were deeply elitist, despite their commitments to the development of mass testing and the strategic recruitment of qualified candidates from non-traditional (that is, poor) backgrounds. James Bryant Conant, for instance, Harvard president and immensely influential in the process of introducing the SAT, wanted to support primarily a small number of talented (male, white) students. Conant and his peers saw themselves firmly within the Jeffersonian tradition. Thomas Jefferson laid out his views on education in no uncertain terms in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785): "By this means twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually, and be instructed, at the public expence, so far as the grammar schools go" (272).

These examples demonstrate the American ambivalence toward the social and cultural value of higher education. Given this ambivalence, it is perhaps no coincidence that education is conspicuously absent from the constitution, which, along with the Bill of Rights, is entirely silent on the issue, relegating it to state and local authorities. Thus, while Americans have a constitutional right to the pursuit of happiness, free speech, and equality before the law, they do not, as of yet, have a constitutional right to education.[3] Partly as a result of this, the American educational system is extremely heterogeneous in terms of quality, accessibility, and purpose. It is also strongly hierarchical, with stratification occurring not only along the lines of public and private institutions, but also with regard to school districts and neighborhood demographics. There is a saying that if the United States has the five best universities in the world, it also has the five hundred worst, and this indicates the stark discrepancies in terms of the quality of teaching and research between

3 For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Stephen Lurie's "Why Doesn't the Constitution Guarantee the Right to Education?" (*The Atlantic*, October 2013).

a select few elite colleges and universities and the many non-elite institutions that cater to the overwhelming majority of students in the US.

The fantasies, desires, and expectations attached to the elite educational space, which I want to address briefly in the following paragraphs, might not necessarily be categorically different from those directed toward non-elite institutions, but they often command more public attention. The discourse of elite education readily offers a number of competing visions of what the function of the elite campus might or ought to be, ranging from the utilitarian and scientific on one end of the spectrum to the humanistic and quasi-religious on the other.

Most commentators agree that the elite educational space should foster the production and transmission of knowledge. There is less agreement, predictably, about the nature of that knowledge, and still less about any attendant or additional functions elite institutions might fulfill. In what is one of the earliest accounts of the purpose of a college education, a short tract titled "New England's First Fruits" (1643), Harvard University formulated its own mission as one central to the success of the Puritan settlement. After settling in New England, the authors explain, "one of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust" ("New England's First Fruits" 568). Harvard's first administrators thus acted out of a professed sense of religious responsibility toward posterity that was informed by a mixture of idealism and utilitarianism. The idealism finds emblematic expression in the life and work of Charles William Eliot, Harvard's longest-running president (1869-1909) and an eminent figure in the history of higher education. Eliot advocated a fervent scientific purism and demanded that "the enthusiastic study of subjects for the love of them without any ulterior objects, the love of learning and research for their own sake, should be the dominant ideas" guiding higher education (214). The utilitarianism, by contrast, is articulated in William A Henry III's *In Defense of Elitism* (1994), in which he argues that "[s]chools prepare the next entrants into the work force, and the skills and attitudes those pupils absorb will determine the fate of American industry's attempts to compete in a global marketplace" (35). The utilitarian model appears to have gained currency in recent years, as *Money Magazine* just published a new and alternative ranking of top universities, promising neither academic enlightenment nor personal growth, but a strictly economic cost-benefits analysis: "Using unique measures of educational quality, affordability, and career outcomes, *Money*'s new value rankings

will help you and your child find the right school at the right price" ("Best Colleges"). While Henry III still stressed the societal function of elite colleges and universities—to strengthen the economy and the nation's global competitive edge—*Money Magazine*'s economically utilitarian vision is geared toward individual gain exclusively. Education, in this scenario, is merely a means to an end, the end being a successful career with adequate monetary compensation.

In addition to the utilitarian and idealistic approaches, which conceptualize education primarily as knowledge transfer and management, a decidedly different vision emerged. Daniel Coit Gilman, president of America's first research university, Johns Hopkins, argued that the university could never be "merely a place for the advancement of knowledge or the acquisition of learning; it will always be a place for the development of character" (quoted in Veysey 161). This holistic paradigm of understanding higher education would prove to be among the most pervasive, informing not only the ways in which the elite educational space was framed discursively, but also playing a crucial role in the politics of admission and exclusion, where 'character' became the central category in the early decades of the twentieth century (Karabel 4). Delbanco, too, emphasizes this function when he writes about the core function of elite educational institutions: A "college should be a place where young people find help for navigating the territory between adolescence and adulthood. It should provide guidance, but not coercion, for students trying to cross that treacherous terrain on their way to self-knowledge" (2012: 3). The use of such phrases as 'self-knowledge' demonstrates the extent to which this conception of higher education is indebted to much older, humanistic understandings of the role of educational institutions for individual and social development alike.

In certain contexts, the holistic paradigm of education turns into a spiritual, almost therapeutic vision of the powers of the elite educational space. Consider how Douthat recounts his expectations upon first arriving at Harvard: "Like most newly minted Harvardians, I envisioned college as a magical place, a paradise where the difficulties of my teenage years would be sloughed off and quickly forgotten" (5). To him, the university consequently becomes "a beacon of hope" to his "semi-alienated teenage mind" (7) and, predictably, fails to deliver. A distinctly humanistic twist is added to the holistic vision in the account of Anthony T. Kronman's *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up On the Meaning of Life* (2007), in which the Yale professor shares his musings on the current state of (elite) education—strayed from its

rightful path due to an unlucky blend of political correctness, identity politics, and an excessive emphasis on the research ideal. In Kronman's view, education transcends even the therapeutic and appropriates a quasi-religious function in our secular age: Because "the meaning of life is a subject that can be studied in school" (5), the elite educational space should be "a forum for the exploration of life's mystery and meaning through the careful but critical reading of the great works of literary and philosophical imagination that we have inherited from the past" (6).

Last but not least, it has to be pointed out that the conceptualizations of higher education introduced above are overwhelmingly concerned with the individual and the potential merits of his or her collegiate experience. But colleges and universities are first and foremost social institutions, and thus presumably have a collective social function to fulfill as well. The question of the precise nature of this function is at the heart of another strand of critical writing about education that I have already alluded to in the introduction of this book, namely the emerging field of critical university studies. Bill Readings, one of the first to explore these issues in his seminal work *The University in Ruins* (1996), traces the development of the university as it is in the process of "becoming a different kind of institution, one that is no longer linked to the destiny of the nation-state by virtue of its role as producer, protector, and inculcator of an ideal of national culture" (3).

As this brief survey has demonstrated, there is a range of demands, hopes, and expectations associated with the college in general, and the elite college in particular. Due to a peculiar blend of different functions, the elite educational space raises a more diverse set of expectations than the non-elite. Most elite college still favor a strong emphasis on liberal arts; they furthermore enjoy a reputation of being extremely lucrative in terms of the financial return on the investment; they have a proven track record of producing public leaders (the White House, for instance, has been occupied by graduates of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton for almost half of the twentieth century, cf. Karabel 3) and at the same time are renowned for their excellence in research and scholarship. Because of this eclecticism of functions, the question remains contested as to what 'education' in the elite educational space might or ought to mean. Whom does the elite institution have to answer to? Is it the individual student, the star faculty, the alumni, the local community, society at large, the nation, or posterity? Or does it first and foremost have to answer to itself, as an institution whose primary goal is survival in a highly competitive market environment? Which cultural, political, and educational functions does it ful-

fill, intentionally and unintentionally? It is part of this study's aim to excavate different positions on these issues, to put them into conversation with one another, and to interrogate their broader socio-cultural implications.

Changes and Continuities: Elite Campuses Then and Now

In the course of the twentieth century, the elite educational space has been subject to radical and lasting change. In the early twentieth century, elite campuses were strongholds of WASP privilege—places where wealthy families from Boston to Philadelphia sent their children to be groomed among their own kind. This is exemplified, for instance, in the works of Owen Johnson, who chronicles the educational career of his protagonist Dink Stover in a number of novels. Arriving first at his prep school and then, later, at college, Stover encounters a historically specific social environment characterized by homogeneity of race, gender, and class: His classmates at Lawrenceville and Yale—as on early twentieth-century elite campuses across the Northeast—are overwhelmingly white, male, and upper-class. On fictional and non-fictional campuses alike, life reflected the security of privilege, as Karabel points out: "[T]he academic side of the college experience ranked a distant third behind club life and campus activities" (17). By and large, students at elite institutions were far more interested in football and final clubs than in intellectual endeavors of any kind, and, in the words of Harvard Dean Henry A. Yeomans "the group which set the undergraduate standard of idleness were the rich and socially ambitious" (quoted in Karabel 21).

In many ways, there seems to be little resemblance between Stover's Yale and the twenty-first-century image of the elite campuses as vibrant hubs of diversity, originality, and intellectual ambition. Indeed, to the protagonists of more recent elite campus narratives—and their non-fictional counterparts—Stover's campus would be virtually unrecognizable. Among the most visible changes is perhaps the presence of women, who were excluded from Harvard, Yale, Princeton and similar schools for the first half of the twentieth century, but now constitute roughly fifty percent of the student bodies at these institutions. This development is reflected in the proliferation of female protagonists in contemporary elite campus narratives; the stories of Dink Stover, Amory Blaine, and Holden Caulfield are complemented and complicated by those of Lee Fiora, Rory Gilmore, and Charlotte Simmons.

Another important change is the increasing number of students with minority backgrounds. Harvard Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid, William

R. Fitzsimmons, confidently proclaims that "Harvard is much more diverse than it was even a few years ago and we continue to bolster our efforts to make Harvard even more diverse in the years ahead" (quoted in Conway and Watron). Indeed, some commentators seem inclined to see the elite campus as a 'post-racial' space. But admissions statistics alone do not create a 'post-racial' campus. This is illustrated quite poignantly by initiatives such as *I, too, am Harvard*, a photo campaign making visible and explicit the everyday racism still permeating the institution. With this campaign, students of color on the one hand voice their existence: "We are here. This place is ours. We, *too*, are Harvard" (*I, too, am Harvard*; emphasis in the original). On the other hand, the blog allows students of color to address the many different ways in which they are still confronted with racist attitudes, comments, and behaviors on a daily basis. *I, too, am Harvard*—along with its many spin-offs at other institutions—remind the administration and the other students that merely opening the gates to previously excluded groups is not sufficient. The change needed has to be much more substantial: Continued dynamics of discrimination and oppression have to be addressed openly and honestly; infrastructures of support for students of color have to be implemented or expanded; faculty hiring politics have to be scrutinized and adapted; the institutions' history and heritage has to be re-evaluated—in short, room has to be made for intervention and change that might be uncomfortable to those in power.

In one crucial way, however, the elite educational space has remained fairly consistent: Most campuses are still strikingly homogeneous with regard to their students' socio-economic background. Then and now, the majority of students at elite institutions come from the upper strata of the income distribution, need-blind admissions notwithstanding. The socio-economic composition of Harvard's student body, for instance, is such that the school's 'middle income' families are defined as earning between $110,000 and $200,000 (Delbanco 2007)—a telling fact when one takes into consideration that the median family income in the United States, according to the US Census Bureau, ranges around $51,000 ("Household Income: 2012"). The socio-political implications of this stark discrepancy are at the heart of recent debates about introducing class-based affirmative action programs.[4]

4 For more information on this, see a series of articles published in the *New York Times* in 2014 under the heading "Should Affirmative Action Be Based on Income?", e.g. Richard D. Kahlenberg and Halley Potter's "Class-based Affirmative Action Works," F. Michael

In attempting to make sense of the changes and continuities characterizing the elite campus it is useful to have a closer look at its single most stable quality. The elite educational space is, by definition, an exclusive and exclusionary space. Though elite institutions have not always been 'selective' in the contemporary sense—referring to low admissions rates and high yields—they have always engaged in practices of exclusion. The elite educational space is not only defined by whom it admits—the wealthy, the brilliant, the few—but also by whom it keeps out. In the first half of the twentieth century, this meant not only people of color and women but also Jewish students. After their numbers had risen steadily during the 1910s, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton introduced quotas—between two percent at Princeton and fifteen percent at Harvard—in order to combat what contemporaries called the "Hebrew invasion" (Karabel 119). Incidentally, elite colleges also introduced quotas limiting the numbers of "aspiring scholars and intellectuals" (Karabel 292) in an attempt to remain socially and culturally attractive to their upper-class clientele. Harvard Dean Wilbur Bender, for instance, cautioned against the proliferation of "pansies," "decadent esthetes," and "precious sophisticates" lest it discourage "the normal American boy" (or his affluent parents) from applying (quoted in Karabel 252). Candidates whose strengths were deemed primarily intellectual were subsequently limited to about ten percent of each entering class. In a similar vein, Harvard introduced the 'happy-bottom-quarter'-policy, which granted admissions officers a lot of flexibility in deciding on whom to admit and why (Karabel 291-93). With admission rates well under ten percent, today's elite campuses are highly exclusive spaces as well. The official reasoning behind the practices of admission and exclusion has changed, however—as has their discursive framing. At the heart of policy decisions and the debates that surround them is the concept of merit, which I introduce in the last section of this chapter.

The Study of Elites and Education

The systematic critical interrogation of the American upper class begins with *Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899), in which economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen offers the first comprehensive analysis of the American elite and argues that contemporary stratification

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Higginbotham's "Race-based Affirmative Action Is Still Needed," or Angel L. Harris's "As an Alternative to Race, Wealth is Best."

and practices of consumption can be traced back to tribal societies. Introducing the phrase 'conspicuous consumption' into the American socio-cultural vocabulary, Veblen's study is still considered one of the landmarks of the field. Likewise milestones of American elite theory, C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956) and E. Digby Baltzell's *The Protestant Establishment* (1964) portray the distribution of power in the United States before the civil rights movement, when the elite was still composed of a fairly homogenous, firmly WASP-dominated upper-class establishment. Mills argues that the men leading the large political, military, and economic organizations form a centralized and coherent national power elite that determines the development of society. All other sectors—religion, education, the media—are subordinate to this monolithic elite. Baltzell's *Protestant Establishment* chronicles the development and lifestyle of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) community, which for the better part of the twentieth century enjoyed control of all the major positions of power in the United States. Baltzell emphasizes its increasingly caste-like nature and the exclusionary practices which, if unchecked, would ultimately lead to the degeneration of the establishment. While many of the observations made by Mills and Baltzell are somewhat outdated in the twenty-first century, their shared attention to the importance on social background and schooling remains important and timely until today.

Following this tradition in contemporary sociology are Thomas Dye and G. William Domhoff, whose studies on the structure and distribution of power in America are updated frequently to include the most recent trends and developments. One of the leading publications in the field,Domhoff's *Who Rules America?* (2013) is in its seventh edition. Detailed information about his research on the operations of powerin the United States is available also on the related website, whichoffers a concise overview of the issues and questions relevant to thecritical study of power in America. Unlike Mills, who saw atriumvirate of political, business, and military elites at the top of theAmerican society, Domhoff argues that it is the leaders of thecorporate community—the managers of banks, corporations, andagri-businesses—that rule America.

An extensive reader edited by John Scott (*The Sociology of Elites* Volume I-III, 1990) furthermore provides access to many standard texts in elite theory and offers a useful overview of the various subfields. Elite studies comprises conceptual and methodological issues, political elites, corporate elites, economic elites, critical and comparative perspectives, interest groups, and networking structures. Other comprehensive accounts of the function and composition of the elite in the United States and elsewhere include Tom Bottomore's *Élites*

and Society (1993), Eric Carlton's *The Few and the Many: A Typology of Elites* (1996), Michael Hartmann's *Elitesoziologie: Eine Einführung* (2004; *The Sociology of Elites*), Masamichi Sasaki's *Elites: New Comparative Perspectives* (2008), and Jean-Pascal Daloz's *The Sociology of Elite Distinction: From Theoretical to Comparative Perspectives* (2010).

In addition to these broad and comprehensive studies of elite influence, there is an increasing amount of research focuses on specific aspects of elite life and culture, investigating the institutional structures, behavioral patterns, and psychological dispositions characterizing the upper strata of society. Offering a plethora of interdisciplinary research opportunities, elite cultures have furthermore been examined not only by sociologists but also by anthropologists, geographers, historians, linguists, psychologists, and gender studies scholars. Some examples of recent research on specific practices, patterns, and institutions include anthropologist Setha Low's *Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (2003), in which she examines gated communities and the reasons for joining them, or sociologist Diana Kendall's *Members Only: Elite Clubs and the Process of Exclusion* (2008), which focuses on exclusive private clubs and their functions with regard to business, networking, and the reproduction of privilege. A member of the social elite himself, Nelson W. Aldrich, Jr. explores the values, attitudes, and myths associated with inherited wealth as opposed to the marketplace mentality of self-made men and the *nouveau riche* in *Old Money: The Mythology of Wealth in America* (1996). Sociologist Betty Farrell likewise follows a historical trajectory. Her 1993 book *Elite Families: Class and Power in Nineteenth-Century Boston* concentrates on the role of elite Boston Brahmin families and the ways in which they shaped and influenced the social and political climate of their time. Mike Donaldson and Scott Poynting, in turn, focus on the contemporary period and explore the private and professional lives of the 'masters of the universe' in their study *Ruling Class Men: Money, Sex, Power* (2007). Psychologist Madeline Levine, on the other hand, highlights the potential and actual disadvantages of belonging to the elite community in *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids* (2008). These publications indicate a lively and growing body of sociological research and their various research emphases provide a road map, of sorts, for cultural studies scholarship. Many of the practices, institutions, and cultural trajectories interrogated in these books operate through a diverse array of cultural channels as well, after all, and derive some of their legitimacy and socio-cultural power through these channels.

During the past few decades, two approaches to conceptualizing eliteness have dominated the discourse of elite distinction; one can be described as moral/normative, and the other as functional/sociological (Keller 5). The moral/normative approach dominates popular parlance and can be found, for instance, in German encyclopedias such as *Brockhaus* or *Meyer*, which define the elite as a social group characterized by above-average skills, abilities, achievements, and societal value (Hartmann 2004: 8). This definition derives from a normative view of the qualities the elite ought to have in order to fulfill its presumed societal function of providing leadership and guidance in a socially responsible fashion. The functional/sociological approach underlies most scholarship in the field of elite studies. Here, the term is defined as referring to "a small number of actors who are situated atop key social structures and exercise significant influence over social and political change" (Markowitz). Even more succinctly, the functional approach posits elites as "[s]mall but powerful minorities with a disproportionate influence in human affairs" (Reid). This definition derives not from alleged qualifications of these minorities but from the actual distribution of power. As Keller points out, the first approach "accounts for the existence of elite groups in terms of the superiority of given individuals, the [second], in terms of the social function of a class or group. The moral approach easily degenerates into mysticism, the functional approach, into tautology" (5). Khan adds to the sociological definition the importance of the "vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource" (2012: 362) and emphasizes the contingency of what counts as a valuable and transferable resource at any given point in time. To study the elite, according to Khan, is to study the distribution and flow of different kinds of resources or capital (ibid.).

A major conceptual distinction in contemporary elite theory is that between 'elitist' and 'pluralist' schools of thought. The elitist school argues that there exists in the United States (or any comparable nation) a single, unified, and internally coherent power elite that determines all kinds of social, political, and economic developments. The pluralist school, by contrast, assumes the existence of a variety of relatively autonomous sub-elites across a range of key sectors, for instance politics, economics, religion, or the media. In a democratic context, the pluralist approach offers a somewhat more reassuring explanation for the issues of inequality and elite influence, since it at least implies a system of checks and balances governing the distribution of power—each sub-elite has a limited sphere of influence and its survival depends on cooperation with the other sub-elites. In order to conquer the

term's imprecision and broad semantic reach, elite theory furthermore distinguishes between elites that are influential solely in their specific contexts (top poker players, athletes, and the like) and those whose power is relevant to society as a whole. Keller calls the latter "strategic elites" (23). This distinction is echoed in Karabel's definition, who limits his understanding of the elite to the "individuals who occupy the leading positions in major organizations in the economy, the polity, and the culture" (560 n.4).

My own understanding of elite rule aligns most closely with that of political scientist Thomas Dye, who walks a middle ground, of sorts, in his hugely influential book series *Who's Running America?* Dye identifies more than 7,300 leadership positions across ten key sectors of American society, and explains the power held by the individuals who inhabit them as follows:

> Individuals in these positions control more than one-half of the nation's industrial and financial assets, over half of the assets of private foundations and two-thirds of the assets of private universities; they control the television networks, influential newspapers and media empires; they control the most prestigious civic and cultural organizations; they direct the activities of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the national government. (139)

What is particularly interesting about Dye's conceptualization is the notion of 'interlocking directorates', meaning that some individuals hold more than one of these leadership positions. In fact, more than twenty percent of the roughly 7,300 positions are held by what he calls 'interlockers'. Dye's conception thus introduces a compelling dialogue between pluralist and elitist approaches: While power is spread across a range of sectors, there are numerous connections within each as well as across sectors. Dye furthermore points to the similar socialization shared by many of those who inhabit leadership positions by virtue of their class background and education.

The sphere of education is one of the most widely researched subfields in elite studies. A whole body of research focuses on the admissions policies of private schools and universities and thus emphasizes the ways in which the elite orchestrates its own reproduction, always forced to negotiate between its own class interests on the one hand and the pressures of broader social developments on the other. In his groundbreaking study *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (2005), Jerome Karabel portrays how the elite gatekeepers at the Big Three continuously reformulated their admissions policies and redefined the term 'merit' in order

to control the racial, ethnic, and social composition of each entering class. New York Times education reporter Jacques Steinberg studied the processing of applications and recruitment of students at Wesleyan University, drawing a highly ambivalent picture of the college's attempts at ensuring diversity as well as financial solvency. On the one hand, Steinberg portrays the admissions officers as human and caring actors in a process that is all too often very painful for the applicants, but on the other hand he also points to the discriminatory treatment of certain groups of applicants, for instance Asian American students, who are held to higher standards than others. Interestingly, Steingberg's book also points to the disappointment the admissions officer feels when a candidate he has tried to recruit chooses a different university—this side of the process is rarely addressed in the discourse (*The Gatekeepers: Inside the Admissions Process of a Premier College*, 2002). Similarly, Mitchell L. Stevens spent one and a half years working in the admissions office of an elite New England college, describing in detail how the admissions officers navigate the at times conflicting interests of the college administration, faculty, and the public in the admissions process. This book will be discussed in greater detail in the second chapter of this study (*Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites*, 2009).

In addition to these studies of the dynamics of admission and exclusion, another group of books focuses on the processes of elite identity formation and group cohesion that occur at and through elite educational institutions. Peter W. Cookson, Jr. and Caroline Hodges Persell were the first to conduct an in-depth examination of how young members of the elite are socialized and trained for the positions of power they are destined to inhabit. Relying on an array of sources, including questionnaires and interviews with students and alumni, Cookson and Persell describe the complex socialization process students undergo at elite prep schools, a process that is defined by a highly competitive environment with little privacy, and an intense pressure to excel. Upon its completion, this process creates a sense of legitimacy in the graduates of these schools, or, as one reviewer puts it, "[i]n one stroke, then, the prep school experience facilitates class cohesion and class legitimation" (Karen 479). Another way in which elite prep schools prepare their students for powerful positions is the college application process, in which they have clear advantages through competent guidance counselors, social networks, and strong ties between the schools and elite colleges (*Preparing for Power: America's Elite Boarding Schools*, 1985). Alan H. Levy's study *Elite Education and the Private School: Excellence and Arrogance at Phillips Exeter Academy*

(1990) offers some valuable insight into the educational and cultural microcosm of boarding schools, but has been criticized for being unnecessarily harsh and polemical. Similar sociological investigations of the role of boarding schools in the formation of elite identities have been conducted recently by Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (*The Best of the Best: Becoming Elite at an American Boarding School*, 2009) and Columbia sociologist Shamus Rahman Khan (*Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*, 2011). Gaztambide-Fernández develops an intricate model that captures the different processes that let students develop elite subjectivities in the course of their time at the school. He calls this model "the five E's of elite schooling" (6), and describes it as follows:

> Students at the Weston School are carefully selected from hundred of applicants through a complex admissions process that involves standardized tests, essays, recommendations, and often interviews. While the explicit purpose of the admissions process is to choose who will be allowed inside, the implicit purpose is to *exclude* and to provide a rational for such exclusions. Once admitted and enrolled, students *engage* a plethora of learning opportunities in a wide range of academic, athletic, and artistic disciplines […]. As students develop their talents and demonstrate their *excellence*, they confirm their *entitlement* to the privilege of a Weston education. At the end of their Weston careers, students *envision* themselves in other equally elite spaces, pursuing challenging careers and assuming leadership roles. (6)

Gaztambide-Fernández's account thus mirrors that of Cookson and Persell in that he stresses the dual nature of the elite boarding school socialization: On the one hand, the changes it produces in the way students think about themselves and their privilege, and on the other hand the support the institutions grants them in creating a portfolio of skills and accomplishments needed to get into an elite college.

In *Perfectly Prep: Gender Extremes at a New England Prep School*, (2008), anthropologist Sarah A. Chase studies the construction and performance of gender at a small elite boarding school. She investigates the different kinds of pressures felt by girls and boys and discusses the influence of ethnic difference and socio-economic status on how gender is experienced and performed. While all students are "caught in the crossfire" of conflicting values and expectations, Chase argues that girls fair worse than boys: "I learned that boys thought that 'it would suck' to be a girl and that one third of the girls would be male if given the chance" (3). These dynamics are particularly problematic, ac-

cording to Chase, since many of the students thus socialized go on to inhabit positions of power and influence in American society.

As these studies demonstrate, there is now, and has been throughout the twentieth century, a peculiar connection between the elite and the educational system in the United States; the production of power and the production of knowledge go hand in hand. An uneasy form of mutual dependence joins two sets of social actors whose interests, to some degree, overlap, but at the same time might contradict each other: the reproduction of privilege and power on the one hand, and the education of responsible future citizens and leaders on the other. At the same time, elite colleges and universities of course also offer educational services in the narrower sense of the term and have to navigate their faculty's research and teaching interests as well as the educational goals of their students. To further complicate matters, the negotiation of these interests takes place in a socio-cultural context that likewise weighs in and, occasionally, forces a response from the parties involved: Political movements, such as the Civil Rights movement or feminism, have had a lasting effect on the elite educational landscape, and, by extension, on the elite that frequents it. Scholars agree that institutionalized education plays a pivotal role in the culture and politics of the elite. As the primary space in which elite identities are forged and in-group cohesion is created, the campus provides ample room for the distribution of social and cultural capital and is thus crucial to the reproduction of the elite group. Historically, colleges and especially prep schools have furthermore facilitated the recruitment of new members and the merging of old names with new money (Levine 1980). Thus, as Mills points out, "[t]he school—rather than the upper-class family—is the most important agency for transmitting the traditions of the upper social classes, and regulating the admission of new wealth and talent." He therefore concludes that education "is the characterizing point in the upper-class experience" (64-5). Though much has changed in the educational field since the 1950s, contemporary sociologists largely agree with Mills's assessment of the importance of education. Michael Hartmann, for instance, discusses the key role of elite degrees in gaining access to top positions in politics, business, administration, and the law (2007: 61). Khan points to one of the most important functions of elite institutions, namely that of creating legitimacy, arguing that elite institutions are "engines of inequality" because they often help "to convert birthright into credentials and thereby obscure[e] some of the ways elites are reproduced" (2012: 372).

At the same time, as the phrase 'When Harvard speaks, the country listens' (quoted in Kridel 161) suggests, elite educational institutions have always played an important role in the culture and politics of American higher education in general. Ernest Earnest elaborates: "To an amazing degree the pattern set by Harvard, Yale and Princeton after 1880 became that of colleges all over the country. The clubs, the social organizations, the athletes—even the clothes and the slang—of the 'big three' were copied by college youth throughout the nation" (204). Elite institutions themselves have consciously adopted the role of leaders and role models, as this statement by Kingman Brewster, Jr., Yale President from 1963 to 1977, suggests:

> I think it's fair to say, without being too officious or self-congratulatory, and I hope not smug, that it has been and is the ancient privilege of endowed free universities of this country, particularly in the northeast, … [to be] the yardstick, not only for the independent rivals in the Ivy League and elsewhere, but the yardstick for the fast growing and very rapidly improving state institutions in the west and far west. (quoted in Soares 6)

It is not surprising, then, that the authors of recent books on higher education in the United States choose to focus on elite institutions. Delbanco points out that elite colleges "have peculiar salience for understanding the past [and] wield considerable influence in the present debate over which educational principles should be sustained, adapted, or abandoned in the future" (2012: 6) and thus provide the best lens through which to examine the cultural meanings of college in America. Menand explains his focus on "a very thin slice of the whole" in similar terms and claims that "historically, the elites have had the resources to innovate and the visibility to set standards for the system as a whole" (2010: 18).

This peculiar relationship of mutual dependence thus manifests itself in the highly disproportionate amount of attention elite institutions command in American public discourse. As Derek Bok explains, "higher education in the United States has grown to become a vast enterprise comprising some 4,500 different colleges and universities, more than 20 million students, 1.4 million faculty members, and aggregate annual expenditures exceeding 400 billion dollars" (9). Given the range, diversity, and sheer numbers of institutions—research universities, professional schools, technical colleges, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, among others— those colleges that deserve the moniker 'elite' by virtue of their high selectivity constitute but an extremely small piece of the higher education pie. Most scholars working on elite edu-

cation use Barron's *Profiles of American Colleges*, which identifies roughly 200 to 250 colleges as 'very competitive' or 'most competitive', as a guide (cf. Leonhardt 2013); this means that between 4.5 and 5.5 percent of colleges are classified as 'elite'. A similar case can be made for the influence wielded by high schools. Douthat writes:

> There are 31,700 high schools, public and private, nationwide, but only 930—roughly 3 percent—could claim more than four students in their 1998-2001 graduating classes who matriculated at Yale, Harvard, or Princeton. And *Worth*'s top hundred sent a total of 3,452 kids to the big three during that time, meaning that roughly 22 percent of the 'Yarvton' student bodies emerged from fewer than 0.3 percent of America's high schools. (50)

The media coverage, the number of fictional accounts, and the general visibility and discursive leverage these highly selective institutions hold seem to suggest that every other American teen attends an elite school, and they create an image of the student at an elite institution as 'the' generic college student, which makes actual facts—for instance that "more than 40 percent of all undergraduates in this country are over the age of twenty-four, and close to 40 percent study part-time" (Bok 16)—seem surprising. Thus, there is an obvious and important imbalance whose cultural and socio-political implications will be discussed in a later section of this study.

4. 'Excellence and Equity': Merit as the Price of Admission

In addition to and continuously in dialogue with eliteness, merit is the second central trope around which the epistemology of elite education revolves. For the past few decades, it has been at the heart of most debates surrounding the elite educational space and its socio-cultural and political implications; Karabel even proposes that the entire "history of admissions at the Big Three has [...] been, fundamentally, a history of recurrent struggles over the meaning of 'merit'" (5). In this section, I share some general observations on the role of merit in the context of elite education, and discuss the history and current discursive role of the notion of a 'meritocracy'.

'Fundamentally Derivative': The Concept of Merit

Among the most interesting qualities of 'merit' is that it is recognized as the admissions criterion on which almost everyone can agree. In part, this is probably due to another interesting quality, namely that despite—or rather because of?—its widespread usage, there is little agreement as to what it actually means. Philosopher Amartya Sen thus aptly begins his exploration of merit and justice by noting that the "idea of meritocracy may have many virtues, but clarity is not one of them" (5). According to Sen, the concept of merit is "fundamentally derivative, and thus cannot but be qualified and contingent" (ibid.). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines merit as "the quality of deserving well, or of being entitled to reward or gratitude" or to a "claim or title to commendation or esteem; excellence, worth" ("merit"). Much like 'elite', then, merit is a relative term, characterized by elusiveness and semantic openness. Its definition depends on what societies or institutions at any given point in time hold to be valuable or worthy of support—or claim to. In the educational context, however, there is no agreement as to the relative weight and importance of, for instance, academic performance (as measured by grades and test results) vis-à-vis extracurricular activities, athletics, or social connections with a school.

If we believe media portrayals of students at elite institutions, they embody the perfect blend of all these qualities. Consider, for example, David Brooks's description of such "mentor magnets" in his book *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (2000):

> These are the kids who spent the crucial years between ages 16 and 24 winning the approval of their elders. Others may have been rebelling at that age or feeling alienated or just basically exploring their baser natures. But the people who made it to this page [the *New York Times* wedding page] controlled their hormonal urges and spent their adolescence impressing teachers, preparing for the next debate tournament, committing themselves to hours of extracurricular and volunteer work, and doing everything else we as a society want teenagers to do. The admissions officer deep down in all of us wants to reward these mentor magnets with bright futures, and the real admissions officers did, accepting them into the right colleges and graduate schools and thus turbocharging them into adulthood. (2000: 15)

Note that in this narrative, the students themselves hold all the agency. There is in this account no awareness of structural factors, such as the students' so-

cio-economic background, their parents' influence, the role of different forms of capital and access to specific resources, etc. The topos of merit often offers ready-made answers to the questions prompted by the existence of elite educational institutions: How and why do individuals gain access to this exclusive and exclusionary space? They do so on the basis of merit, an unspecified mélange of innate abilities and individual achievement. What do they do once they have arrived at the elite campus? They further cultivate their meritoriousness by excelling in a number of academic, extracurricular, and athletic endeavors. A recent edition of *Harvard Magazine* puts it as follows:

> There's a wide consensus that today's undergraduates make up the most talented, accomplished group of polymaths every assembled in Harvard Yard: there's nothing surprising about meeting a first-year cellist in the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra who is also a formidable racer for the cycling club, or a student doing original research on interstellar dark matter who organized a relief effort in sub-Saharan Africa. (Lambert)

What do the meritocrats bring into the outside world once they leave the confines of the elite educational space? A unique blend of knowledge, skills, and leadership qualities—an evolved kind of merit—that authenticates and legitimates their future positions as society's leaders. Douthat aptly sums up the discursive function of the topos of merit: "So it is that at Harvard, and at similar schools around the country, a privileged class of talented students sit atop the world, flush with pride in their own accomplishments, secure in the knowledge that they rule because they *deserve* to rule, because they are the *best*" (12, emphasis in the original). Khan refers to the same phenomenon when he describes the "language of hard work" (55) that permeates the self-descriptions of elite students and serves as "the linchpin to validating contemporary elite life: [the students'] abilities explain their achievements and their achievements thus justify their elite position" (2011: 178). Institutions themselves similarly utilize the topos of merit when they describe their student bodies as exceptionally ambitious, gifted, driven, and passionate. To further authenticate this narrative, student profiles on institutional websites often include stories of hardships overcome or professional successes celebrated. A majority of fictional accounts of the elite educational experience likewise center around the topos of merit, but shift the focus to the scholarship student who arrives at the elite institution to which he or she gained access on the basis of hard work and ambition.

The topos of merit was not always articulated in the fashion exemplified by Brooks and Douthat. Reflecting on the changing interpretations of merit, Karabel argues that "beneath the flux has been a consistent pattern: the meaning of merit has shifted in response to changing power relations among groups as well as changes in the broader society" (5). He identifies a number of critical junctures in the conceptualization of merit: In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, merit was ostensibly a purely academic category. Entrance exams administered by colleges and universities measured the prospective candidates' knowledge of a specific curriculum, including, importantly, Latin and Greek. Social exclusivity was guaranteed by the fact that most public high schools did not teach classical languages, thus effectively ousting their students from the competition. During the 1920s, however, as part of a conscious attempt to regain control over the composition of entering classes and limiting the number of 'undesirable' students, the notion of 'character' was introduced into the admissions politics of elite colleges. The gatekeepers now explicitly focused on "the idea of the 'all-round man' of sturdy character, sound body, and proper social background," as Karabel puts it (4). Athletic prowess and engagement in other extracurricular activities assumed primary importance over academic factors. In the 1950s, the Cold War, the reverberations of the Sputnik crisis, and the general American anxiety over competing with the Soviet Union gradually began to displace the ideal of the 'all-round man'; the so-called Gentleman's C was no longer sufficient. Instead, the ideal of the 'exceptional student', gifted intellectually and otherwise, gained currency, and at the same time, the professionalization of mass intelligence testing promised to provide a means of identifying and selecting those students. Elite colleges and universities were expected to produce future leaders and scientists who would ensure America's global dominance. The 1960s and 70s, by contrast, saw another shift in the definition of merit, as notions of 'diversity' and 'inclusion' began to enter the vocabulary of admissions officers. Since then, merit has stabilized as a heterogeneous category that on the one hand includes academic and extracurricular qualifications, and on the other refers to certain cultural, racial, or ethnic subject positions. As most elite campuses opened their gates to women and minorities, the WASP-y homogeneity of Dink Stover's campus slowly but steadily became a thing of the past—or so the story goes.

Today the meaning of merit is still widely contested. Though surveys indicate that most people understand merit in the educational context as an academic category (Soares 1), schools and colleges still adhere to a much broader

conception, taking into account extracurricular activities, athletic prowess, ties to the institution, and potential financial expressions of gratitude. It is not surprising, then, that the discourse of elite education in general remains relatively vague on the issue. The meaning of merit becomes somewhat clearer when one focuses on the qualities that it is set against: the "accidents of birth" (Soares 2), "social ties and status" (Khan 2011: 9), or "inherited privilege" (Karabel 3)—qualities often evoked as ghostly and embarrassing relics of the past. Most discursive positions seem to agree that merit is not hereditary and cannot be bought or sold. Importantly, the fundamental implication of adopting merit as a guiding criterion for selection is that it is both possible and desirable to evaluate an individual "separate from the conditions of social life," as Khan puts it (2011: 9). Since this is, in fact, rather difficult to do, the admissions practices of elite institutions are still characterized by what Karabel calls discretion and opacity—"discretion so that gatekeepers would be free to do what they wished and opacity so that how they used their discretion would not be subject to public scrutiny" (2). Oscillating somewhat uneasily between aptitude and ambition, merit remains a problematic quality, and the fact that it seems somehow in larger supply with the children of privileged families continues to provoke critical interrogation.

The Ideal of the Meritocracy

Perhaps the most telling indicator of America's infatuation with the notion of merit is the enthusiastic appropriation of the notion of the 'meritocracy' as an ideal and guiding principle. As Christopher Hayes points out in *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy* (2012), "to call an organization, a business, or an institution 'meritocratic' is to pay it a high compliment" (31). This is significant in so far as British sociologist Michael Young originally coined the term in his satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958) to express criticism, not approval. Young's book takes the form of a fictional Ph.D. thesis written in the year 2034, tracing the ascendancy of a new ruling class chosen exclusively on the basis of a series of valid and reliable tests of intelligence and aptitude. The fictional scholar himself puts it as follows: "Today we frankly realize that democracy can be no more than aspiration, and have rule not so much by the people as by the cleverest people; not an aristocracy of birth, nor a plutocracy of wealth, but a true meritocracy of talent" (Young 2011 (1958): 11). One of the results of the restructured class system is a steady loss of influence for the working class. On the one hand, this is due to the loss of ideological fervor

since there is no longer an unfair class system against which to rebel—social stratification still exists, but it is ostensibly justified and fair. On the other hand, the working class loses its potential leaders as they are coopted by the meritocracy structures allowing them to rise above their station. The meritocracy itself, due to intermarriage, congeals into caste-like structures and thus increasingly starts to resemble a closed aristocracy, albeit a 'deserving' and efficient one. Young's main argument, curiously missed by most of his readers, is that the seemingly fair process of mass intelligence testing would ultimately produce rampant social inequality and erode all sense of solidarity among the citizenry.

Though Young had intended his study to be a cautionary tale, the term 'meritocracy' was adopted widely and uncritically as a synonym for fairness, and now lends an aura of legitimacy to all kinds of selection processes. Shortly before his death in 2002, Young himself, exasperated by the misunderstanding, commented on the term's popularity:

> I have been sadly disappointed by my 1958 book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. I coined a word which has gone into general circulation, especially in the United States, and most recently found a prominent place in the speeches of Mr. Blair. The book was a satire meant to be a warning (which needless to say has not been heeded) against what might happen to Britain between 1958 and the imagined final revolt in 2033. (Young 2001)

Apart from the general discrepancy in evaluating the socio-political reverberations of meritocratic structures, it is interesting to note another difference between Young's usage of 'meritocracy' and that of public discourse: In Young's mock dissertation, the term meritocracy refers to the new meritocratic elite, the ruling class chosen on the basis of innate ability rather than inherited privilege. In contemporary (American) parlance, by contrast, the term is used to describe the system as such, not a specific group within that system. One explanation for this diverging use might be that labeling distinct social classes, whatever their legitimacy, does not resonate well with the American public since it indicates a certain affinity with other, less legitimate forms of rule, such as aristocracy or plutocracy.

As Young observes, the term 'meritocracy' is used widely and in many different contexts. Books such as Hayes's *Twilight of the Elites* or Stephen McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr.'s *The Meritocracy Myth* (2009) take as their basis a rather broad understanding of meritocracy and thus consider a whole array of key sectors across American society, but the term is also used on a smaller

scale. One example cited by Hayes is the investment banking firm Goldman Sachs, which claims to be "a meritocracy built on the belief that collaboration, teamwork and integrity create the right environment for our people to deliver the best possible results for our clients" ("Why Goldman Sachs"; cf. Hayes 31). The original context of the concept, however, was education, and conceived of merit as a value "assessed by a competitive educational system" ("meritocracy"). Today, despite its wide semantic range and eclectic usage, the notion of the meritocracy is still closely tied to the educational system and specifically to the elite educational system.

There are several reasons for this connection. In Young's original account, the meritocracy was selected via educational institutions, which offer the greatest variety of those instruments needed as the prerequisites for a functioning meritocracy: systematic examinations, reliable and valid mass testing, in-depth reviews conducted by ostensibly neutral agents. Another reason for the link between the meritocracy and education lies in the fact that the campus is often seen as a microcosm of society (cf. Showalter 3). People live, work, and play on the campus; they form relationships; its infrastructure includes legislative, executive, and judicative dimensions; it is equipped with its own media landscape; it offers arts, sports, food, and entertainment—just like the 'real world'. If, in the words of Jay Parini, the campus is "a place where humanity plays out its obsessions and discovers what makes life bearable," then perhaps this accounts for the continued popularity of the campus as a setting for fictional and non-fictional narratives. Since the campus is often seen as a pars pro toto for society, it also frequently serves as a yardstick for measuring society's progress. This is true especially for the elite campus due to its heightened visibility, which then seems to suggest that the elite campus is an ideal microcosm of an ideal society.

The elite educational space is misconceived as the generic educational space, which in turn is seen as a mirror of society. The fact that Harvard is now welcoming its most diverse entering class ever into its ivied walls is turned into a source of comfort and pride to those who want to see a more just and egalitarian society. The more enthusiastic these accounts are, the more likely are they to forget that a meritocratic society "is not an expression of, but an alternative to, a more egalitarian society," as Karabel puts it (4). The meritocracy, after all, is not opposed to stratification per se, just to certain kinds of stratification. This line of reasoning furthermore neglects the exceptional status of the elite educational space. Just as Hillary Clinton's success as a female politician does not say much about the overall situation of women in politics,

the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic makeup of the elite campus does not say much about anything except just that. It certainly does not say whether the American society works according to meritocratic principles, nor does it seriously engage with question of whether this would be a desirable goal in the first place.

Part of the elite campus's continuing allure is that it forms a crucial and unique part of the American cultural heritage—Harvard, for instance, was founded in 1636—and even though the semiotics of elite education are somewhat at odds with other fundamentally American tropes, such as, for instance, the frontier, it forms a well-established part of the American cultural inventory. Films, television series, and novels are full of references to actual or fictional elite institutions. Sometimes these references are humorous, like *30 Rock*'s Jack Donaghy claiming that he was a recipient of the 'Amory Blaine Handsomeness Scholarship' at Princeton; sometimes they are used to establish a backstory; sometimes they are critical or disparaging. In any case, references to elite institutions occur frequently and in a variety of different contexts.

In its cultural work as a signifier, the elite educational space appropriates the legitimacy conferred by the topos of merit. In conjunction with the mechanisms of the pastoral and picturesque, a powerful image of legitimate privilege is created. The references to the elite educational space and the utilization of its aesthetics function as shorthand for a privileged life, a beautiful life, but most importantly: a *legitimately* privileged and beautiful life. They thus reflect Max Weber's observation about good fortune and legitimacy:

> The fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this, he needs to know that he has a right to his good fortune. He wants to be convinced that he 'deserves' it, and above all that he deserves it in comparison with others. He wishes to be allowed the belief that the less fortunate also merely experiences his due. Good fortune thus wants to be 'legitimate' fortune. (quoted in Gerth and Mills 271)

This set of meanings associated with the elite educational space is utilized in non-educational contexts as well, for instance when fashion brands such as Polo Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, or J.Crew appropriate its aesthetics to add an aura of legitimate superiority and elite distinction to their products.

The tenacity of the connection between the concept of meritocracy and the notion of legitimate privilege becomes obvious, moreover, in the lack of any genuine critique of meritocratic structures and in the inability or un-

willingness, in the overall discourse of elite education, to suggest meaningful alternatives. As the second chapter of this study shows in greater detail, sociological studies and journalistic investigations of elite education all find fault with the status quo of the meritocracy, but simultaneously operate entirely within its ideological framework. Their suggestions for reform, then, are geared toward improving the meritocracy by making it more just and less susceptible to the undue influence of capital and power. There is very little awareness in this critical landscape of the systemic flaws and inconsistencies of the ideology of meritocracy—flaws and inconsistencies that were so obvious to Michael Young when he coined the term. A recent and paradigmatic case in point is Lani Guinier's book *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America* (2015). Its title suggests an awareness of the pitfalls of meritocratic structures and a commitment to rethinking and reforming the educational system in accordance with democratic principles. Guinier's central suggestion, however, is simply to change the definition of merit from what she calls a 'testocratic' one—test scores, grades, and other measures of individual competition—to a 'democratic' one: "a student's capacity to collaborate and think creatively" (xiii). "If we are going to have a 'meritocracy'—which really just means 'rule by merit'," Guinier writes, "then we need a better conception of what now constitutes merit in our society versus what it should be" (xi). Despite the implications of its title, then, Guinier's book likewise operates squarely within the ideological framework of the meritocracy. There surely are in the United States educators, researchers, or other commentators who are genuinely critical of the very idea of the meritocracy and attempt to think of alternative systems instead of merely changing the definition of merit. In the discourse of elite education, however, these voices are not heard.

5. 'A Touchy Subject'? Class and Elite Education

As the previous sections have shown, eliteness is an elusive quality that the discourse of elite education does not always make explicit, even though it is at the heart of its epistemological practices. Merit, by contrast, is a concept with strong legitimatory potentials and, as such, is frequently invoked, despite the lack of agreement on its meaning(s). The constitution and operation of both notions, as has become clear time and again, depends strongly on different forms of capital. The production of meritorious—i.e. "measurably

talented," as Stevens puts it (22)—individuals, for instance, costs money, warrants connections, and requires specific kinds of knowledge. Eliteness, too, is expensive, as indicated by the impressive endowments and spending patterns of those institutions commonly thought of as 'elite'. Their exclusiveness likewise depends upon their social and cultural capital—access to famous and influential people, or ties to other institutions, for example.

This leads us to the third and last category I want to introduce in this chapter: class. It is something of a truism to point to the conflicted, ambiguous, and contradictory ways in which class is talked about—or not talked about—in the United States. Americans, critics and commentators seem to agree, range somewhere between willfully ignorant and grossly negligent when it comes to the issue of socio-economic stratification. In his 1980 book *Inequality in an Age of Decline*, Sociologist Paul Blumberg argues that "[w]ithin the framework of the American tradition of classlessness, social class is America's forbidden thought, its dirty little secret that cannot be expressed openly and directly but emerges via subterranean paths and masquerade" (53). Paul Fussell complains in his introduction to *Class: A Guide through the American Status System* (1983) that whenever he talked about his research on class, people responded as if he "had said, 'I am working on a book urging the beating to death of baby whales using the dead bodies of baby seals'" (15). A deep sense of discomfort thus appears to permeate the American imagination with regard to the issue of class and status.

Interestingly, however, these observations do not hold true in the context of the contemporary discourse of elite education. In fact, in this discursive space, class plays an increasingly prominent role, albeit a rather undertheorized one. All three epistemological paradigms I examine in this study—the critical-analytical, the affirmative, and the imaginative—engage with socio-economic factors in one way or another. In the sociological and journalistic texts that form the core of the following chapter, class is one, if not *the* primary analytical category, and its examination is closely linked to the expectation that elite educational institutions serve as engines of social mobility. In the self-representational materials—promotional brochures, videos, and other content published by Princeton University—class-related policies and achievements are placed quite prominently, even though the treatment of socio-economic factors remains selective and incomplete. Fictional texts set in the elite educational space likewise conspicuously prioritize socio-economic stratification as the central issue informing the experiences of campus novel protagonists. The treatment of class in the discourse of elite education thus

not only demonstrates that class is, in fact, very much talked about in the United States, but also testifies to the different dimensions on which class operates: economic and material, cultural and ideological, psychological and physical.

Approaching Class in the Discourse of Elite Education

This relative openness notwithstanding, however, class poses a problem for the discourse of elite education. The strong correlation between socio-economic background and educational achievement does not resonate well with American self-descriptions as the land of fairness and opportunity for all, and the various efforts made to alleviate this correlation have to contend with the fact that class, due to its multilayered nature, is not easily integrated into existing patterns of such alleviation. A case in point is the 'diversity paradigm', discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, which serves to recognize, affirm, and celebrate difference. Class difference, however, does not seem to be something Americans want to recognize, much less claim in an affirmative manner—countless studies and polls tell us that most Americans cling to the belief of belonging to one large middle class. The American imagination is informed by a strong desire for socio-economic structuration *not* to matter, nor even to be acknowledged. The diversity paradigm thus does not resonate well with class, as Walter Benn Michaels argues:

> [T]he kind of diversity produced by a larger number of poor students isn't exactly the sort of thing a college can plausibly celebrate—no poor people's history month, no special 'theme' dormitories (i.e., no Poor House alongside Latino House or Asian House) and no special reunions for poor alumni. Indeed, the whole point of going to Harvard, from the standpoint of the poor, would be to stop being poor, whereas Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, et cetera, presumably don't want to stop being Asian American, African American, et cetera. (2006: 89)

Rita Felski explains the difficulty of combining class analysis and identity politics by pointing out that "class is essentially, rather than contingently, a hierarchical concept" (42). Class politics, she argues, "is ultimately concerned with overcoming or at least lessening class differences, not with affirming and celebrating them" (ibid.). But is this true? First, race and gender—in a society that so obviously values whiteness and masculinity—are de facto also hierarchical concepts and would lose their meaning if the hierarchies were dissolved. The

mere fact of distinguishing between two or more identity positions arguably always implies a hierarchical rather than egalitarian relationship—in practice, at least, if not in theory. And second, depending on how one conceptualizes 'class differences', related politics do not necessarily have to aim at lessening or overcoming them. Not everyone wants to be like the rich, nor even *be* rich, for that matter.

In the following, I outline my own understanding of class, which is informed, by and large, by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Gavin Jones, and Rita Felski. It is important to note here that while the following observations inform my own thinking about class as a complex and multidimensional construct, this complexity is not always necessarily reflected in the discourse of elite education. In fact, as I have already indicated above, the discourse itself often produces an understanding of class that is far more simplistic and reductive than that of class theorists.

In the discourse of elite education, class is primarily conceptualized as family income. The class-related issues that are discussed most frequently are affordability, particularly in light of steadily rising tuition costs, and access, primarily in light of the competitive advantage enjoyed by applicants from affluent families. The critical-analytical studies discussed in the following chapter agree that class 'should not matter' in elite college admissions, but that it unfortunately does; one of the studies' central demands is that elite institutions stop privileging affluence and start implementing programs to help low-income applicants and students. The self-representational materials discussed in the third chapter oscillate between affirmative and evasive positions toward class: On the one hand, universities try to include class in the 'diversity paradigm', and on the other hand they present information in such a way as to suggest a class diversity that does not, in fact, exist. Fictional narratives, as the fourth chapter shows in greater detail, insist that class matters, in various ways, and their conceptualization of class overall comes closest to my own. At the same time, however, many campus novels structurally reproduce the illusion of class diversity at elite institutions, as Michaels points out (2007: 96).

In order to approach class, I ask three related sets of questions. First, what is class? Which factors determine one's class position? Second, does class exist in practice or is it merely a theoretical construct? Third, how does class inform an individual's identity? Is it contingent or permanent? What role do social mobility and intersectionality play?

In *The American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality* (9th edition, 2015), Dennis Gilbert defines social classes "as groups of families, more or less equal in rank and differentiated from other people above or below them with regard to characteristics such as occupation, income, wealth, and prestige" (11). Paul Fussell points out that despite their reluctance to acknowledge class differences, Americans have, over time, developed an elaborate system of social and cultural distinctions that may offer clues about someone's class position (15). Consumption patterns, behaviors, tastes, desires—in short, everything a person thinks, does, wears, and desires can be related to his or her position in the income distribution. Thus, while Gilbert's definition sounds straightforward enough, class remains a contested and slippery concept, fraught with a variety of tensions. Whenever the importance of cultural factors in processes of socio-economic stratification are emphasized, one enters Bourdieusian territory. According to Bourdieu, to talk about class means to talk about an individual's position in social space. Classes are "categories of people who occupy positions within a field […] which are, in terms of the topology of the field, similar or close to each other" (Jenkins 54). An individual's position is determined by her "portfolio of capital" (Grenfell 88), which is constituted by economic, cultural, social, and symbolic resources. Individuals who are close to each other in social space "are inclined to develop similar lifestyles, outlooks, dispositions and a tacit sense of their place in the world" (Grenfell 93). Bourdieu calls this set of attitudes and behaviors the habitus. Insisting on the importance of cultural and psychological factors, and stressing the role of taste and embodiment, Bourdieu moves away from the Marxist conception of class as a narrowly economic and materialist category determined by the individual's position with regard to the means of production. "Forms of symbolic and social accumulation and differentiation" (Swartz 147) form a crucial part of class relations and politics, which are always informed by "the material conditions of existence" (Bourdieu 1986: 106), but are not necessarily determined by them.

Felski similarly explains that her approach focuses "on the psychic as well as the social, semiotics as much as economics" (34). Class, then, manifests itself in wealth and different sources of income, but also in occupation, prestige, association and socialization, in behaviors, patterns of consumption, matters of style and taste. This multiplicity is what Gavin Jones calls the "peculiar dialectics" of class, namely the oscillation between "material and nonmaterial, objective and subjective criteria" (3). Situated at the intersection of discourse, practice, and the body, class thus includes the "materiality of

need"—and, one might add, that of abundance—as well as the "nonmaterial areas of psychology, emotion and culture, […] moving away from the absolute and objective toward the relative, the ideological, and the ethical" (ibid.).

But are these positions in social space felt and recognized by the people who inhabit them or are they merely constructs used by social science researchers? Bourdieu insists "on a sharp distinction between social classes as *scientific constructs* and social classes as *real mobilized social groups*" (Swartz 148). This distinction, as Jenkins points out, owes "no small debt to Marx's distinction between the class-in-itself (objectively defined) and the class-for-itself (subjective class consciousness)" (54). In the discourse of elite education, class remains for the most part a theoretical construct employed by sociologists, admissions officers, advertisers, and novelists. There is little evidence, of yet, of any meaningful efforts of class mobilizations. The difficulty of coming to terms with one's class position, the difficulty of developing class consciousness is described poignantly in Curtis Sittenfeld's novel *Prep*, which I discuss in detail in the last chapter of this study.

In the American cultural imagination, one of the dominant ways of framing class is through the notion of mobility. In the realm of fiction and storytelling, in particular, class is rarely portrayed as permanent or fixed, but rather as always in flux and quite often as upwardly mobile. To think about class in terms of mobility raises questions about its "ontological status […] as a matter of personhood," as Felski puts it (38). How strongly does one's class position influence one's sense of identity? And if one's class position changes, does one's identity change as well, and in what ways? Unlike race or gender, which "often mark identity inescapably," as Felski points out (ibid.), class boundaries seem porous and comparatively easy to transcend. "If one has become upper-middle-class as a result of social mobility," Felski argues, "then one really is upper-middle-class—class being, in one sense, nothing more than the sum of its material manifestations" (ibid.). In other ways, however, one's original class identity might very well linger, and one might experience difficulties in adjusting to one's new position. To look at class through the lens of mobility thus demonstrates the importance of conceptualizing it as a multidimensional construct: In terms of its economic foundations, such as income or wealth, class has to be seen as contingent, but in terms of its cultural and psychological reverberations, it might be much more permanent.

In addition to this multidimensionality, class also has to be conceptualized as an intersectional category. The term 'intersectionality' was coined by critical race scholar and legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in order to illustrate

the multilayered oppression faced by women of color due to a convergence of racism, sexism, and classism (Smooth 32). Crenshaw describes the concept as follows:

> Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions, sometimes from all of them. Similarly, if a black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury would result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (149)

A person's class position, as well as her class identity and the way she is perceived by others, are thus informed by other identity markers, such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, sexuality, religion, and nationality. In the discourse of elite education, intersectionality is an important factor to keep in mind, because awareness of it can change the ways in which we interpret certain kinds of information, particularly statistical data. When Princeton University, for instance, states in one of its promotional brochures that its student body includes 42 percent Americans with minority background, this does not mean, as many might assume, that these students are from low-income families in the inner city. 'Minority background', in this context, is a purely racial/ethnic marker, and neglects socio-economic status. By the same token, while the university's statement that 60 percent of its students receive financial aid seems to indicate a solid degree of socio-economic diversity on campus, the opposite is the case. In fact, the median family income of a student at Princeton is $186,100 (more than three times as high as the median household income in the United States, which in 2015 was $56,516). 72 percent of students come from the top 20 percent of the income distribution, and only 2.2 percent from the bottom 20 percent. It is quite important, then, to keep in mind the multiple levels on which class operates, manifests itself, becomes visible, or is obscured, as well as the ways in which it interacts with and is informed by other social and cultural categories.

Class and Merit

The discourse of elite education tries to solve the problem of class in part by emphasizing merit as an allegedly class-neutral category. The topos of merit generates images of legitimacy and fair competition, and thus allows the dis-

course to frame stratification as something just, inevitable, and even desirable. Seemingly stable, ahistorical, and easily determined via tests and examinations, merit eclipses any relation between the elite educational space and class. It is posited as the opposite of hereditary privilege and constructed as a category somehow exempt from socio-economic factors—if someone is judged on the basis of merit, the reasoning goes, she is precisely *not* judged on the basis of class. In the fantasy of the meritocracy, there is no room for economics or the complexities of capital; there is one the deserving and the un-deserving.

The way the topos of merit legitimizes existing structures is illustrated poignantly by the example of Hunter College High School in Manhattan. Hunter is perhaps the most purely meritocratic educational institution in the United States: It is public and free of tuition, open to students from all over New York City, and admission is based on a single test that students take in the sixth grade. Hunter's mission statement explains that "[o]ur schools strive to reflect the city they serve by admitting and educating a population of students who are culturally, socio-economically, and ethnically diverse. We seek to serve as a model for combining excellence and equity, serving as a catalyst for change in New York City and the nation" ("Mission Statement"). Christopher Hayes, himself a Hunter alumnus, talks at length about the school in his book about the failures of the American elites. Despite the school's professed mission, he points out, "Hunter has never had a student body that matched the demographic composition of the city in which it resides" (36). The entering class of 2009, for instance, was only three percent black and one percent Hispanic (ibid.), even though the population of New York City was 25 percent black and 28 percent Hispanic in 2010. In large parts, this is due to the emergence of a professionalized support industry geared toward preparing applicants for the Hunter admissions test—the more money parents are willing and able to spend on tutors, summer classes, and study materials, the more likely their kids are to get in. Hayes goes on to quote from Hunter student Justin Hudson's 2010 commencement address, which caused something of a scandal in the Hunter community:

> More than happiness, relief, fear, or sadness, I feel guilty. I feel guilty because I don't deserve any of this. And neither do any of you. We received an outstanding education at no charge based solely on our performance on a test we took when we were eleven-year-olds (…). We received superior teachers and additional resources based on our status as 'gifted', while kids who nat-

> urally needed those resources much more than us wallowed in the mire of a broken system. And now, we stand on the precipice of our lives, in control of our lives, based purely and simply on luck and circumstance. (…) Hunter is perpetuating a system in which children, who contain unbridled and untapped intellect and creativity, are discarded like refuse. And we have the audacity to say they deserved it, because we're smarter than them. (quoted in Hayes 33)

Hudson's speech illustrates the fragility of arguments in support of meritocratic structures by demonstrating that merit is not a category devoid of connections with class and capital. A somewhat similar point is made by Michaels, who argues that affirmative action programs do not contradict meritocratic principles, as their critics often claim, but that they, in fact, produce "the illusion that we actually *have* a meritocracy" (2007: 85, emphasis in the original). According to Michaels, the rhetoric of affirmative action eclipses socio-economic concerns: "Race-based affirmative action […] is a kind of collective bribe rich people pay themselves for ignoring economic inequality. The fact (and it is a fact) that it doesn't help to be white to get into Harvard replaces the much more fundamental fact that it does help to be rich and that it's virtually essential not to be poor" (2007: 86).[5]

The individualistic, merit-based legitimation of one's claim to the elite educational space can also be found in a short video production of the *I, too, am Harvard* project mentioned above. In the clip, students talk about their experiences of race and racism on campus and about their desire to feel validated as part of Harvard's community. Toward the end, a young woman concludes: "To the doubters: everyone here is incredibly brilliant. Everyone here worked incredibly hard" (quoted in Bean). Again, merit is portrayed as the great equalizer, a collective quality shared by all Harvard students, regardless of race, class, or gender. However, the statement also illustrates the central difficulty of operating with the concept of merit: If merit is conceptualized as innate ability—being "incredibly brilliant"—then selecting on the basis of merit would contradict many of the values Americans hold dear: hard work, dedication, discipline, self-improvement. But if merit is seen as achievement—having "worked incredibly hard"—it becomes impossible to deny or ignore its entanglement with socio-economic factors, as the Hunter

5 Michaels's dismissal of race-based politics is problematic and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

College High School example demonstrates. The centrality of the topos of merit in the discourse of elite education and the cultural work in which it engages thus have to be scrutinized carefully. The uneasy relationship between merit and class in particular calls for close examination.

6. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I outlined in some detail the two guiding premises that informed my approach to the discourse of elite education: First, that there is a central tension between the American ideal of egalitarianism and the existence of a highly stratified educational system whose selection principles are all too often swayed by different forms of capital; and second, that the elite educational space works as a cultural signifier characterized by a semiotics of elite distinction whose meanings transcend academic education proper. I then introduced the three nodal points that I regard as central to the architecture of the discourse of elite education: eliteness, merit, and class. After addressing some defining features of the term 'elite'—its etymology, history of usage, and contemporary definitions—I laid out my own understanding of eliteness as a particularly productive concept in the field of cultural studies. Connoting privilege, wealth, and power as well as distinction, legitimacy, and skill, the concept of eliteness is more nuanced and flexible than semantically similar concepts and alludes to fantasies and desires, often distracting from its economic foundations. Despite its elusiveness, however, I have argued that the term commands a triad of relatively stable meanings: The first, and arguably most pervasive connotation is excellence/exceptionalism. An elite university is one that offers superior education to superior students, and boasts professors doing superior research. The second connotation the term elite holds is that of exclusivity/selectivity. By definition, elite institutions constitute only a small piece of the higher education pie, and they cater to an even smaller segment of the overall student population. Their exclusivity, measured in ever-decreasing admissions rates, is one of their primary assets, and the process of selection their applicants undergo one of their primary means of establishing legitimacy. Lastly, the notion of eliteness carries the connotation of influence/power. This refers on the one hand to the position of the institutions themselves, who are seen as leaders in the field of education, and on the other hand to the position of their graduates, who disproportionately populate leadership positions across all key sectors of the American society.

Related to and in continuous dialogue with the notion of eliteness is the concept of merit, which dominates the entire discourse. I recapitulated the changing historical conceptions of merit and discussed the particularities of its semantic flexibility. I traced the emergence and enthusiastic appropriation of the ideology of meritocracy in the United States, and discussed the role of merit in the discourse of elite education, in which it function as a structural master topos producing generic narratives of well-deserved and legitimate success. In the last section, I have introduced the third major category that permeates the discourse: class. Though it is often said that socio-economic stratification is rarely and only reluctantly talked about in the United States, this is not true for the discourse of elite education. Here, class has in fact become a central issue in all three subdiscourses I investigate in this study. In order to provide the necessary context for the more detailed discussions that follow in the individual analytical chapters, I outlined the role of class in the overall discourse, its relation to the concept of merit, and, lastly, my own understanding of class as a dialectical category comprising both cultural and material factors.

II. Critique: Elite Education and its Discontents

1. Introductory Remarks

In January 2017, *The New York Times* published an interactive online tool to explore the results of a study on the role of colleges in intergenerational mobility, evocatively titled "Some Colleges Have More Students From the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60. Find Yours." Based on anonymous tax filings and tuition records, the research was conducted by the Equality of Opportunity Project,[1] a team of economists and sociologists dedicated to exploring various aspects of socio-economic mobility. Among the most important results of the study was that income segregation among students across colleges is much more pronounced than previously assumed, and that the number of low- and middle-income students "varies substantially" depending on the college ("Some Colleges"). At the same time, however, the study found that if students from low- and middle-income families do attend an elite college, they fair just as well as their wealthier peers in terms of academic success and earnings outcomes. The researchers furthermore developed a new statistical value, the 'mobility

1 The Equality of Opportunity Project is led by principal investigators Raj Chetty (Stanford), John Friedman (Brown), and Nathaniel Hendren (Harvard). According to its website, the project's research agenda is to use big data to understand what has led to the erosion of upward income mobility in the US over the last decades, and to "develop scalable policy solutions that will empower families to rise out of poverty and achieve better life outcomes." The primary research areas of the Equality of Opportunity Project are education (e.g. "Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility"), neighborhoods (e.g. "The Effects of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility: Childhood Exposure Effects and County Level Estimates"), and health (e.g. "The Association between Income and Life Expectancy in the United States, 2001-2014").

rate', which "combines a college's share of students from lower-income families with its success at propelling them into the upper part of the distribution" (ibid.). Building on these insights, the digital tool created by *The New York Times* allows for an interactive comparison of colleges with regard to a number of variables, for instance 'percentage of low- and middle-income students' or 'colleges with the highest mobility rate', and offers detailed profiles of more than 2,000 colleges. Using neutral rhetoric, the *Times* piece offers a largely descriptive account of the study's findings. And yet, unless one assumes that affluence causes intelligence, the critical impetus of the report is clear: The sons and daughters of affluent families are heavily overrepresented at elite colleges and universities across the nation, a fact that is drastically at odds with the core values of a society ostensibly invested in equality of opportunity and upward mobility.

As one among many research efforts dedicated to exploring and critiquing the status quo of elite education, the Equality of Opportunity Project illustrates some of the main characteristics of the critical landscape in focus in this chapter. Along with most other publications constituting this critical sphere, the project assumes that colleges, and particularly elite colleges, ought to function as engines of upward mobility, as agents of the American Dream. Their conception of eliteness, then, is primarily driven by economic success; they are not necessarily concerned with the quality of education or the happiness of the students, but focus first and foremost on their position in the income distribution. Building on this assumption, the Equality of Opportunity Project identifies a major issue: the striking socio-economic homogeneity of student bodies on elite campuses and the obvious lack of students from low-income families. In this focus on class, the project is again representative of the overall critical landscape, which has likewise foregrounded questions of socio-economic stratification in recent years. The study identifies as a major class-related problem the difference between 'affordability' and 'access', and contends that while some elite colleges have done much to address the former, little has been done about the latter. This distinction can furthermore be seen as symptomatic of another characteristic of the critical landscape: While class does play an increasingly important role, there seems to be no consensus as to how to theorize it. Attempts are made to conceptualize 'class' analogously to other identity markers such as 'race' or 'gender', but as I have outlined in detail in the previous chapter of this study, this conceptualization is reductive and problematic since it does not account for the specificity of class as

a hierarchized category situated at the intersection of cultural and material factors.

This chapter constitutes the first step of my foray into the discourse of elite education in the United States, and explores the epistemological mode of critique by analyzing a number of sociological and journalistic texts that claim an explicit critical impetus. I ask three main questions: First, how do the studies respond to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, which I conceptualize as the central fault line of the discourse on elite education? Second, how do they negotiate the three categories that are at the heart of my inquiry into this discourse, namely merit, class, and eliteness? And third, what role do form and aesthetics play in these dynamics? While the texts differ, to an extent, with regard to their specific analytical foci and research interests, the main argument I want to advance in this chapter is that they have one important feature in common: They are written in the mode of the jeremiad and thus ultimately affirm and validate the system they ostensibly critique. Even though their emphases vary, the texts that constitute the critical landscape agree in their desire for a classless eliteness, a notion that I consider a celebration of the collective fantasy of the American Dream and thus an expression of American exceptionalism.

In the following, I proceed in three steps. The first section maps the critical landscape that surrounds the issue of elite education. I address important publications and discursive trends, before introducing briefly the five books I use as case studies as well as my reasons for choosing them. In the sociological and journalistic sphere, I contend, elite education is discussed within a framework of crisis, manifesting itself in tuition costs, student debt, hyper-competitiveness, lack of socio-economic (and, to a lesser extent, racial) heterogeneity. The critical studies that respond to this perceived crisis by analyzing its dynamics and proposing solutions are varied in terms of genre and text type: They range from monumental sociological studies to largely anecdotal memoirs and pieces of investigative journalism. This multiplicity of genres suggests a widespread interest spanning academia and public discourse, as well as individuals who are or want to be part of the system of elite education. As the back cover of Daniel Golden's *The Price of Admission*, one of the texts in focus in this chapter, puts it: These studies are "a must-read not only for parents and students with a personal stake in college admissions but also for those disturbed by the growing divide between ordinary and privileged Americans." The five texts I have chosen to discuss in this chapter are representative of this multiplicity of genres and of the two research interests

that dominate the critical landscape. On the one hand, the politics of admission and exclusion, and on the other hand, broader investigations of the elite educational experience. I conclude the section by discussing the mode of the jeremiad as my own critical framework for reading the studies, drawing on the work of Sacvan Bercovitch and others.

In the second section, I focus on three studies that interrogate the admissions policies of elite colleges and universities from a progressivist social justice perspective: Daniel Golden's *The Price of Admission* (2006), Joseph Soares's *The Power of Privilege* (2007), and Mitchell Stevens's *Creating a Class* (2007). I argue that all three texts operate firmly within the ideological framework of the meritocracy and attempt to resolve the tension between elitism and egalitarianism by making reformist suggestions on how to improve the existing structures so as to eventually arrive at what the authors conceive of as a genuine academic meritocracy. In doing so, the studies fall prey to what I call the 'merit fallacy', namely the attempt to fix the meaning of 'merit' as the stable opposite of 'privilege', an attempt that does not account for the fact that merit is more often than not an expression and a continuance rather than the opposite of inherited privilege. While Golden, Soares, and Stevens offer a range of valid points of criticism in their books, they thus ultimately re-affirm the notion of the meritocracy and project the possibility of and desire for a classless eliteness, which I read as an expression of American exceptionalism.

In the third section, I turn to two texts that critique the larger institutional cultures of elite colleges and the kinds of subjectivities produced in and through the elite educational experience: Ross Douthat's *Privilege* (2005) and William Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep* (2014). Their answer to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, I argue, is to rewrite this tension as one that centers on matters of quality rather than inequality; instead of critiquing the political economy that produces the system of elite education, the authors contend themselves with a critique of the flawed culture that characterizes this system. Both ultimately argue for the return to the notion of a humanistic eliteness of substantial and serious engagement, which they contrast with the current prevalence of what I call a neoliberal eliteness, characterized by a mindless glorification of success for its own sake. In the end, their conclusions are similar to that of the progressivist studies in that they, too, validate and re-affirm the system and advocate a classless eliteness, only that Douthat and Deresiewicz focus more on the nature of the eliteness than on the notion of classlessness—their criticism is directed less at who is excluded from elite colleges than at what those who are admitted do once they are in.

Before I delve into my readings of the epistemology of critique, a brief note is necessary on the composition of the critical landscape and, in particular, on the speaking positions of the actors in this landscape. Conservative public intellectual Wilfred McClay, in an essay on Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), points out that "there is a special weight given in American culture to critics who criticize from within." This is undoubtedly true, and for good reason: Insiders are assumed to be more knowledgeable, informed, and credible, and to have higher stakes in the game; their criticism is received as unmarred by envy, misunderstandings, or other ulterior motives. The discourse of elite education, however, is populated *exclusively* by critics who criticize from within: Every single publication I have come across was written by someone who has been or still is part of the system. It is a conversation upheld entirely by insiders. This is particularly pertinent when it comes to the sphere of criticism, of course—those who are allowed to address their concerns, whose voices are heard and accepted as credible and authoritative, are all part of the system they set out to criticize. The exclusivity of the elite campus, and the gatekeeping procedures in place to guarantee it, are thus mirrored in the very discourse meant to critique them.

2. Mapping the Critical Landscape

The practices and politics of educational institutions have always been subject to critical inquiry. After all, the importance of education for the political, economic, and socio-cultural wellbeing of post-industrial democratic societies is a matter of broad consensus, and large amounts of tax money are involved in financing private as well as public institutions. Elite colleges and universities—as "venue[s] where access to power and influence is rationed" (Loury xxii)—find themselves under particular scrutiny. Given the degree of socio-economic inequality in the United States in an era that has been called, by economist Paul Krugman and others, a "second gilded age" (cf. Livingston), it is indeed not surprising that elite institutions have in recent years increasingly come into focus in both journalism and scholarship. What role do the nation's most exclusive colleges play in this era of growing inequality? Do they actually help to provide intergenerational mobility, as a majority of Americans expects them to, or do they, on the contrary, exacerbate the problem by serving as bastions of privilege and elite self-reproduction? In the following, I want to map the critical landscape surrounding the issue of elite education in the

United States, before briefly introducing the corpus of texts I have chosen to analyze in this chapter. Even though reviewers have used a range of different labels to describe the modes of critical writing employed by the authors—critique, indictment, polemic, among others—I argue that one important mode is missing from the discussion: the jeremiadic. Often seen as a quintessentially American form of criticism, the jeremiad produces a dynamics of celebration-through-lament that quite accurately reflects the cultural work of the studies analyzed in this chapter. In the concluding section, I thus discuss my approach of reading the five texts through the lens of the jeremiad.

'From a Murmur to a Roar': Criticism of (Elite) Education in the Contemporary US

Criticism directed at the many failures of educational institutions of all stripes is gaining momentum, as Andrew Delbanco, cultural critic and professor at Columbia University, points out: "[P]ublic demand that our colleges scrutinize, justify, and reform themselves has grown from a murmur to a roar" (2012: ix)—not least due to the devastating effects of the financial crisis. Parents, Delbanco continues, criticize the rising cost of tuition; students remonstrate against the crippling debt burdening them upon graduation; employers complain about incompetent graduates and insufficient quality standards; and politicians argue over accountability and funding. Everybody, it seems, has something to say about the current state of higher education in the United States, and little of it is positive.

Most critics are preoccupied to some degree with the question of what college, in general, should do, and for whom. As even the most cursory glance at the critical landscape demonstrates, there is no consensus about the expectations directed toward the collegiate experience in the contemporary United States. Is a college's main responsibility toward society, toward the individual student, toward specific groups of students, or toward its own survival as an institution? Delbanco, to offer but one example of an attempt at answering these questions, names "three central principles" to which colleges should adhere: The first is equality of opportunity—colleges should enable students "to discover their passions and pursue them as far as their talents allow" regardless of their personal background. Second, college ought to be a "rehearsal space for democracy" and teach students how to be active and thoughtful citizens. Finally, Delbanco argues that college should not focus solely on the production and dissemination of knowledge, but help "young people prepare

for lives of meaning and purpose" (2012: xiv). Given the complexity of this conglomerate of social, civic, cultural, and personal dimensions, it is not surprising that colleges all too often fail to meet the demands directed at them. This heterogeneity of expectations, in which academic education often seems like an afterthought, is reflected also in the self-representation of elite colleges that I discuss in greater depth in the third chapter of this study. An additional factor to be considered in this context is the financial situation in particular of private colleges, which exerts its own influence on the ability and willingness of individual institutions to live up to popular expectations.

Disagreement as to the precise nature of the mission(s) of college notwithstanding, there is consensus among critics and commentators in at least one crucial respect: College is important. Despite a number of well-popularized and quasi-mythical dropout success stories—Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, and Oprah Winfrey, among others—popular opinion and sociological research alike agree that a college education is more necessary than ever in the contemporary United States. In *Higher Education in America* (2013), Derek Bok points out that the median income for college graduates is almost twice as high as that of those holding only a high school diploma (81); journalist David Leonhardt states that the discrepancy between college and high school graduates has "reached a record high" and concludes that a degree from a four-year college "has probably never been more valuable than now" (2014). It is not surprising, then, that almost eighty percent of all ninth and tenth graders say they want to go to college; polls demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of Americans acknowledge that "a college education has become as important as a high school diploma used to be" (Bok 82). It is crucial to note, in this context, that these findings are particularly relevant for careers in law, medicine, business, and similar upper-middle-class professions, which, as Stevens points out, "virtually require[] a college education" (10). While the value of a college degree thus has increased in general, it is felt most acutely by those in the middle- and upper-middle classes, for whom not getting a college degree has become all but unimaginable.

While there is indeed widespread agreement about the importance of a college education, parents, applicants, and employers likewise concur that not all degrees from all colleges are equally valuable. Elite educational institutions, as the previous chapter has demonstrated, are known to play a decisive role in (re)producing wealth, status, and power; they offer access to the upper echelons of business, politics, medicine, the law, and a host of other professional arenas; their graduates populate leadership positions across a range

of key sectors in American society. Bok for instance points to the fact that "a mere dozen institutions […] have educated 54 percent of the CEOs of large corporations and 42 percent of the nation's top government leaders" (123). A mere handful of colleges thus hold a disproportionate sway in terms of placing their graduates in positions of power and influence, and spots at these institutions are predictably fiercely contested. In fact, the hierarchization of the American college landscape has reached such a degree that getting into the 'right' college has turned into a cultural obsession among segments of the population; Delbanco points out, half-jokingly, that the most profitable week of the year for local news vendors is "probably the week *US News & World Report* comes out with its annual college rankings issue" (2012: 1). The importance attributed to the rankings is one symptom among many of the increasing fetishization of a small number of institutions whose exclusivity is one of their primary means of distinction.

Given this pervasive influence, it is not surprising that elite institutions are subject to heightened scrutiny by academics, pundits, and journalists alike. In fact, recent years have seen a surge in publications on the issue, suggesting that there is a large audience interested in analysis and critique of the nation's elite universities. Critical analyses and interventions come in a variety of guises, ranging from in-depth profiles in magazines[2] to full-length sociological studies such as Jerome Karabel's monumental *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (2005). These critical investigations reflect an ambivalence toward elite education that is pervasive in American culture, a collective attitude that oscillates between pride in the institutions' global reputation of excellence, and suspicion, or even resentment, toward their exclusionary practices, their disproportionate influence, and their alleged snobbery.

Despite the multiplicity of voices contributing to the critical discourse about elite education, two relatively distinct analytical concerns dominate the conversation. The first and arguably most pervasive topic is the issue of admission and exclusion. Texts in this group examine who gains access to elite colleges, who does not, and why. The dominance of this trope in itself already suggests the predominantly affirmative nature of the critical landscape, which

2 For instance the *Economist*'s "America's New Aristocracy: Education and the Inheritance of Privilege" (2015), *Vanity Fair*'s "Inside the Legal Intrigue at Columbia's Elite, Secret Campus Society" (2015) or *Time Magazine*'s "Who Needs Harvard? Forget the Ivy League!" (2006).

I discuss in greater detail below. The politics of individual institutions as well as their situatedness within larger socio-cultural and political contexts come under scrutiny here. The process of admission and exclusion, and the criteria upon which it is based, are of interest not only to those immediately involved—students, parents, administrators, professors—but also to social critics and the general public: "all of us," as economist Glenn Loury puts it (xxii). This again is due in part to the widespread expectation that colleges ought to play a role in producing upward mobility. The second group of texts focuses on the larger question of the elite educational experience and its implications for US society. What kinds of subjectivities are produced in and through elite colleges, and what does that mean for the composition, mentality, and behavior of the American leadership class? Which values, interests, and behaviors do the institutions encourage, cultivate, and reward? The books in this group claim to offer wide-reaching diagnoses of the various shortcomings of the status quo and critique the overall work of elite institutions.

Regardless of the specific angle, much of the criticism directed against the elite educational system is rendered in the rhetoric of crisis, outrage, and uncertainty, and specifically points to the national implications of such crises. Elite colleges and universities, various works seem to suggest, do not only fail individuals and social or ethnic groups; elite institutions are failing the nation as a whole, as the following titles indicate: *Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream* (Suzanne Mettler, 2014); *The Price of Silence: The Duke Lacrosse Scandal, the Power of the Elite, and the Corruption of Our Great Universities* (William D. Cohan, 2015); *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy* (Chris Hayes, 2012). The subtitles of Golden's and Deresiewicz's works—"How America's Ruling Class Buys Its Way Into Elite Colleges And Who Gets Left Outside The Gates" and "The Miseducation of the American Elite"—point in the same direction.

Crisis frameworks are a popular and effective critical mode for journalists, pundits, and scholars alike, and have been a permanent fixture in public and academic debates alike—in particular in the United States, where the specter of national decline is "an idea whose time has always come," as Stephen Jendrysik puts it (1). Kevin Phillips writes that American visions of national decline come in two guises, "one displaying economic and social polarization and injustice, which always stirs complaint among progressives, and the second representing moral and cultural decadence-cum-sophistication, which invariably stirs conservative and fundamentalist outrage" (218). This observation holds true also for the critical investigations of elite education in

the United States. Both types of studies assume that there is some kind of crisis going on, but they differ in the precise diagnosis and, consequently, in the remedies they propose. The texts in the first cluster—those interrogating the dynamics of admission and exclusion—follow a social justice logic and are interested primarily in matters of access and representation. Together, these texts can be grouped as progressivist interventions. The second cluster of texts is more conservative in its stance on elite education. While social justice issues do play a role in these investigations as well, representation and fairness are not their primary concern. Instead, their criticism is indeed directed at the decadence, snobbery, and entitlement of those who populate elite institutions, and at the failure of the institutions to correct these tendencies. Theirs has to be understood as a critique of quality rather than inequality. Even though both strands of criticism mobilize nostalgic and utopian tropes, their emphases thus differ, as do their conceptions of eliteness and their responses to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism.

Corpus Selection

In order to analyze the role of the mode of critique in the epistemology of US elite education, I have selected a number of books that mirror the concerns of the overall critical landscape in terms of their analytical foci and the multiplicity of genres that they represent. In the following, I introduce each of the publications briefly; more detailed observations will follow in the next two sections of this chapter. The first cluster of texts consists of progressivist critiques of the admissions practices of elite colleges and comprises the works of journalist Daniel Golden, sociologist Joseph Soares, and education researcher Mitchell L. Stevens. Golden's *The Price of Admission: How America's Ruling Class Buys Its Way Into Elite Colleges And Who Gets Left Outside The Gates* (2006) aims to reveal the ways in which "rich and well-connected students" (4) are favored in the admissions process of elite colleges. In each chapter, Golden investigates specific instances of preferential treatment—ranging from the influence of big donors at Harvard to legacy preference at Notre Dame. Soares's *The Power of Privilege: Yale and America's Elite Colleges* (2007), by contrast, follows a diachronic approach and traces the changing trajectory of Yale's admissions politics throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, foregrounding "the nexus between social class and admissions" (xii). Stevens's study *Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites* (2007) differs

from the others in that he is concerned with the actual day-to-day work performed by admissions officers at a small elite college.

The second cluster of texts consists of conservative critiques of the elite college experience written by Ross Douthat and William Deresiewicz. In *Privilege: Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class* (2005), Douthat uses his four years as a Harvard undergraduate as a point of departure to discuss and critique the system of elite education. In nine loosely connected chapters, he writes about diversity, social stratification, intimate relationships, political activism, and education at Harvard, all of which he finds lacking, primarily due to the all-embracing culture of privilege and the pervasiveness of "the scramble for upward mobility, achievement, success for success's sake" (11). William Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (2014), finally, approaches the same phenomenon from the perspective of the educator. His aim mirrors Douthat's: to expose the fraudulent meritocracy and the culture of entitlement that characterizes elite campuses across the nation, and to discuss the implications for society at large. Elite educational institutions, Deresiewicz argues, fail their students by denying them a 'real' education, and society at large by producing an inept and irresponsible leadership class.

As mentioned above, the five books reflect the critical landscape not only in terms of their research interest and critical impetus, but also in terms of the variety of critical genres they represent: Golden's *Price of Admission* relies heavily on investigative journalism and is written in an approachable and entertaining style, recounting numerous anecdotes unearthed by the author, whereas Soares's *Privilege* is a work of historical sociology, clearly scholarly in terms of rhetoric and method. Stevens, though himself a professor, walks a middle ground in *Creating a Class*, pointing out in the introduction that his book is intended for "for general readers" interested in "the machinery of social opportunity and social distinction in America" (4), rather than for an academic audience. Douthat's book is a memoir with a touch of the coming-of-age mode: He essentially tells his own story, but interspersed with more general information on the respective issues he addresses. Though Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep* likewise relies on the author's own experiences as a student and teacher at a number of elite universities, he takes a somewhat more detached perspective. His publisher, Simon and Schuster, files *Excellent Sheep* under 'philosophy' and 'higher education', and describes it as a 'manifesto'—Deresiewicz's criticism is thus less ruminative and more interventionist than Douthat's.

The critical literature on elite education is thus positioned at the intersection of investigative journalism, scholarship, and popular non-fiction in various shapes and forms, read and utilized by scholars researching the rising levels of inequality and stratification, a general public concerned about the (re)production of the American leadership class, and those who are personally involved in the process of applying to an elite institution. This variety of genres, styles, and modes of investigation and critique suggests the widespread appeal of the issue to a diverse American audience and points to the various dimensions on which elite education becomes meaningful: the mental and emotional life of individual applicants and students, the historical position of ethnic and other social groups, and the well-established grand narratives of opportunity and success that fuel the notion of American exceptionalism.

'Revitalizing the Errand': Critique as Affirmation

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines criticism as the act of "passing judgment upon the qualities or merits of anything; *esp.* the passing of unfavourable judgment; fault-finding" ("criticism"). In the context of elite education, the epistemological mode of critique is actualized in many different ways—polemically, earnestly, understandingly, or accusatorily, for instance. The *New York Times* coverage of the Equality of Opportunity Project, to name an example, communicates its criticism implicitly, through the presentation of suggestive data. Similar critical trajectories can also be transported humorously, however, as in a fake commercial produced by the LA-based comedy group Back of the Class, which uses the tag line "Harvard University: Educating the Rich since 1636" and thus pokes fun at the socioeconomic homogeneity of the college's student body.

The books discussed in this chapter, by contrast, follow serious trajectories and are clearly identified in paratexts and reviews as critical investigations through the use of labels that signify various modes of critical writing. Golden's *Price of Admission* was labeled, rather dramatically, as a "fire-breathing, righteous attack on the culture of superprivilege" (*New York Times Book Review*), while Stevens's study is described in more neutral terms as a "fascinating behind-the-scenes account" (Hyden), using "fly-on-the-wall reporting […] Mitchell Stevens has done a real service by pulling back the curtain on the secretive college admissions process" (Coll). Soares, on the other hand, is hailed as "one of the most important social critics" (Blau) and his book as a "provocative critique" (Ramirez, back cover). Deresiewicz's *Excel-*

lent Sheep was received as a more aggressive intervention, described variously as a "refreshingly barbed indictment" (*MORE Magazine*), a "withering analysis" (Wieseltier), a "passionate, deeply informed, and searing critique" (Zakaria), and even as "a call […] for revolt" rather than reform (Hedges). Similarly, Douthat's *Privilege* was referred to as an "incisive critique" and a "withering indictment" (*Booklist*), a "memoir-cum-pop-sociological investigation" (*Publisher's Weekly*), and a "memoir-cum-polemic" and "thoughtful analysis" (*The New Yorker*). The book itself reflects this hybridity in its self-description as a "powerfully rendered portrait of a young manhood," thus alluding to the genres of memoir and the coming of age novel; as a "pointed critique of this country's most esteemed institutions," thereby positioning itself within the realm of cultural critique; and, lastly, as "an exploration of issues such as affirmative action, grade inflation, political correctness, and curriculum reform."

A range of different monikers is used to describe the books: investigation, report, analysis, indictment, polemic, critique, attack, and exploration. An important mode of critical writing that does not occur anywhere in the reviews, however, is the jeremiad. Perry Miller "rightly called the New England jeremiad America's first distinctive literary genre," as Sacvan Bercovitch puts it in *The American Jeremiad* (1978), perhaps the definitive account of the subject in the field of American Studies. The jeremiad is named after the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, who blames Israel for its own downfall since it broke the contract with Jehovah. As M.H. Abrams puts it, Jeremiah "denounced with gloomy eloquence [Israel's] religious and moral iniquities, and calls on the people to repent and reform"—only then would Jehovah "renew the ancient covenant" (189). The Puritans brought the jeremiad with them from Europe to New England, transformed it in structure and content, and used it in a variety of contexts. As Bercovitch explains, the jeremiad "might be called the state-of-the-covenant address, tendered at every public occasion (on days of fasting and prayer, humiliation and thanksgiving, at covenant renewal and artillery company ceremonies, and, most elaborately and solemnly, at election day gatherings" (4).

In terms of structure, the Puritan jeremiad consists of three successive steps. First, it reiterates the promise God made to the Puritans and thus emphasizes their special mission, their 'errand'. Second, the jeremiad outlines in detail the many ways in which members of the community are failing to keep their covenant, and laments the resulting decline. Third, the jeremiad offers the hope of redemption and return to the mission and God's favor (cf. Jasinski 335). Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the jeremiad was secularized

and its usage no longer restricted to matters of faith and devotion. In addition to the basic structure of "promise, decline, and redemption" (Jasinski 335), the secularized jeremiad continued to insist on the singularity and specialness of the American people and the American experiment, whose exceptionalism manifested itself in the shared commitment to the American Dream. As Richard Posner explains, the jeremiad is characterized by a set of fairly strict conventions: "[I]t must be nostalgic, pessimistic, predictive, and judgmental" (9). Nostalgic and utopian in equal measure, the jeremiad harkens back to a vision of the past that is said to be superior to the present, and at the same time conjures up the image of a future in which this perfection might yet be possible again. Not all jeremiads claim that the perfect past has actually existed, however; some, as Andrew R. Murphy suggests, do not draw on the past "because of its concrete accomplishments or practices, but due to the radical *promise* of the American founding experience" (132, emphasis in the original).

While Miller stressed the "vehemence of its complaint," Bercovitch locates the cultural significance of the jeremiad in its "unshakable optimism" (8). The trajectory of jeremiadic complaint, moreover, is reformist rather than revolutionary, and it is always teleological, as Bercovitch notes: "The question in these latter-day jeremiads, as in their seventeenth-century precursors, was never 'Who are we?' but, almost in deliberate evasion of that question, the old prophetic refrain: 'When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?' And the answers, again as in the Puritan jeremiads, invariably joined lament and celebration in reaffirming America's mission" (11). The cultural work of the jeremiad, then, lies in "simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream," as Bercovitch puts it. In so doing, it ultimately transforms the epistemology of critique into one of affirmation and validation. Building on Bercovitch's work, Murphy explains this peculiar dynamic: "[J]eremiadic strategies function to transform dissent and doubt about American society into a rededication to the principles of American culture […]. The jeremiad deflects attention away from possible institutional or systemic flaws and toward considerations of individual sin" (402). This means that the "depth of social criticism" (ibid.) offered by jeremiadic texts is, by nature, limited.

The books discussed in this chapter do not conform perfectly to the conventions of the jeremiad, but they are written, I want to suggest, in a jeremiadic mode and mobilize a range of jeremiadic elements. Reading them as such helps to explain a central conundrum marking these texts: Though they may differ in style—by turns accusatory and aggressive or thoughtful and em-

pathic—there is little doubt that all five studies are meant to be received as critical interventions. They confirm preexisting stereotypes about the entitled offspring of the very rich; they shock, surprise, and ultimately disillusion those who had believed in the meritocracy; they spark debates among educators, administrators, and families. And yet, despite their obvious critical commitments, the studies ultimately, and to a degree paradoxically, end up affirming the system they set out to critique.

This, then, is due to their jeremiadic tendencies: They implicitly or explicitly remind the reader of the promise of American elite education—as a means of ensuring social mobility, among other things, and as a globally legible symbol of American exceptionalism—then address all the ways in which elite educational institutions are failing their mission, and then conclude by delineating the enticing vision of elite redemption: the perfect meritocracy, a system in which eliteness is stripped of the burden of class and thus turned into another instantiation of the American Dream. Instead of questioning the validity of the elite educational system as such, or thinking about possible alternatives to the meritocratic framework, the studies' criticism ultimately strengthens that system and validates that framework. Like the Puritan jeremiads, then, their "cries of declension and doom [are] part of a strategy designed to revitalize the errand" (Bercovitch xiv), namely to celebrate the vision of a classless eliteness as an expression of American exceptionalism.

3. Progressivist Critiques

The admissions process of elite colleges is a mystery to many. Applicants and cultural commentators alike perceive the dynamics of admission and exclusion as enigmatic, intransparent, and even willfully obscurantist—a procedure inscrutable to outsiders and quite likely discriminatory on multiple levels. This view is in part created by media portrayals of the work of admissions officers: In a wave of recent articles, the admissions policies of elite colleges have been described as a "frenzied, soul-deadening process" (Wong), as "unpredictable" (Menand 2003), "insanely selective" (Dillon), and "crazy competitive" (Nordquist), and as resulting in "hysteria" (Tierney) among college-aged kids and their families. Thus framed in the rhetoric of psychopathology, the elite admissions process is presented by national news outlets as irrational, erratic, even absurd—a framing that deflects from the agency of admissions

officers, college administrators, and interest groups, all of whom have high stakes in the admissions game.

In addition to these general concerns about the opacity of elite college admissions, the past few decades have seen substantial evidence for patterns of systemic exclusion on the grounds of gender, race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. Social justice arguments about elite college admissions are therefore a staple of the critical landscape, and have been throughout the second half of the twentieth century. In recent years, there has again been an increase in progressivist publications concerned with matters of equal access and representation in the context of elite college admissions, and their focus has primarily been on class. Given the current degree of inequality in the United States, this emphasis on socio-economic issues is hardly surprising.

The three texts discussed in this section—Golden's *Price of Admission*, Soares's *Power of Privilege*, and Stevens's *Creating a Class*—examine both parts of the equation of admission and exclusion. On the one hand, they reflect on the characteristics and achievements of those students who are admitted to elite colleges: grades, test scores, extracurricular activities, and athletic accomplishments, but also socio-economic status, race, family background, and the extent of the family's involvement with the school in question. The institutional politics behind admissions decisions come under scrutiny here, as does the situatedness of these politics within larger socio-cultural contexts.[3] On the other hand, the studies are interested in the characteristics that have kept qualified candidates out of elite institutions. Soares, for instance, has excavated a disturbing story of discrimination, snobbery, and hypocrisy at America's most prestigious colleges, where patterns of systematic exclusion on racial, ethnic, and religious grounds were the norm for most their long histories. Despite all professions to the contrary, moreover, discriminatory practices apparently continue to inform the admissions policies of elite colleges, as the controversy surrounding alleged quotas on students of Asian descent suggests.

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3 One example to illustrate this is Jerome Karabel's discussion of the increasing admission of women at Harvard in the early 1970s. The turn toward coeducation, he argues convincingly, was not primarily an expression of the institution's allegiance with the women's movement or gender equality, but rather a result of the dynamics of competition among the Big Three: Princeton and Yale had started to admit women in 1969 and thus proved more attractive for parts of the elite clientele (cf. 442).

Exclusion, as I have argued in the previous chapter, is one of the three dominant signifiers of eliteness, complemented by excellence/exceptionality on the one hand and power/leadership on the other. The selection of the few and the exclusion of the many is a crucial and constitutive factor in the production of elite status at institutions such as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, as are the various rituals associated with this process: the applications, the standardized tests, the visiting weekends, and the big and small envelopes.[4] Exclusion and exclusivity, however—both in the sense of being highly selective and, more generally, as being "high class, expensive; highbrow" ("exclusivity, n.")—are at the same time the features most drastically at odds with American self-descriptions of the openness, fluidity, and upward mobility of US society. It is not surprising, then, that the gatekeeping procedures in place to practice exclusion and guarantee its success are suspicious almost by default. Exclusion is accepted and tolerated in the American imagination only when it is perceived as legitimate and fair, and when the exclusionary decisions mirror the American commitment to equality of opportunity and individual achievement.

The works of Golden, Soares, and Stevens demonstrate that patterns of systemic discrimination (e.g. against Asian Americans) and competitive disadvantages (e.g. for low-income applicants) continue to inform elite college admissions; they also show that despite the media rhetoric described above, there is in fact very little irrational about the politics of admission and exclusion. Instead, these politics are the result of much negotiation and mediation among the different parties involved, all of whom benefit in one way or another from the current status quo of elite college admissions. The institutions themselves retain high levels of control over the composition of entering classes and are thus able to navigate the often conflicting expectations and demands of a number of interested parties—most importantly, perhaps, alumni associations, athletic departments, and major donors. The impenetrability of the admissions process has furthermore spawned a booming industry of application support services, ranging from SAT tutoring and application mentoring to so-called 'essay-ready summers' and enrichment programs of various kinds. The money and power generated by the opacity thus suggests that

4 The arrival of the dream college's response is an iconic moment in the discourse, and a thin envelope stands for rejection. For a more detailed discussion of the phenomenon, see Louis Menand's article "The Thin Envelope" (*New Yorker*, 2003).

there is very little 'irrational' or 'crazy' about the admissions policies of elite colleges, even though, on occasion, they might present themselves as such.

In the following, I begin by introducing the three studies in a little more detail, and then discuss the ways in which they negotiate the three categories that form the central interest of this study: merit, class, and eliteness. My primary question is how the three authors respond to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, and my reading is informed by the notion of the jeremiadic tendencies the texts exhibit. I argue that all three texts operate within the ideological framework of the meritocracy and propose an understanding of merit as a measurable academic entity. They identify the undue influence of socio-economic factors as the main problem facing elite admissions and make a number of recommendations to correct this deficiency. Throughout their argumentation it becomes clear that the studies do not find fault with the notion of eliteness per se; instead, they denounce a specific plutocratic version of eliteness. Even though their research emphases differ, all three texts share a common flaw, which I call the 'merit fallacy': They assume the existence of 'merit' as a stable function of academic eliteness and put it in binary opposition with 'privilege', by which they mean all forms of inherited and thus presumably undeserved capital. This dichotomy obscures the fact that merit in all of its manifestations is more often than not the expression rather than the opposite of privilege. Reading the three texts as instantiations of the jeremiadic mode thus demonstrates that despite their ostensible commitment to critique, they ultimately affirm and celebrate the meritocracy as a systemic expression of the American Dream.

Introducing the Texts

In 2013, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Golden published a series of eight articles on the admissions practices of elite colleges, exposing what he called the "preferences of privilege" (4): the vast advantages enjoyed by different groups of mostly white and affluent students—alumni children, development cases, and athletes, among others. A year later, Golden received the Pulitzer Prize for Beat Reporting for these "compelling and meticulously documented stories" (Pulitzer Website). He subsequently turned the articles into a book, *The Price of Admission: How America's Ruling Class Buys Its Way Into Elite Colleges And Who Gets Left Outside the Gates*, published in 2006 to largely positive reviews. Preferential treatment on the grounds of either wealth or connections, Golden argues in his introduction, routinely allow[s] an academically weak

candidate to leap over a strong one and can represent an admissions boost equivalent to hundreds of SAT points at Ivy League schools and other elite colleges. The children of wealth and influence occupy so many slots that the admissions odds against middle-class and working-class students without outstanding records are even longer than the colleges acknowledge. (4)

In each of the following chapters, Golden outlines in detail the different forms the 'preferences of privilege' can take—ranging from the influence of big donors at Harvard and legacy preference at Notre Dame to favoritism shown toward faculty children at a number of elite institutions. Golden also devotes one chapter to discussing the pervasive discrimination against Asian American students and one to a positive example of what he terms "wealth-blind admissions" (263) at Caltech. In the last chapter, "Ending the Preferences of Privilege," Golden offers a list of recommendations for elite colleges in order to make their admissions policies more fair and less dependent on economic and social capital.

Soares's *The Power of Privilege* (2007) is a work of historical sociology and distinctively more scholarly in rhetoric and methodology than Golden's book. Soares traces the changing trajectory of Yale's admissions policies through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, focusing primarily on "the nexus between social class and admissions" (xii). In particular, he questions the validity of "the alleged shift in admissions after 1950 from character to brains" (xii). He concludes that this shift in fact never took place in the way the institutions themselves proclaimed, and that socio-economic factors still hold a decisive influence over who is and is not admitted to Yale and its peer institutions. Like Golden, Soares concludes his study with a list of suggestions that ought to pave the way "to a proper academic meritocracy" (196).

Mitchell Stevens's approach in *Creating a Class* (2007) differs from most other studies on the topic, since his interest in the dynamics of admission and exclusion is not only directed in an abstract sense at the admissions politics of elite institutions, but is much more directly concerned with the actual work admissions officers do on a daily basis. "We know almost nothing," Stevens points out, "about how officers balance incentives to reward high academic accomplishment, athletic skill, legacy or minority status, and the ability to pay full tuition" (20). *Creating a Class* furthermore establishes compelling ways to link the findings about the modus operandi of admissions officers to more general cultural dynamics informing the lives of American families in the early twenty-first century: "Upper-middle-class Americans have responded to the triumph of educational meritocracy by creating a whole new way of life orga-

nized around the production of measurably talented children and the delivery of news about kids to the right places at the right times. This system is expensive and time-consuming" (22). In a poignant choice of phrase, Stevens argues that elite educational institutions offer affluent families a way of "laundering privilege" (248). This emphasis on "the impressive organizational machinery" (3) that privileged families have developed in order to ensure their offspring's access to elite institutions adds an important dimension to the socio-cultural, economic, and political reverberations of elite education in the United States.

Merit, Class, Eliteness

As the category said to stand between admission and exclusion, merit is at the center of all three studies. As I have discussed already in the first chapter of this study, there is no clear consensus as to which qualities 'merit' actually references; Karabel points out that there has never been "a neutral definition of 'merit'," (3)—whatever meanings the term temporarily signifies will benefit some while disadvantaging others. These semantic uncertainties notwithstanding, it becomes clear that Golden, Soares, and Stevens want to see merit as a primarily academic category, one that is measurable, comparable, and cannot be bought or sold. This fixed version of merit as a conglomerate of innate and learned traits, the studies agree, should govern the admissions policies of elite colleges. In his first chapter, "Meritocracy and Its Discontents," Soares for instance outlines his understanding of merit as rooted in "talent" and "achievement" (2) and points out that most Americans, according to a range of studies, likewise conceive of merit as "academic accomplishments" (1), signified by grades and test scores. Colleges, he points out, follow a much broader conception of the term and are thus at odds with popular opinion.

Collectively, the texts posit a certain understanding of what a functioning educational meritocracy should entail: a fair and neutral selection process, based on objectively measurable admissions criteria, and impossible to sway by economic or social capital. There should neither be discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, or financial need, nor should access to certain forms of capital offer unfair advantages to candidates from society's upper strata. In sum, the admissions process should be as transparent and class-neutral as possible. Much room is given in all four studies to delineating in detail the discrepancies between this ideal version of the academic meritocracy and the actual status quo of admissions politics in the United States.

One of the most pervasive tropes employed in these discussions is that of exposing or revealing a hidden truth. Golden, in particular, makes use of this trope frequently. His book's blurb states that Golden "shatters the myth of an American meritocracy" and "disclos[es] what elite colleges won't tell you." From the very beginning, Golden juxtaposes "popular notion[s]" about elite college admissions with "the truth" (1), and claims to "reveal[] the double standard" (4) that favors the wealthy and well-connected. Later, he talks about "the dirty little secret of college admissions" (54). It is not surprising, then, that the rhetoric of the reviews reflects this tendency: *The Price of Admission* was called "explosive" and "trenchant" (*Atlantic Monthly*) it was said to be full of "juicy stories" and "immensely readable," and while the author was said to have "fun making trouble in the best journalistic sense" (*Harvard Magazine)* his book was referred to as "a muckraking morality tale with many villains and few heroes" (*New York Review of Books*). Turning Golden's journalistic report into an intriguing, soap-opera-like tale full of deception, betrayal, and villainy distracts from the reality of the conditions he exposes.

While they thus agree that merit is a complex and contingent category, all three studies operate more or less enthusiastically within the ideological framework of the meritocracy. Even though Soares's book is aimed at "dispelling the myth of Ivy League meritocracy" and he asks, in his foreword, whether it might not be "time for us to pursue alternatives" in light of the obvious shortcomings of the meritocratic system, his suggestions for reform, if implemented, would not lead to an alternative system but simply to a 'better' kind of meritocracy, as he himself points out in his last sentence: "Taken separately or in combination, [the suggestions] should move us closer to a genuine academic meritocracy, and away from a system in which too many of the measures of merit turn out the be proxies for the privileges of social class" (201). Golden likewise advocates a different kind of meritocracy and ends his book with a rhetorical question: "Is it too much to ask that seats in the classrooms of such beautiful minds not be sold to the highest bidder but reserved for the students who earned them through their diligence and natural gifts?" (308). While Stevens is more wary of the meritocratic ideology, he does not explore any other valid models that could serve as the basis for an educational system either. Aware of the inherent pitfalls of the meritocracy, Stevens ends his study on a somewhat resigned note: "We might wish that all of our children could get to that place, but the hard truth is that however we write the rules of admission, there will never be room for everyone" (264). In this context, the jeremiadic element of the studies becomes clear: While criticizing the ways

in which elite institutions have gone astray in their admissions politics, all three texts ultimately affirm and celebrate the meritocracy and its commitment to eliteness as a systemic commitment to the American Dream and thus to American exceptionalism.

The problem all three studies identify as standing between the current status quo and the enticing vision of a functional meritocracy is the undue influence of class. In the introduction to her 2000 book, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, author and activist bell hooks points to the pervasive silence surrounding matters of socio-economic stratification in the United States: "Nowadays it is fashionable to talk about race or gender; the uncool subject is class" (vii). Most Americans, hooks argues, are unwilling and afraid even "to think about class" (ibid.), because acknowledging that socio-economic stratification informs life, work, and play would destabilize their position within society, creating anxiety and uncertainty in the process. hooks's observation is instructive in a number of ways—it demonstrates that much of what academics, journalists, and activists think and talk about is subject to the cyclical developments of trends and fashions, and it points to the tendency of separating categories such as race, gender, and class, even though they are inextricably entwined in the lives and thoughts of people. What is most striking in this context, however, is that a mere decade later, the discursive situation has changed, and considerably so. In the discourse of elite education, at least, hooks's diagnosis can no longer be said to hold true: Much room is given to socio-economic factors, particularly in the progressivist studies on admission and exclusion that form the core of this section—more so, arguably, than to matters of race, ethnicity, or gender.

Class is thus included as a central analytical category in all three studies in focus here. Golden's emphasis on socio-economic factors is already alluded to in his title, both in the phrase "the price of admission" and in its mentioning of "the ruling class," even though it might be pointed out, in this context, that he does not theorize his usage of the latter concept. Soares explains in his foreword that his study is "specifically focused on the nexus between social class and the admissions regime" (xii). Following a slightly more comprehensive approach, Stevens includes race and gender in his discussion of admission policies, but highlights socio-economic factors as well, for instance in his reading of collegiate aesthetics. He identifies a "larger myopia" in sociological accounts of education and stratification, namely in the neglect of "the sensual aspects of class" (18). Class distinctions, he argues, are rooted and expressed

not only in wealth, income, and credentials, but also in "[w]hat a society calls beautiful […] and what it makes beautiful in turn" (ibid.).

Even though they do not explicitly define it, it becomes clear that all four studies follow a Bourdieusian understanding of class as a complex and multi-layered category determined by access to and use of different forms of capital; often, class becomes meaningful when there is either an excess or a lack of this access to economic, cultural, or social resources. The analysis of class is further complicated by its oscillation between cultural and identitarian aspects on the one hand, and material, economic factors on the other. Even though both play important and, at times, distinct roles in the context of elite education, the debates on admission and exclusion tend to privilege material factors, perhaps because they are easier to pinpoint, and the problems they cause, for instance the inability to pay for tuition, seem easier to solve. The studies agree, moreover, that socio-economic factors do not exist in a vacuum, but have to be theorized and analyzed as intersectional categories that are informed by and, in turn, inform other identity markers. The link between class and race, in particular, is discussed in a number of contexts, for instance with regard to the issue of affirmative action or when Golden points to the double advantage caused by whiteness and wealth.[5]

Both admission and exclusion, the studies agree, happen on the grounds of socio-economic factors: Class can be an advantage to some, and a hindrance to most. The current, information-based admissions regime that displaced the earlier discriminatory practices may well be more meritocratic, but, as Steven argues, it "nevertheless systematically favors the wealthy, well educated, and well connected" (22). Excess of capital thus exerts an undue influence on the admissions process—the 'preferences of privilege' exposed by Golden all too often guarantee access for children from affluent families. Lack of capital, in turn, makes it almost impossible for candidates with lower-class backgrounds to gain admission. As mentioned above, the emergence and stabilization of the ideology of meritocracy crucially changed the ways in which upper-middle-class families in the United States structure childhood and adolescence; it generated "a whole new way of life organized around the production of measurably talented children" (Stevens 22). Families who lack

5 For an in-depth discussion of the intersections of class and race in higher education, see Tomas J. Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford's *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal: Race and Class in Elite College Admission and Campus Life* (2009).

the resources to participate in this process are thus obviously and systematically disadvantaged and the resulting scarcity of students from poor families at elite schools is one of the main areas of criticism in the studies.

The pervasive influence of class is seen as problematic in the three studies because it arrests all forms of social movement and thus leads to a solidification of existing strata in society. This development is diametrically opposed to the role elite colleges are expected to fulfill, namely to function as engines of upward social mobility—this is the primary answer the progressivist studies offer with regard to the tension of elitism and egalitarianism. Golden and Soares thus both place class at the center of the fairly comprehensive suggestions for reform they discuss as a remedy for the shortcomings their investigations have exposed. Many of these suggestions are geared toward ending upper-class advantages in the admissions process, for instance by ending legacy admission and separating fund-raising and admissions, thus making it harder for wealthy families to buy their way into colleges (Golden 292-3). But among the "desirable, non-utopian steps" (Soares 201) the studies propose are also many that target prospective students with low socio-economic backgrounds and make it easier, more attractive, and more promising for them to apply to elite schools: "Revamping the testing system, striving to admit the top 10 percent from all secondary schools, practicing socioeconomic sensitive admissions, reforming legacy and athlete admissions, actively challenging the criteria used by the ratings industry, and engaging with the public debate on secondary education" (Soares 200-1).

The increasing openness with which the pervasive influence of socio-economic factors is addressed is an important and productive step in the current critical conversation about elite education. Given the authors' framing of their studies as part of the general social justice critique of inequality within the United States, however, there is a caveat: Even if all measures proposed in the texts were implemented, and even if elite colleges managed to drastically reduce the impact of socio-economic factors in the admissions process and were to become truly need- and wealth-blind, the effects would be arguably fairly minimal. None of the proposed measures would do much to alleviate the rampant, large-scale inequality characterizing the United States in the twenty-first century. In fact, rather than destabilizing a system that is a major legitimatory power in the current climate of inequality, the implementation of such measures would likely strengthen that system by creating additional legitimacy. Walter Benn Michaels observed in *The Trouble With Diversity* that "the function of the (very few) poor people at Harvard is to reassure the (very

many) rich people at Harvard that you can't just buy your way into Harvard" (99); this observation would arguably still hold true if the absolute numbers of poor students were to increase. What is more, elite colleges by definition cater only to a very small segment of the overall student population (approximately 4 percent); so even if the numbers of students from lower-class families were increased dramatically, such policies would very likely achieve upward mobility only for a very small number of ambitious, talented, and lucky students from the lower strata of society. If applicants from affluent and influential families were rejected, moreover, they would probably respond by flocking to other institutions, taking their capital with them. This change in the funding structures of elite institutions might influence the landscape of elite education in ways that are difficult to project.

This does not mean, of course, that lessening the undue influence of socio-economic factors is not a desirable goal. But as the comparison with race-based policies demonstrates, increasing equality in elite college admissions does not necessarily translate into increasing equality overall. The treatment of class-related issues in these studies thus demonstrates a number of blind spots in the discourse: First, the overrepresentation and overestimation of elite institutions; and second, the isolationism that characterizes the authors' engagement with elite education—both with regard to the rest of the educational landscape in the US and with regard to the glaring lack of international comparative perspective.

While merit and class are explicitly discussed and analyzed in the three studies, their conception of eliteness is much more opaque. The studies use a number of semantically similar terms to denote the eliteness of the institutions they investigate: Golden, for instance, talks about "top colleges," "premier colleges," "the nation's best and most selective universities," "America's foremost universities," and "ultraexclusive colleges" (1-3). Soares writes about the "most prestigious universities" (xii); Stevens refers to the "most distinguished colleges and universities" (1) and describes elite colleges as "among the nation's most enduring and most emulated organizations" (6). None of these monikers is particularly surprising; all of them allude to at least one of the features of eliteness I have introduced in the previous chapter: excellence/exceptionalism (best, top, premier, foremost, distinguished); exclusivity/selectivity (most selective, ultraexclusive); influence/power (leading, prestigious). Looking closer, the studies name a number of factors that together constitute the eliteness of elite colleges, for instance their endowments, the quality of their teaching and research, their spatial composition, their mis-

sion and obligation, the degree of influence they and their alumni exert in all sectors of society, and, most importantly, in their exclusivity. In fact, while all of these aspects are mentioned in the studies, often in passing, it is the criterion of exclusivity and selectivity that is most dominant in distinguishing elite from non-elite institutions. In this, the studies largely follow the practice of the most influential college rankings, which also assign disproportional importance to the admissions rates in deciding where to situate individual institutions.

Given their commitment to the ideology of the meritocracy, it is not surprising that Golden, Soares, and Stevens conceptualize eliteness within this framework. Golden, addressing the structural position of private colleges and universities, points out that as tax-exempt, nonprofit institutions, they benefit immensely from subsidies and various kinds of government funding (10). His conception of elite universities thus includes important social obligations that they fail to fulfill: "[T]hey are shirking their mission to unearth and nurture diamonds in the rough" (ibid.). Elite institutions are thus beholden to the nation, and their admission policies, which, according to Golden and the other studies, "stifle talent and exalt mediocrity," ultimately do not only discriminate against individual students but "weaken the country's economic competitiveness and political leadership" (11). Soares introduces another important qualitative distinction between elite and non-elite institutions: Large state universities are distinctly more utilitarian in mission and outlook; fittingly, their students are admitted "based on [...] subject-specific competence," and live in "beehive dorms" (11); elite colleges, in turn, tend to favor the liberal arts over the sciences and allow their students to live "in residential country-club like surroundings" (ibid.).

Ultimately, the elite status of the institutions in focus in the studies—Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Duke, Brown, Notre Dame, Hamilton College, Wesleyan, and others—is accepted as a given and neither explained in any detail nor challenged in any meaningful way. In fact, none of the studies really criticizes the elite educational system for its elitism; the authors' criticism is for the most part directed at the plutocratic and discriminatory structures that govern the system. Eliteness as such, along with its many socio-political and cultural implications, is not at the center of these studies, and even if it were, it would not be criticized. As their commitment to the meritocracy demonstrates, the authors do not find fault with the notion of eliteness, on the contrary: They conceptualize it as an important and desirable facet of the higher education landscape, provided it is the right kind of eliteness.

Conclusion: The Merit Fallacy

If the studies' conceptualizations of merit, class, and eliteness are put into conversation, a distinctive pattern emerges, which I would like to call the 'merit fallacy' and which is part of their jeremiadic tendency to affirm and validate rather than genuinely criticize. Even though the authors are aware of the contingency of 'merit', Golden, Soares, and Stevens alike tend to fix its meanings by positioning it as the opposite of privilege, as the following examples show: Golden, for instance, contrasts students' "own merit" with "their paternal pedigrees," "intellectual potential" with "tens of millions of dollars," and applicants who "earn their admission" with those who have it "delivered to them as a birthright" (2). Soares mobilizes the same alleged opposition when he charges elite universities with "confusing merit with social class" (xii), or argues that students "should get into a top university because of [their] achievements, not because of accidents of birth" (2), or explains how in the course of the twentieth century elite colleges initiated "the abolition of family privilege" in favor of "the introduction of academic merit" (7). Stevens, in a similar vein, explains how "the inequalities of family, caste, and tribe gradually give way to hierarchies predicated in individual achievement" (11), and describes how individuals are evaluated "on the basis of demonstrated individual accomplishment, not inherited privilege" (12). All of this seems to suggest that 'merit'—as a comprehensive category comprising talent, skill, ambition, work, ability, accomplishment, etc.—and 'privilege'—as an equally comprehensive moniker for inherited wealth, cultural capital, and social connections—are somehow completely distinct and distinguishable factors confounded willfully by the admissions offices of elite colleges. Positing a dichotomy between 'merit' on the one hand and 'privilege' on the other hand obscures the fact that merit in all its forms—even and especially in the seemingly neutral sense of 'measurable virtue'—is more often than not the expression and continuance rather than the opposite of privilege.

4. Conservative Critiques

In 1987, philosopher Allan Bloom published what turned out to be a surprise bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Its subtitle, "How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students," sums up the main argument. According to Mark S. Jendrysik, Bloom's tract can be

seen as an expression of what he calls American declinism, "a belief that the United States is in a state of terminal moral collapse" (2002: 361). *The Closing of the American Mind* furthermore provided the blue print for jeremiadic critiques of the academic establishment, in particular for conservative critics—Jendrysik calls it "the foundational work of the modern jeremiad" (2008: 37). Bloom decried what he saw as overwhelming evidence of "cultural decadence and national decline" (Jendrysik 2008: 38), in particular in the sphere of higher education, and attacked the alleged moral relativism, intellectual rootlessness, and political correctness of the academy. Given these concerns, it is not surprising that both Deresiewicz and Douthat mention Bloom favorably. What unites all three of them is a vision of America gone astray, and a concomitant plea to return to the right path.

In the following, I discuss Douthat's *Privilege* and Deresiewicz's *Excellent Sheep* separately, and address in detail the ways in which their jeremiadic tendencies inform their negotiations of merit, class, and eliteness. I argue that their response to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism is to rewrite this tension as one that centers not on inequality but is concerned instead with quality, or the lack thereof. To retrieve the right path of American excellence, according to Douthat and Deresiewicz, means to abdicate the neoliberal eliteness of mindless credentialism, which their books set out to criticize, in favor of a return to a humanistic eliteness that is more substantial, more serious, and more soulful than its current competitor. Like the progressivist studies discussed in the previous section, both authors ultimately desire a classless eliteness, but unlike them, they emphasize the qualitative nature of the eliteness more than the dream of classlessness. In the end, *Privilege* and *Excellent Sheep* both construct a conservative vision of the elite university as a classless, raceless, and genderless haven for serious intellectual engagement, free of decadence, entitlement, and the pitfalls of privilege, and thus free to contribute its civic duty to the project of American exceptionalism.

Ross Douthat: *Privilege* (2005)

Ross Douthat published *Privilege: Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class* in 2005, just a few years after his graduation from the eponymous college, of which he aims to offer, according to the back cover, a "penetrating critique." In a fitting turn of events, the book's publication mirrors some of the phenomena Douthat lambastes, as he explains in an interview: "[T]he way I ended up selling the book is actually a perfect example of the sort of connection-building

and privilege that I talk about in the book itself" (quoted in Healy)—a former Harvard classmate had put him in touch with a literary agent who helped the fledgling author to develop and ultimately sell the proposal. Marketed by its publisher, Hyperion Books, under the header 'Sociology', *Privilege* exhibits the genre hybridity typical of the conservative jeremiadic texts discussed in this chapter, and demonstrates the multiplicity of personal, cultural, political, and aesthetic dimensions on which elite education becomes meaningful in twenty-first-century America.

Asked what prompted him to write about Harvard, Douthat mentions three literary role models that situate his work within a tradition of conservative cultural critique, and that can serve as points of departure to discuss the three generic forms actualized in his text: the memoir, the coming-of-age-story, and the cultural commentary. The first is Tom Wolfe's 2004 novel *I am Charlotte Simmons*, which chronicles the experiences of a working-class scholarship student at a fictional elite university. Douthat explains that while he "really enjoyed" Wolfe's novel, he also thought that someone closer to the actual undergraduate experience than Wolfe, who was well into his seventies when he finished *Charlotte Simmons*, should write about it: "I felt like college from the point of view of the college students was fertile literary terrain" (quoted in Kolhatkar). Describing his own work "as *I am Charlotte Simmons*, but with less sex" (ibid.), Douthat thus emphasizes that his is a coming-of-age story, tracing his difficult path at Harvard from adolescence to adulthood. In addition to the staples of the genre—love, sex, friendship—the dominant motif is his disillusionment with the elite institution. Arriving in Cambridge "with the highest of expectations" (5), Douthat describes entering the university "wide-eyed and naïve, expecting to be surrounded by intellectual ferment and immersed in what Matthew Arnolds called the 'best that has been thought and said'" (11). His disappointment—with his peers, his professors, and the whole Harvardian culture—is what drives most of the narrative. The jeremiadic element in his writing is thus not so much a mourning of a better past, but a mourning of the idealized Harvard of his imagination, which crumbles in the face of the real thing. Interestingly, the motif of disillusionment is equally strong in Curtis Sittenfeld's novel *Prep*, discussed in the last chapter of this study, but while Lee Fiora blames herself for the disenchanting experience of the elite educational space, Douthat blames Harvard, and only Harvard, for his.

In fact, given the nature of Douthat's expectations, the reader learns surprisingly little about the author's intellectual development, nor of any efforts

he makes to actualize his aspirations. A notable exception is his conservatism, which he mentions several times (e.g. 62, 229). On the one hand, this intellectual and political self-categorization seems to function as a rhetorical gesture to establish outsider status, and thus to render his criticism of Harvard more convincing. Unlike Charlotte Simmons, whose otherness is marked by her socio-economic as well as her regional background, Douthat hails from an upper-middle-class family in Connecticut and attended a private high school "in a leafy New Haven suburb" (6). His conservatism thus serves to strengthen his maverick status, as does his Catholicism, since both apparently are rare occurrences in the Harvard community. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, the references to his conservative worldview serve to establish his position in the intellectual tradition of a particular brand of movement conservatism, similar to that espoused by Allan Bloom, which combines a stringent anti-elitism with a reverence for cultural and intellectual eliteness.

A second influence Douthat cites is David Brooks, whose arguments and observations in writings such as *Bobos in Paradise* or "The Organization Kid"[6] are echoed in *Privilege*. Here we see Douthat as cultural observer and would-be ethnographer who, like Brooks, aims to make broad claims about "the culture of privilege" (*Privilege* back cover) by letting the reader catch a glimpse of what life at one of America's most selective and prestigious universities is 'really' like. Douthat proposes to take off the "ideological veneer" (9) and expose the truth about the institution: Harvard "was not a refuge of genius and a sanctuary of intellect," but a place for mindless posturing and networking. The issues Douthat explores in his capacity as social commentator include grade inflation and the prevalence of postmodern jargon in the humanities—again, a nod to his conservative roots, in particular perhaps to Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*—activism and politics on campus, which he dismisses as more or less laughable, and the pitfalls of promiscuity.

This conservative strand in Douthat's writing is furthermore supported by the third, and arguably most important, role model he mentions: William F. Buckley, Jr. and his 1951 *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of 'Academic*

6 "The Organization Kid" (2001) appeared in *The Atlantic* and raised an argument about mindlessness and entitlement at elite institutions (specifically, Princeton) very similar to that brought forth by Deresiewicz a few years later: "The young men and women of America's future elite work their laptops to the bone, rarely question authority, and happily accept their positions at the top of the heap as part of the natural order of life."

Freedom', a classic in conservative writing and institutional critique. Buckley, whom Douthat lovingly describes as "the great man, the right's godfather, the urbane and wicked prince of the conservatives" (241), likewise wrote the famous indictment of his alma mater shortly after his graduation. While Buckley's intervention focused mainly on what he experienced as Yale's undue promotion of secularism, liberalism, and collectivism, Douthat's critique is aimed at Harvard's hypocrisy, its snobbery, and the lack of intellectual rigor expected and guidance offered by the institution. The disingenuousness Douthat diagnoses does not only characterize Harvard, however, but the entire system of elite education: "It is a culture that pays lip service to various earnest ideals—like diversity and public service and tolerance—but in point of fact indoctrinates its students with a religion of success, and seduces them, oh so subtly, with the promise that what they have is theirs by right, the right of talent" (11). Instead of the humanistic eliteness he was looking for, Douthat thus finds only what I conceptualize as a neoliberal eliteness, an essentially empty pattern of distinction used primarily to legitimize wealth and power: Caught in "the scramble for upward mobility, achievement, success for success' sake" (ibid.), Douthat is disappointed by the false sense of legitimacy and entitlement Harvard inspires in its students, who despite being "intellectually adrift" turn into "an American ruling class that is smug, stratified, self-congratulatory" (4). The use of the term 'smug' again signals Douthat's position in a particular conservative intellectual tradition, in which 'smugness' is associated with liberals and leftists. Douthat concludes that while Harvard "remains one of the best places on earth to educate oneself," the institution does not actively seek to educate its students and "will not guide or shape or even push back in any significant way against entropy and laziness and careerism" (138). It is the collective paucity of seriousness, of honest engagement with classes and materials, and the thoughtless glorification of success that Douthat finds most appalling about the elite educational experience. His main issue, it is important to note, is thus not the socio-economic homogeneity of his peers, as his book's subtitle might indicate, but their academic and intellectual mediocrity. Douthat's critique is not a critique of the political economy of elite education, but of its cultural shortcomings.

Merit, Eliteness, Class

Douthat frames his own background in the paradigm of the academic meritocracy. His parents went to Yale and Stanford, and thus, as he explains, "had

the whole meritocratic pedigree" (5). It is interesting to note that their affiliation with these institutions is in itself enough for Douthat to establish his meritocratic genealogy, even though he offers no further information on his parents' backgrounds or how they gained access to the colleges, thus insinuating that a genuine academic meritocracy was fully functional in the past. As part of that tradition, he himself "excelled academically" (6) at his prep school, engaged in the right kinds of extracurricular activities, and eventually made it to Harvard. This blue print of a merit narrative is complicated by the fact that it is evident from the beginning of his book that Douthat is critical of these very structures: One of the two epigraphs that precede his story is a quote from Christopher Lasch's *The Revolt of the Elites* (1995): "Meritocracy is a parody of democracy." Douthat thus obviously mistrusts the notion of eliteness qua merit that the progressivist studies on admission and exclusion are so eager to support.

Douthat's understanding of eliteness, as we learn throughout the narrative, was changed fundamentally through his experience of the elite educational space. Before arriving at Harvard, Douthat conceptualized eliteness, according to his own admission, as an exclusively intellectual quality in the humanistic, Western tradition. He envisions the college as "a magical place, a paradise" (5) of academic excellence—the antithesis of the "high school jockocracy" that caused him so much unhappiness: Harvard "became a beacon of hope to my semi-alienated teenage mind. […] At Harvard, athleticism and good looks and popularity would count far less than the things that really mattered: native brilliance, and intellectual curiosity, and academic achievement" (7). As he soon realizes upon arriving in Cambridge, however, eliteness at Harvard is less academic than it is social, or even profanely financial. Douthat gives much room to revealing the naïveté of his youthful imaginations of the "Iviest of the Ivy League schools" (8) and correcting the notion of Harvard as a haven for intellectuals. In "the wider, institutional culture of Harvard," he argues, there is little room for the pursuit of intellectual endeavors for their own sake; instead, "the *real* business of Harvard [is] the pursuit of success" (ibid.). "At its crudest," Douthat complains, "a Harvard education is a four-year scramble to ingratiate oneself" (ibid.). *Privilege* thus conjures up the image of the elite educational space as a realm in which success and achievement trump academic inquiry at every turn; eliteness is a worldly category measurable in internships, job offers, and money spent. Rather than about learning and serious engagement, Harvard is about collecting capital.

In the chapter titled "Approaches to Knowledge," in which Douthat discusses Harvard's academic culture, he goes to great lengths to disprove the popular image of the overly studious Harvardian and, in the process, criticizes the practice of neoliberal eliteness. Even though he admits that some of his classmates "took academics very seriously" (122), most of them—Douthat included—"were studious primarily in our avoidance of academic work, and brilliant mostly in our maneuvering to achieve maximum GPA in return for minimal effort" (123). Douthat attributes this seeming paradox to the peculiar incentive structure of the meritocracy: On the one hand, because the driving force at Harvard was not thirst for knowledge, but hunger for success, classes were seen primarily as a means to an end, as "just another résumé-padding opportunity" (ibid) among many, and not as arenas for serious intellectual engagement. On the other hand, "Harvard's other demands—social, extracurricular, pre-professional" (140) dominated the students' lives to such a degree that academics were never the top priority.

Douthat's observations also reflect the transition between a liberal version of the meritocracy as a system that rewards hard work, diligence, and sacrifice, to a neoliberal instantiation of the same system, which now rewards success for its own sake, regardless of effort or dedication. The "meritocratic imagination," he argues, is dominated not by education or intellectual fulfillment, but by success: "People send their children to Harvard," he argues, "above all, because they want them to *succeed*—because they want them to be part of the ruling class, and Harvard is the easiest, best-known ticket" (10, emphasis in the original). This statement is problematic in a number of ways, however, not least because it contradicts his own reasoning for applying to Harvard and thus, presumably, also that of many other students and graduates. The question whether gaining admission to Harvard really is the "easiest […] ticket" to the ruling class—given the amount of effort and money that needs to be invested in receiving that ticket—remains unanswered as well. In any case, Douthat is disappointed in the Harvard he experiences and concludes: "Meritocracy is the ideological veneer, but social and economic stratification is the reality" (9). Of course, stratification does not at all contradict meritocracy. On the contrary, in Young's original account, 'social and economic stratification' were the exact results of implementing meritocratic structures, which is what Young warned against. This demonstrates that Douthat follows a very specific conception of eliteness as meritorious, and of merit as academic, which then renders the competition fair and the stratification jus-

tified. This pure vision of eliteness is contaminated by the neoliberal emphasis on success and careerism.

The possibility of a genuinely meritorious eliteness is thwarted, according to Douthat, by the prevalence of extreme wealth on campus and the socio-economic homogeneity of the student body. The book's subtitle—"Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class"—suggests that Douthat's investigation positions class as a central category, and in some ways, it does. His impetus differs considerably from that of the progressivist studies, however, because his is essentially a cultural critique of entitlement rather than a political critique of inequality.

Douthat begins by addressing his own class background in the prologue, careful to establish a difference between himself and his equally affluent peers. Labelling his upbringing "superficially bourgeois" (5), he goes on to explain why his childhood was different from that of socio-economically similar Connecticut families: His mother was "chronically ill with strange and inexplicable allergies," which drove the family to "seek unorthodox cures" (ibid.). A number of cultural practices—a macrobiotic diet, a home birth, an aversion to vaccinations, summers spent in health food camps—distinguished Douthat's family from the more stereotypical upper middle class; or so Douthat claims, emphasizing the cultural rather than the material dimension of socio-economic stratification.

Class then assumes a new kind of importance for Douthat when he arrives at Harvard and finds it rampant with rich people. Though "a smattering of poor students" exists, most of his classmates are a "wildly privileged lot, culled from the country's upwardly mobile enclaves and blessed with deep, parentally funded pockets" (9). In the three chapters that follow, Douthat discusses various social and cultural reverberations of stratification. In the first, "The Fall of Straus B-32," he seeks to explain the failure of Harvard's diversity politics, using as his only example the story of the suite adjacent to his, Straus B-32, whose inhabitants seemed emblematic of the university's commitment to diversity: "Forth and Nick, Siddarth and Damian: a rich kid schooled at Groton, two children of immigrants, and a great-great-grandson of slaves. The social engineers in the Freshman Dean's Office must have enjoyed putting together that particular slice of Harvard, we joked, and after a while, there was a dollop of bitterness in the laughter (19)." Douthat then details the emerging conflict between Forth, "the blond, blue-eyed grandson of a cabinet secretary" and Damian, "who was southern and black and relatively poor" (ibid.), and argues that Harvard's diversity politics are hypocritical and useless because

they focus only on "the most superficial form of diversity—the diversity of color" (48). Douthat finds other measures of diversity—regional or class background, for instance—more substantial, but since they are not part of the official university politics, he concludes that "Harvard is not some bubbling stew of diversity. It is a place filled with haute bourgeois students from the professional and creative classes, a place where a smattering of strivers from underprivileged backgrounds are asked to become the 'seasoning in the rice', as one minority tutor put it bitterly during my freshman year" (52). Douthat is right, of course, in pointing to the glaring lack of socio-economic diversity at Harvard and other elite schools. That he calls the 'diversity of color' the 'most superficial form of diversity', however, arguably reveals more about his own subject position as a white man than it does about Harvard's diversity politics.

In the following two chapters, Douthat continues to explore the role of class at Harvard, recounting in great detail his attempt and subsequent failure to join one of the exclusive final clubs, which he introduces as a further expressions of the dominance of wealth and privilege on campus. He concludes the chapter by explaining that his rejection from the club was ultimately a good thing, since "Harvard was privileged enough, […] and sufficiently detached from the real world, without going a step further and entering the charmed circle of final-club brats" (82). The appeal of upper-class institutions such as the final clubs, however, becomes very obvious in Douthat's loving descriptions of the various locales in which his 'punching' took place; his attempts at rationalizing his failure to gain access sound half-hearted and somewhat forced.

His third chapter, "The Strange Career of Suzanne Pomey," demonstrates the fairly dramatic consequences the pervasive culture of privilege can have for individual students. Suzanne Pomey, Douthat tells us, was a campus celebrity, of sorts, a "Harvard queen bee" (86), known for her lavish parties and for being the producer of the Hasty Pudding Theatricals. Shortly before graduation, however, she was convicted of embezzling close to a hundred thousand dollars from Hasty Pudding; instead of donning cap and gown and receiving her degree with the rest of her classmates, Suzanne was then "arrested and charged with grand larceny" (86). Douthat uses the case of Suzanne Pomey to criticize Harvard's "cutthroat culture" (95), which is based not only on the "boundless ambition" of its students, but also, and arguably more importantly, on "an astonishing foundation of wealth" (ibid.). Suzanne Pomey, it turned out during the scandal, did not come from a wealthy family,

as everyone had thought, but had stolen the money to pretend that she did, to succeed in Harvard's social scene. According to Douthat, her case is instructive because she represented "Harvard's raging id: She had the ambition, the obsession with fame, and the desire for riches that animated so many of us, and like us she stored them up behind the façade of a pure heart and good intentions, of community service and academic excellence" (108). Class, then, matters greatly in Douthat's account because it is, he claims, the ultimate goal of the "meritocratic elite" (116), a goal he denounces as superficial, misguided, and irresponsible. Harvard's undergraduates—along with the students at other elite schools—have been raised to believe, Douthat argues, that "their worth is contingent on the level of wealth and power and personal achievement they attain" (ibid.). Gaining or maintaining upper-class status is thus what drives most students at elite colleges—resulting in the lack of interest in serious engagement and the overemphasis on measures of success that Douthat criticizes.

William Deresiewicz: *Excellent Sheep* (2014)

In 2008, William Deresiewicz published an article in *The American Scholar*, titled "The Disadvantages of an Elite Education." A comprehensive critique of the elite educational system, the text begins in the mode of the confessional: Deresiewicz recounts a situation in which he found himself in the company of a plumber he employed to fix his pipes—"a short, beefy guy with a goatee and […] a thick Boston accent"—and admits to his failure to relate in any way or even to make small talk with the man. So far had his Ivy League education removed him from the experience of 'common people' that he felt utterly unable to empathize with them: "I could carry on conversations with people from other countries, in other languages, but I couldn't talk to the man who was standing in my own house." In the article that builds on the anecdote, then, Deresiewicz faults the institutions responsible for his "Ivy retardation" for failing their educational mission, as the tag line suggests: "Our best universities have forgotten that the reason they exist is to make minds, not careers." Instead of fostering a wholesome atmosphere in which students are encouraged to explore their own minds and souls, and thus grow into responsible, empathic citizens, the Ivy League and its peer institutions, according to Deresiewicz, favor a materialistic and utilitarian approach to education, thereby producing students who are ambitious, talented, and successful but also shallow, arrogant, and out of touch with the larger populace. Like Douthat's *Privi-*

lege, Deresiewicz's writing is dedicated to exposing and denouncing what can be described as a neoliberal eliteness (marked by empty credentials, mindless success, etc.) and at the same time propagating the vision of a humanistic eliteness (marked by genuine learning, serious engagement, personal growth, etc.). Here, too, the potentials of the right kind of eliteness are simultaneously mourned and celebrated in perfect jeremiadic manner.

Deresiewicz himself spent a total of twenty-four years in the Ivy League, first as a student, then as a teacher, before abandoning academia in favor of pursuing an independent writing career. In 2014, *The New Republic*[7] published an updated version of his initial article on elite education. Provocatively titled "Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League," the article was accompanied by the image of a burning Harvard flag, and its tag line claimed that "[t]he nation's top colleges are turning our kids into zombies." The rhetoric is decisively more inflammatory and sensationalist—six years after the original article, elite universities are no longer faulted merely for being shallow and careerist, but for 'turning kids into zombies', arguably a more serious offense. In addition to this change in register, Deresiewicz also abandoned the plumber anecdote, probably due to the critical responses it had elicited—one reviewer called it "preposterous." Instead, he jumpstarts his critique of the kinds of subjectivities produced in and through elite institutions by recounting his "daylong stint on the Yale admissions committee," during which he caught a—to him, disturbing—first-hand impression of the ways in which admissions officers sift through the hyper-qualified yet strangely caricatural applicant pool. If the *American Scholar* article had already received its fair share of attention (it had been viewed online one million times, and shared 40,000 times of Facebook), the *New Republic* piece went viral—thus demonstrating the degree of cultural interest in matters of elite education. It inspired a number of responses, many of them critical, but also quite a few that echoed his concerns about the trajectory of elite education in twenty-first-century America.[8]

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7 The choice of magazine is in itself interesting: given that it is a liberal and progressive venue, its readers might be more inclined to agree with social justice arguments as exhibited by the studies on admission and exclusion. And in fact, many of the responses demonstrate just that (cf. footnote 18).

8 Among them Steven Pinker's "The Trouble With Harvard," J.D. Chapman's "Send Your Kid to the Ivy League!," Andrew Giambrone's verbosely titled "I am a Laborer's Son. I went to Yale. I am not Trapped in a Bubble of Privilege," and Yishai Schwartz's "An Attack on the Ivy League is an Attack on the Meritocracy Itself."

Shortly thereafter, Deresiewicz published *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (2014), the best-selling third step of his Ivy League critique. Again, he changed his opening remarks, now returning to the confessional mode and presenting the book as "a letter to my twenty-year-old self" (1). He himself, Deresiewicz tells his readers, "went off to college like a sleepwalker, like a zombie," without a clear conception of what receiving an education might actually entail, driven only by "vaguely understood objectives: status, wealth, getting to the top—in a word, 'success'" (ibid.). Having observed the same phenomenon in today's college students, Deresiewicz intends his book to be an intervention, focusing on "[w]hat that system [of elite education] does to kids and how they can escape from it, what it does to our society and how we can dismantle it" (2). The fact that he changed his opening vignette a third time demonstrates the difficulty of the critic to position himself with regard to the object of critique and with regard to his audience; Deresiewicz has to walk the fine line between authority and arrogance—a delicate balancing act in particular when it comes to class, education, and privilege. All told, his objective is similar to Douthat's: to find out what kind of subjectivities are produced in and through elite colleges and universities, and to explore the social, cultural, political, and economic ramifications of the fact that these colleges and universities supply the majority of the leadership class.[9] Deresiewicz is interested more in the individual than in the systemic dimension of these questions: Ten out of twelve chapters, or 200 out of 250 pages, are devoted to describing what happens to students on elite campuses and what they can do, individually, to counteract the system's detrimental influence. In contrast, his thoughts on more wide reaching systemic change take up much less room in his overall argument.

Merit, Eliteness, Class

Merit and eliteness are central categories in Deresiewicz's critique, and he conceptualizes them as closely entwined and mutually dependent. Class is

9 None of the studies really theorizes the category of the 'leadership class', but it can be inferred from their writings that the authors follow a pluralist or functionalist understanding of eliteness in the sense that educational institutions, among other actors, educate the people who then assume leadership positions across a range of key sectors, e.g. business, politics, law, etc. The studies do not engage with the question of the relative importance and power of each of these sectors, nor with the question of the existence of a coherent national leadership class.

addressed in several steps of his argument, in particular when he discusses the broader socio-political implications of the elite education system, but as I will show below, his is more a critique of snobbery than of inequality.

Deresiewicz's critique of life and work on elite campuses echoes much of what Douthat and similar critics talk about. The main enemy of these "meritocracy lamenters," as Rita Koganzon calls them (114) is the mechanisms of the meritocracy, which is conceptualized as "a ruthless, pointless competition for external accolades at the expense of true learning" (Koganzon 109). From kindergarten to the Ph.D., the structures governing advancement in the elite educational sector are flawed; the system's incentive structure is designed in a way that favors achievement over substance and therefore "forces you to choose between learning and success" (Deresiewicz 4). Here again, the vision of a humanistic eliteness that exists and is cultivated independently of worldly factors—i.e., the neoliberal system—comes to the fore. Deresiewicz criticizes as narrowly utilitarian the underlying conception of education that informs the work of elite institutions: Students are encouraged to view their education as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. The system furthermore creates elitist mentalities and a false sense of superiority. Instead of fostering curiosity, sincerity, and excitement about learning, elite colleges produce snobby, out-of-touch conformists who flock to the financial industry in droves because they are afraid of taking risks, afraid of failing, and unwilling and unable to think about what they really want from life. The charges of snobbery—Deresiewicz also uses the term "smug" (205)—echo the conservative critique also articulated by Douthat, in which the sense of social and cultural superiority is deemed worse than the actual inequality.

If class is not a central category in Deresiewicz's work, it is because he is not primarily interested in critiquing inequality, but, as his title suggests, in exposing the "miseducation" of the leadership class. The very beginning of his 'manifesto' demonstrates his lack of concern for and awareness of socio-economic factors: He explains that he himself went to college without giving much thought as to where and why, because college "was the 'next thing'" (1). There seems to be little awareness that for many American teenagers, college—and especially the elite kind—is not 'the next thing' at all, and that the casualness of his approach is in itself an expression of class privilege. He does, however, time and again acknowledge and discuss the presence of money on campus—"colleges like Harvard are bastions of privilege, places where the rich send their children to learn to walk, talk, and think like the rich, and to make sure that they stay rich" (209)—and he also raises the issue of "self-seg-

regation by mind-set and lifestyle—which really means, by economic status" (215). But these issues are not his primary concern. His major point of criticism is rooted in what he refers to as the "elite mentality" (214), grounded in a conflation of class, eliteness, and merit. The essence of this mentality, Deresiewicz claims, is the fact that to affluent families, the presence of their offspring on elite campuses is "a never-ending source of self-delight" and a powerful legitimation for their privilege: "[Y]ou're here because you earned it, and you earned it because you're the best" (ibid.). It is this attitude, the elitism of the elite, that Deresiewicz finds offensive more than anything else; he criticizes students and their parents for assuming that their affiliation with an elite school means that they are "simply better—better morally, better metaphysically, higher on some absolute scale of human value" (ibid.).

When he does talk about the systemic ramifications of elite education, his diagnosis and criticism mirror that of the progressivist studies discussed earlier in this chapter. Elite colleges and universities, Deresiewicz argues, "reproduc[e] the class system" (205). The system aggravates inequality, hinders social mobility, sustains privilege, and thus produces an elite that is not only isolated from the people it is meant to lead, but also "smug about its right to its position" (ibid.). The major cause of the persistence of socio-economic stratification, and here Deresiewicz repeats Stevens's argument, is "the ever-growing cost of manufacturing children who are fit to compete in the college admissions game" (206). Deresiewicz's observations and his suggestions for reform are firmly in line with the consensus of the critical literature on elite education. A new and improved system, he demands, has to ensure that "privilege cannot be handed down" (235), though this is, of course, ultimately impossible to achieve. In addition to the usual suggestions on how to change the admissions process—no more special treatment for legacy students and athletes, etc.—Deresiewicz asks colleges to reconsider their understanding of merit. Instead of encouraging blind conformity and rote memorization, the admissions process should reward "resilience, self-reliance, independence of spirit, genuine curiosity and creativity, and a willingness to take risks and make mistakes" (236). Deresiewicz fails to explain in any detail, unfortunately, how these changes might be implemented in the daily work of admissions officers who have to read and select thousands upon thousands of applications.

Toward the end of *Excellent Sheep*, however, Deresiewicz surprises the reader with some thoughts on how "to rethink, reform, and reverse the entire project of elite education" (4), as he puts it in the introduction. His last chapter, evocatively titled "The Self-Overcoming of the Hereditary Meritocracy,"

offers some ideas about a comprehensive reform of the system and, literally on the book's last five pages, Deresiewicz makes a number of suggestions that set him apart from the majority of criticism:

> The changes must go deeper, though, than just reforming the admissions process at selective schools. That might address the problem of mediocrity, but it won't address the greater one of inequality. Private colleges and universities will only ever go so far in opening their gates to the poor and middle class, for the simple reason that they cannot afford to do otherwise. We need instead to overhaul the entire way we organize our higher education system. The problem is the Ivy League itself—the position it and other schools have been allowed to occupy. (237)

One of the biggest problems caused by the way the elite educational system is set up, Deresiewicz argues, is that a number of private institutions have been entrusted with the "training of our leadership class" (237). These colleges and universities, he contends, will always prioritize their own institutional interests over those of society at large, and are thus inherently ill-equipped to meet their responsibilities. This, again, falls into the realm of criticizing the mediocrity of the leadership class produced by elite colleges. An additional, and even more important, reformist intervention would have much broader consequences: Deresiewicz explains how for the longest time he thought that the goal was to create a system in which every child had the same chance to get into an elite college, but that he now realizes that what is really needed is an educational system in which "you don't have to go to the Ivy League, or any private college, to get a first-rate education" (238). What Deresiewicz advocates, on these last pages of his book, is "[p]ublic education, financed with public money, for the benefit of all" (ibid.). He does not restrict his demands to post-secondary education, moreover, but argues persuasively that in order to combat inequality effectively, the stratification of the K-12 sector has to be alleviated as well. Given that these claims are all but unique in the critical literature I surveyed for this chapter, it is interesting to note that Deresiewicz does not position them more centrally. Most reviews do not even discuss these suggestions for reform in any detail, but focus exclusively on the critique of the culture of privilege prevalent at elite institutions.

5. Concluding Remarks

This chapter rests on the premise that critique is a major mode of knowledge production. What a society singles out for inspection, the flaws this inspection finds, and the remedies that are subsequently proposed tell us much about the thing in question—elite education, in this case—and about the society that tries to make sense of it. The central dilemma that characterizes the situation of elite educational institutions in the United States is that one of their primary means of distinction—their exclusivity—is fundamentally at odds with a set of values that form the core of American self-understanding: equal opportunity, the possibility of upward mobility, and the virtue of hard work. Building on this, the objective of this chapter was threefold: to explore how the critical-analytical studies conceptualize and negotiate the nodal points eliteness, merit, and class, to examine how the critical-analytical texts respond to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, and, finally, to understand the specific contribution of the epistemological mode of critique to the discourse of elite education. In order to answer these questions, I began by mapping the critical landscape surrounding elite education in the United States, and then discussed two main clusters of texts that reflect this landscape in terms of their research interests and genre multiplicity: first, progressivist social justice critiques of elite admissions politics, and second, conservative critiques of the campus cultures at elite colleges and universities. In the following, I want to briefly recapitulate the chapter's main insights and arguments.

The critical landscape shares a number of assumptions about its object of inquiry, the system of elite education: Elite colleges, most critics agree, are supposed to serve their country by acting as agents of social mobility and rewarding merit rather than inherited privilege. One of the most pressing problems this system faces, then, is that the institutions in question too often and too spectacularly fail to meet these demands—as the Equality of Opportunity Project has shown, the most prestigious universities are not the ones with the highest mobility rate, and students from affluent families are dramatically overrepresented at all top schools. It is not surprising, then, that the image of elite education generated in this critical sphere is one informed by the notion of crisis and the specter of national decline.

Broadly speaking, two diagnoses dominate the discourse: The progressivist social justice critiques argue that the admissions policies of elite colleges have to be reformed in order to ensure equal access for low-income students

and reduce the overrepresentation of kids from wealthy families. The conservative critiques, by contrast, focus on the culture of entitlement and the mindless glorification of success for its own sake that characterizes the elite educational experience.

Despite a number of differences, the five studies are similar in important respects. First, they all formulate a vision of eliteness as meritorious, and merit as measurable and academic. Second, they agree that class privilege exerts an undue influence on the elite educational experience in general and on the admissions process in particular. Third, they construct a framework of reform that assumes a binary opposition between 'merit' on the one hand and 'privilege' on the other—a false assumption that I have called the 'merit fallacy'. This fallacy may well be rooted in the jeremiadic strategies that all five studies share: The promise they hold up—the inversion of their criticism—is that of a fully functional meritocracy, and for a meritocracy to be fully functional, merit has to be the polar opposite of privilege. If the two are inextricably linked to one another, as they de facto are, the meritocratic system will always be flawed. The response the critical-analytical mode offers to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, then, is determined by its jeremiadic undertones and ultimately celebrates rather than genuinely criticizes the system of elite education. The progressivist social justice investigations argue for a *classless* eliteness, emphasizing the importance of equality of access and representation. The conservative cultural critiques, by contrast, suggest a classless *eliteness*, in which the focus is on quality rather than (in)equality. They want to return to a notion of a humanistic eliteness that is in sharp contrast to the neoliberal eliteness they see as the main flaw of the system. The entire critical sphere, however, is complicit with the elite educational system as such, and ultimately celebrates its potentials as an expression of and vehicle for the American Dream. The only rupture in this discursive trajectory is Deresiewicz's brief suggestion to overhaul the system in its entirety—a suggestion that feels almost like an afterthought in his book and did not gain much attention in the discourse. Perhaps some of the curiously affirmative tendencies in this ostensibly critical epistemological formation stems from the composition of its participants, all of whom are part of or have ties to the system they profess to critique.

III. Affirmation: Self-Representation at Princeton University

1. Introductory Remarks

In March 2016, just as the annual admissions season was drawing to a close, Frank Bruni of the *New York Times* published an op ed in which he claimed that the admissions rate of Stanford University had "plummeted all the way to its inevitable conclusion of 0 percent." The article included quotations from an anonymous Stanford administrator who explained that there was not "a single student we couldn't live without" in the applicant pool, prompting Bruni to conclude: "With no one admitted to the class of 2020, Stanford is assured that no other school can match its desirability in the near future." Titled "College Admissions Shocker!", the article did indeed shock a number of people—those who failed to understand the obvious satire. Enraged responses on social media decried Stanford's alleged arrogance, and Stanford spokeswoman Lisa Lapin told the *Huffington Post* that Bruni's piece caused "confusion" among the public, high schools, and parents of admitted students (quoted in Kingkade). Stanford had in fact published a press release about its admissions statistics a few days earlier, explaining that spots had been offered to 2,063 students out of an applicant pool of 43,997, "the largest applicant pool in Stanford's history" ("Stanford offers"). The university did not refer to the actual admissions rate of 4.69 percent, however, but instead left it to the newspapers to publish this daunting number. The press release also did not mention that Stanford had by then become the most selective elite college in the United States.

The Bruni-Stanford hoax is instructive in a number of ways. First, it demonstrates that the selectivity rat race in which elite colleges are engaged has become such a well-established cultural phenomenon that one of the most prominent American newspapers would satirize it in the manner described above. While satire is a form of criticism, the use of humor also always

signals a certain degree of acceptance. Second, the fact that the hoax was at least partially successful suggests that elite college admissions is important enough to people that they fail to see even the most obvious form of satire. Those who fell for the hoax were quite likely blinded to the ludicrousness of the claim by their investment in the admissions game. Third, it is indicative of an increasingly critical stance toward the hyper-exclusivity of elite colleges and people's fetishization thereof. Criticism of elite colleges, as I have shown in the previous chapter, has been growing more vocal in recent years.

For my purposes in this chapter, the Bruni-Stanford hoax is particularly important because it reveals the representational dilemma elite colleges and universities face: The eliteness of elite institutions such as Harvard, Yale, or Princeton is arguably their most important asset; their continued success depends largely on the reputation and prestige their elite status generates. It is thus reasonable to expect them to communicate their eliteness—conceptualized in this study as the triad of excellence/exceptionalism, exclusivity/selectivity, and power/leadership—to their respective audiences. Americans, however, are simultaneously enamored with, wary of, and resentful toward their own elites and the institutions that produce them. Intellectual elites, in particular, often face a curious mixture of admiration, suspicion, and ridicule. The hoax thus raises important questions about the processes of elite status production and about the ways in which elite colleges and universities talk about themselves and their eliteness. Which paradigms or topoi characterize their self-representation? How do they communicate their eliteness without seeming elitist? Who actually produces the institutions' eliteness in the discourse?

The previous chapter investigated the ways in which the critical sphere approaches the elite education system, and found that despite a range of substantial points of critique, this sphere ultimately re-affirms and validates the system it claims to criticize. This chapter, in turn, analyzes the discursive contributions of elite institutions themselves. What does the affirmative mode of self-representation add to the epistemology of elite education? How does it negotiate the input of the critical sphere? How do elite institutions respond to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism; how do the three categories of merit, class, and eliteness figure in these responses; and what role do form and aesthetics play in these epistemological dynamics?

In order to answer these questions, I have chosen Princeton University as a case study. Princeton is one of the most visible and well-known elite universities in the United States, positioned consistently among the top five

institutions in a variety of rankings,[1] and well-represented in cultural production and public discourse alike. For all of these reasons, Princeton lends itself as a proxy for a range of similar institutions. Historically, Princeton is a particularly interesting case because none of its Ivy League peers underwent such dramatic changes in reputation and mission: Around 1900, Princeton was seen as the most conservative and socio-economically and racially homogeneous among the Northeastern elite colleges, characterized by laxity of academic standards and country-club atmosphere. In the course of the twentieth century, however, Princeton transformed itself into a world-renowned research university with need-blind admissions and a student body that includes 42 percent American minorities[2].

Though the specifics might differ, most of the observations about Princeton I share in this chapter speak to the practices of other elite colleges as well. The self-representation of less elite institutions likewise does not necessarily differ categorically from that of Princeton and its peers, since all colleges and universities—private and public, small and large, selective and non-selective—operate within a competitive market of higher education in which applicants and their funds are fiercely contested. Much of the institutional self-representation is thus informed by the corporate logics of marketing and branding, and many of the representational paradigms—diversity, for example—can be found across the entire spectrum of higher education.

An elite university like Princeton has an array of different means of communication at its disposal, but I am interested specifically in orchestrated efforts at self-promotion and marketing, and thus in materials that are directly concerned with branding. In the following, I analyze a range of internal and external communicative channels Princeton uses in producing knowledge about itself, for instance catalogues and brochures, promotional videos, and speeches by Princeton's president, Christopher L. Eisgruber. I also include in the analysis the campus itself along with the institution's efforts at displaying it and endowing it with meaning.

Given the ambivalent position of eliteness in American culture, my initial guiding assumption was that Princeton would mobilize the markers of eliteness within a meritocratic framework of ambition, talent, and hard work.

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1 For instance, "#5 Best Colleges in America" by *Niche Rankings*; "#1 National Universities" by *US News & World Report*; "#3 America's Top Colleges" by *Forbes*.

2 Although this figure has to be taken with a grain of salt, as I have discussed in the previous chapter.

After all, for decades the ideology of the meritocracy has proven to be the primary and most effective strategy of negotiating the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, as my discussion of the progressivist social justice critiques in the previous chapter has shown. A meritocratic elite, by definition, is perceived as legitimate and deserving of its status and the advantages derived from it. A meritocratic elite can therefore seemingly exist within the framework of egalitarianism without undermining or calling into question the existence and validity of this framework. In part, this is due, to the fact that the meritocracy has appropriated the connotations of fairness and justice, and thus somehow seems egalitarian; its inherent and systemic elitism is rarely, if ever, discussed.

Interestingly, however, the self-representational materials I examined did not, as I had expected, significantly mobilize markers of academic excellence or hard work; instead, they produce a range of vignettes that share a commitment to the notions of opportunity and choice, introducing Princeton as the locus of a holistic experience that transforms mind, body, and soul. In these texts and images, a veritable excess of possibilities is imagined, rendered in a markedly affective rhetoric of passion, self-fulfillment, and love. Why is this so? And if the institution itself does not significantly articulate its own eliteness, nor legitimize its existence through the framework of merit, then who does so?

In order to make sense of this, I took a step back and situated the institutional self-representation in its larger discursive and epistemological context. The dominant paradigm that frames debates around elite educational institutions in the media is a paradigm of impossibility; journalists writing about elite education seem to agree that for a host of reasons it is all but impossible to gain access to top tier colleges. Aimed at disputing this dominant paradigm, the self-representational materials can ultimately be conceived as a form of counter-discourse. While the media landscape marks elite education with the notion of impossibility, the institutions themselves respond by emphasizing endless opportunities and choice. The dynamics of im/possibility thus proved to be a productive lens through which to explore the different dimensions of meaning making at work in the context of Princeton's self-representation. A second way in which the institutional self-description responds to pervasive characterizations in the media is through emphasizing the nodal points of passion, fun, and community. While critics and commentators often stress the almost pathological nature of the admissions process and the hyper-competitive and cutthroat atmosphere on elite campuses, the schools

themselves foreground the wholesomeness of the educational experience they offer.

My main line of argumentation in this chapter is that the tension between elitism and egalitarianism is not the only issue Princeton has to address in its self-representation. The institution's auto-epistemic propositions, I suggest, are complicated by the fact that an elite college in the twenty-first century has to be the proverbial many things to many people. Different types of eliteness—academic, social, financial, cultural—have to be mobilized in order to reach a heterogeneous group of prospective students and donors, while at the same time catering to the college's alumni base, and communicating to a larger public its commitment to equality of opportunity and upward mobility. To put it bluntly, an institution like Princeton has to speak to the lower-class physics genius from the Midwest, the black basketball star from Alabama, the potential big donor from Silicon Valley, and the third-generation alumnus from Connecticut alike. On the basis of my readings, I argue that Princeton engages in this epistemological balancing act by creating the notion of a meritocracy of affect, an incentive structure based on passion and opportunity rather than hard work and sacrifice. This meritocracy of affect represents a curious amalgamation of the humanistic and neoliberal modes of eliteness discussed in the previous chapter, and it is embedded in and sustained by three epistemological frames that determine Princeton's self-representation: diversity, community, and the notion of the good life. Class, I contend, is conceptualized as an identity marker similar to race, and thus addressed primarily through the diversity paradigm. Merit is no longer framed in the liberal language of hard work, self-discipline, and sacrifice, but instead seen as an expression of passion, excitement, and self-fulfillment. Eliteness, finally, is envisioned as a classless and holistic category in the humanist tradition—reflecting the paradigm articulated in the critical sphere. Without explicitly acknowledging it, the trope of community building revolves around the notion of eliteness—the exclusivity, excellence, and proximity to power that defines the elite community. All of these epistemological practices are underpinned and stabilized by a range of formal features: imagery, spatial compositions, and rhetorical figures that together create a quasi-mythological attachment to the place and the institution.

In the following, I begin by discussing the epistemological context of Princeton's self-representational efforts: the media discourse on elite education, which is structured around the nodal points of impossibility and pathology. I argue that this context creates an ambivalent communicative

situation for elite institutions, since they benefit from the incessant dramatization of their own eliteness, but at the same time have to respond to the concerns and criticism voiced in the debates. In the second section I outline Princeton's response to this dilemma, which I call the 'meritocracy of affect'—a modulation of the traditional meritocracy of effort that emphasizes the notions of passion and choice. In the third and final section, I address the three epistemological frames of diversity, the good life, and community, along with some of the ruptures that destabilize these frames.

2. Elite College Admissions: A Discourse of Impossibility and Pathology

As the previous chapter has shown, there is widespread agreement among scholars, pundits, and commentators alike that a college education has become all but indispensable in the United States in order to enter into or remain in the middle or upper middle classes. While this is the case in other post-industrial democracies, the American educational landscape is particularly complex and more heterogeneous than elsewhere, as Bok explains: "Higher education in the United States has become a vast enterprise comprising some 4,500 different colleges and universities, more than 20 million students, 1.4 million faculty members, and aggregate annual expenditures exceeding 400 billion dollars" (9). In the course of the twentieth century, the system has turned into a highly competitive marketplace, with actual and ascribed quality varying greatly. Given the range, diversity, and sheer numbers of institutions—private and public, research universities, liberal arts colleges, professional schools, community colleges, junior colleges, and for-profit colleges—those institutions that carry the moniker 'elite' by virtue of their selectivity constitute but an extremely small piece of the higher education pie. These relatively few institutions are highly overrepresented in the discourse, however, dominating media coverage, fictional treatment, and scholarship.

By definition, elite colleges and universities have always been marked by exclusivity, and thus, for most Americans, by impossibility. It was not always acceptance rates and test scores, however, that signified this exclusivity: For much of its long history, the Ivy League, along with its peer institutions, practiced exclusion on the grounds of religion, race, and gender, and the exclusivity of these institutions was signified by the homogeneity of their student

bodies. Unlike in recent decades, elite colleges at the turn of the century were not expected to create upward mobility or to promote equality of opportunity. On the contrary, it was widely accepted that Harvard, Yale, and similar institutions catered primarily to the affluent families of the Eastern seaboard. It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that the notion of elite colleges as 'great equalizers' gained any kind of currency. Not coincidentally, this was also the time during which the concept of the meritocracy was imported from Britain, initiating a paradigm shift in the professed rationale behind elite college admissions.

As Lemann explains in detail in *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (1999), standardized testing techniques had entered the scene a few decades earlier and promised to make possible a fair and comprehensive way to structure society and assign each individual their rightful place in accordance with their aptitude and achievements. It is interesting to note, however, that the uncertainty as to the validity and reliability of the test results is reflected not only in the criticism standardized testing continues to face, but also in the changing meanings of the acronym of its most famous representative: When it was introduced in 1926, the letters 'SAT" referred to the "Scholastic Aptitude Test," a label suggesting that it measured and rewarded innate abilities. In the course of the following decades, the question whether this was actually the case was raised time and again, and calls to move away from essentialist conceptualizations of merit toward those that privilege hard work and dedication were voiced with increasing frequency. In 1990, finally, the test was renamed "Scholastic Assessment Test," changing the focus from the abilities of the test taker to the process of evaluation itself. The commission in charge of the name change argued that a "test that integrates measures of achievement as well as developed ability can no longer be accurately described as a test of aptitude" ("SAT: An Acronym"). In 1997, however, the College Board—the institution responsible for developing and administering the test—announced that the moniker SAT "is not an initialism; it does not stand for anything" (quoted in Applebome); a spokesman for the organization insisted that "The SAT is the SAT, and that's all it is" (ibid.). The name change demonstrates impressively the lack of agreement as to what exactly standardized tests are supposed to measure. Diane Ravitch argues that the College Board evades this important issue by insisting that the initials do not stand for anything: "They don't want to refer to aptitude, and calling it the Scholastic Assessment Test is like calling it the Scholastic Test Test, because

that's what an assessment is […] rather than dealing with the dilemma of what the test is, they're just saying, 'Call us the SAT'" (quoted in Applebome).

In any case, the admissions policies of elite colleges did indeed begin to change: Beginning in the late 1960s, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton went co-ed, started admitting people of color, abolished the semi-official quotas on Jewish students, and, gradually, introduced need-blind admissions. With increasing openness came increasing numbers of applications and, thus, increasing competition over the few desirable seats at the elite table. The 'common application', introduced in 2007, further exacerbated this process by allowing prospective students to use the same software for all of their applications, making it much easier and less time-consuming (if still expensive) to apply to a greater number of schools.

On the one hand, elite college admissions policies during the second half of the twentieth century have thus been marked by an increasing democratization: Previously excluded groups of applicants now have a chance of being admitted, and the process of applying has been made easier and more affordable. On the other hand, the number of available spots in each entering class has not grown by the same measure as the applicant pool, and the overall number of applications has almost doubled in the past ten years, so the competition has increased dramatically. It is thus not surprising that despite the democratization of elite admissions, the current discursive climate surrounding elite education is marked by a pervasive sense of impossibility. A selection of headlines from articles in a number of major national news outlets—*The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Huffington Post*, *Slate*, *The Atlantic*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Forbes Magazine*—demonstrates the pervasive anxiety surrounding elite education: "Greater Competition for College Places Means Higher Anxiety, Too" (Hartocollis); "College Admissions Anxiety: Teens Share Their Stories" (n.a.); "Best, Brightest and Rejected: Elite Colleges Turn Away Up To 95%" (Pérez-Peña); "Getting into an elite US university is harder than it's ever been in history" (Wang); "College Admissions Rates Drop for the Class of 2015" (n.a.); "The Thin Envelope: Why College Admissions Has Become Unpredictable" (Menand); "The Absurdity of College Admissions" (Wong); "Getting In: The Social Logic of Ivy League Admissions" (Gladwell); "The Cost of College: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow" (Patton); "The Real College Barrier for Working-Poor Families" (Goldrick-Rab); "Can You Avoid Majoring in Debt?" (Taylor); "College Debt Hits Well-Off" (Simon and Barry).

The headlines indicate two major nodal points that structure the discourse of impossibility: money and access. In the case of the former, impossibility

is linked to unaffordability due to staggering tuitions and the resulting issue of student debt. The second and arguably more important nodal point is linked to the dynamics of admission and exclusion: who gets in, who does not, and why. Here, the impossibility is attributed to the hypercompetitive and largely intransparent nature of the admissions process, a result of the scarcity of spots and the increase in applications. The popular discourse on elite education, then, is characterized by an anxiety-inducing message: College education is more important than ever; it is extremely important to get into a specific college; it is impossible to get in that college. An important additional player in this discourse of impossibility is the ranking industry, first and foremost *US News & World Report*, which includes the acceptance rate as a major factor in their tables. These numbers assume an almost "fetishistic appeal" (Peck) in the discourse, even though their diagnostic value is, in fact, fiercely contested.

In addition to the notion of impossibility, media descriptions of elite colleges also mobilize the topos of pathology. The admissions process, with its many demands and general unpredictability, causes extreme levels of anxiety among students, articles suggest: "Pressure to be accepted into elite colleges is crushing our kids," reads one headline (Leiken); "Anxious Students Strain College Health Centers," cautions another (Hoffmann); "Kids of Helicopter Parents Are Spluttering out," admonishes a third (Lythcott-Haims). The pressure and its psychological reverberations do not cease upon admission, moreover, but continue to shape the experience of students at elite colleges—at least according to news media. *The New York Times*, for instance, reports on "Suicide on Campus and the Pressure of Perfection" (Scelfo), *The Boston Globe*, likewise discussing suicidal behavior on elite campuses, points out that "MIT eases workload, offers support after recent suicides" (Krantz and Rocheleau). Students are dangerously overworked, these and similar articles argue, "pull[ing] all-nighters" and "struggling under a weekly wave of problem sets" and other homework (ibid.). Loneliness and depression are a recurring topic in articles on elite colleges, as for instance in an article published in *The Crimson*, which details the so-called "Harvard Condition," defined as "the appearance of normalcy but the reality of distress" (Klein). Several students struggling with "the loneliness, the melancholy, the disinterest" of the elite educational space are profiled; the author argues that "[w]hen high achievers are plopped en masse into a pressure cooker, some are bound to melt" (ibid.). One student describes the emergence of her depression as follows: "The competitive nature of the school made me think that I wasn't doing enough, and wasn't

evolved enough, and wasn't achieving enough, and wasn't getting high enough grades, […]. All that kind of wore on me, and my mental state deteriorated over time" (quoted in Klein). Another Harvard student likewise acknowledges the problematic ramifications of Harvard's competitive climate: "Harvard students are obsessed with success—that plushy consulting job after graduation, that prestigious fellowship, that elite medical or law school—and our focus on goals, more often than not, turns us into petty, Machiavellian creatures" (Araya). Public discourse around elite education thus emphasizes the pathological undertones of the elite college experience.

This overview of the media discourse on elite education, however brief, allows for some reflections on the interplay of impossibility, pathology, and eliteness. The framework of impossibility is neither fatalistic nor revolutionary, but firmly reformist. Its demands mirror those raised by Golden, Soares, and Stevens: The expressed desire of almost all voices within this discourse is to make elite institutions conform to the imperatives of fairness and equal opportunity. The ultimate goal of these interventions is for the student bodies at elite universities to reflect the composition of American society at large with regard to gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Like the progressivist social justice arguments discussed in the previous chapter, the framework of impossibility is informed by an unwavering commitment to the ideal of the meritocracy.

While the studies on admission and exclusion exhibited what I called the 'merit fallacy', a similar fallacy characterizes the discussion of the pathological reverberations of elite education. The implementation of meritocratic structures caused a democratization of elite admissions politics, but at the same time steered the attribution of blame toward the individual. Those who fail—to get in, to withstand the pressures of the elite environment, to succeed—carry the burden of meritocracy. To be sure, reforming the system would help to alleviate the most detrimental effects of the admissions mania, but its effects would be limited. The overburdening of the individual is written into the very structure of the meritocracy, after all.

The discourse critiques the impossibility, but does not challenge the system that produces the structures of impossibility to begin with. Instead, impossibility is seen as that which can and should be made possible, through reform, through subtle modulation of the dynamics at hand. In a dynamic that mirrors the jeremiadic tendencies described in the previous chapter, the ostensibly critical discourse of impossibility in fact contributes significantly to the production of elite status by reiterating over and over again the exclusivity, the categorical otherness, and the socio-cultural importance of elite

institutions. At the same time, however, the impossible strain put upon students involved in the elite educational system is said to lead to illness and pathology. Depression and anxiety, it often seems, are the price to pay to become and stay part of the elite.

Who benefits from this discursive paradigm? The emphasis on impossibility fuels the 'application support industry' I have discussed in the previous chapter: the sum of books, courses, tutors, and essay-ready summer programs that promise to increase the likelihood of admission. This industry has an obvious interest in keeping the admissions process as intransparent and unpredictable as possible, so as to keep families spending money in their attempt to navigate the system. In addition to these economic interests, however, the rhetoric of impossibility and pathology also informs the ways in which elite colleges can and do talk about themselves. Since the media discourse relentlessly re-emphasizes the eliteness—the exclusivity, the importance, the influence—of elite colleges, the institutions themselves are free to democratize their self-descriptions and focus on the pleasures of the elite educational experience. The resulting paradigm of self-representation, which I call the meritocracy of affect, is the subject of the next section of this chapter.

3. A Meritocracy of Affect

In the winter of 1746, ten young men convened in Reverend Jonathan Dickinson's parlor in Elizabeth, NJ to study and attend classes together. They were the first students enrolled in the College of New Jersey, founded in that same year to further "the Education of Youth in the Learned Languages and in the Liberal Arts and Sciences," as the charter granted by the Province of New Jersey, in the name of King George II, put it. A few years later, in 1756, the college moved southwest to Princeton and into its new quarters, Nassau Hall. For half a century, Nassau Hall housed the college in its entirety, and it is still one of its most recognizable and beloved landmark buildings. In 1896, during its sesquicentennial, the College of New Jersey expanded its program to gain full university status and renamed itself 'Princeton'. At this time, the institution also adopted its unofficial motto, "Princeton in the nation's service

and in service to all nations,"[3] which was inspired by a commemorative address delivered by Woodrow Wilson, then still a faculty member, but soon to be Princeton's president, and, later still, the nation's.

This brief historical overview can be found on the institution's official website, under the header "Princeton History at a Glance." The article is augmented by some observations on the university's "tradition of educational excellence," and mentions the year Princeton went coeducational (1969); it also addresses one of Princeton's most attractive and unique features, namely the fact that it is simultaneously a small college devoted to undergraduate education and one of the nation's leading research universities. This self-description is characterized by a number of obvious and important blind spots. There is no mention of the racial and religious discrimination practiced at Princeton for much of its long history, as outlined compellingly in Karabel's *The Chosen*, nor of the debates about deteriorating academic standards at the turn of the century and beyond—Scott Fitzgerald's famous diagnosis of Princeton as 'the pleasantest country club in America' does seem to contradict or at least challenge the notion of a 'tradition of educational excellence'. If one keeps looking, however, there is some official information on these problematic parts of Princeton's institutional history as well. The *Mudd Manuscript Library Blog*, for instance, features articles on the history of African American and Jewish students at Princeton[4], and even though these are phrased very cautiously and, at times, uncritically or euphemistically, this does testify to Princeton's—albeit selective—efforts at coming to terms with the less commendable parts of its past.

The information available on the website is complemented by a number of book publications that I interpret as officially sanctioned since they were written by Princeton graduates or professors and are sold at the official university store. Among the most recent is *Princeton: America's Campus* (2012), an architectural history written by W. Barksdale Maynard, who received his B.A. from Princeton in 1988 and now works as a lecturer at the art history department. Maynard points out that it is not easy "[t]o tell the story of this campus" (2012: 9), and he is right: Its "complex tale" (ibid.) does not only span almost

3 This was changed in 2016 in the aftermath of the debate about Woodrow Wilson's legacy at Princeton; the new informal motto now reads "Princeton in the nation's service and in service to humanity."

4 April C. Armstrong's "Dear Mr. Mudd: Who Was Princeton's First Jewish Student?" (2016) and "African Americans and Princeton University" (2015).

three hundred years of history, but involves countless actors—architects and builders, administrators and professors, alumni and trustees, and the thousands of students whose lives shaped the place. While it would thus not be productive or feasible to trace the historical development of the Princeton campus in any great detail, it is instructive to consider Maynard's discussion of the "series of identities" Princeton underwent in the course of its history:

> Over more than 260 years, the university has passed through a series of identities, each leaving their trace on the campus. At first, it was the staunchest of the Puritan colleges in America, bastion of "New Light," what we would today call evangelical Christianity. Then a famed School for Statesmen in the Revolutionary period. In the early nineteenth century, a training ground for gentleman farmers, clergy, and professional men from North and South alike. In the Gilded Age, "the pleasantest country club in America" and haunt of millionaire's sons, a flavor perfectly captured in Fitzgerald's novel. Up to the Vietnam War, the most conservative and blue-blooded of elite universities. […] Since coeducation, all has changed profoundly. Striving to redress old social wrongs, Princeton has rubbed away many quirks and eccentricities, and its outlook has come to more or less resemble its major rivals Harvard and Yale. Its demographics no longer recall a country club grillroom but rather the lobby of the United Nations. It aims for excellence and has earned a world-class reputation. (Maynard 2012: 2-3)

This paragraph can serve as a typical example of the kind of progressivist success story that is so often told about elite universities. The underlying assumption is that an institution passes through a series of distinct phases, which can then in retrospect be interpreted as individualizable parts of a grand narrative of obstacles overcome and goals achieved. The rhetoric of this passage is striking. The phrase 'quirks and eccentricities', for instance, certainly does not adequately capture the long history of racism, sexism, and religious discrimination practiced at Princeton; in a similar vein, describing the historical Princeton as 'conservative and blue-blooded' is as euphemistic as it is misleading. These problematic aspects notwithstanding, Maynard's brief synopsis demonstrates the multiplicity of narratives written into the campus, prompting us to take a closer look at some of the meanings inherent in the physical fabric of the university—to decode the palimpsest of the campus landscape.

Knowledge production at Princeton about Princeton serves a number of different purposes, and addresses various audiences by means of a range of

epistemological channels and practices. Much of this happens in the mode of publicity and marketing, through strategic communication between the university and the public via advertising and other promotional materials. The resulting economy of prestige relies on what sociologist Thorstein Veblen already a century ago had identified as "marketable illusions" (130). In *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (1918), his provocative critique of the collegiate landscape in the early twentieth century, Veblen discussed universities' increasing need for "a due and creditable publicity" (129). The "efficient salesman," he argued, manages to add to his actual marketable goods "an immaterial increment of 'prestige value'" (ibid.), and thus increases the overall success of his business. The main issue for Veblen is that in the context of the university, "[t]he gain which so accrues […] from such an accession of popular illusions is a differential gain in competition with rival seats of learning, not a gain to the republic of learning or to the academic community at large" (139). No matter how successful, publicity and its attendant illusions thus belong to the realm of the competitive market and not to that of the advancement of knowledge. Veblen's complaint, then, is directed at the disproportionate amount of resources invested in matters of marketing, because they detract from the real purpose of the university, which is to provide a space for scholars and the production of knowledge. Even though Veblen wrote *Higher Learning in America* a century ago, many of his observations still hold true today; universities in the early twenty-first century are much more preoccupied with the production of 'marketable illusions' than they were in Veblen's time. Since a number of important developments, technological and otherwise, have taken place since then, however, it is necessarily to briefly historicize Princeton's self-representational practices.

The landscape of higher education in the United States as such changed profoundly in the course of the twentieth century. Veblen was writing at the end of what economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz have called "the formative period of America's higher education industry, when its modern form took shape" (37), namely the two to three decades following 1890. During this period, Goldin and Katz explain, the American research university and the public sector flourished, expanding enrollments and widening the scope of higher education in the United States. Still, in the early years of the twentieth century, college choice was very much determined by region and class, and the competition Princeton faced was comparatively low. All in all, around 240,000 students were enrolled in institutions of higher education in 1900 ("Education Summary"). At the beginning of the twenty-first century,

by contrast, close to fifteen million students are enrolled in more than four thousand colleges in the United States; even if one just takes private four-year-institutions into account, Princeton is one among 1,845. This does not mean that Princeton competes directly with all of these institutions; the pool of immediate competitors is much smaller, including perhaps around eighty institutions (those listed as "most competitive" in *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*). Princeton is thus part of a highly competitive marketplace in which colleges and universities compete for students, funding, and recognition. The resulting prestige economy is an important factor in Princeton's self-representation.

Technological developments, moreover, are among the most important changes informing the ways in which colleges are able to talk about themselves. Princeton now has a host of digital tools at its disposal that were unthinkable during Veblen's days—the university uses a range of social media platforms as well as Youtube and its regular website. These technological advancements have had a decisive impact on how Princeton is able to present itself and engage with an interested public. For one thing, the institution's self-representation is much more flexible, frequent, and interactive. The visual dimension, moreover, plays a markedly more pronounced role; as countless images on Instagram and Facebook demonstrate, for instance, Princeton is able to capitalize on the physical beauty of its campus in new and productive ways.

This brings us to a third change that distinguishes the early twenty-first century from Veblen's time: the pervasive influence of a number of economic, political, ideological, and cultural forces commonly subsumed under the header of neoliberalism. As we will see shortly, much of what sociologists Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski have memorably called 'the new spirit of capitalism' in their eponymous book is visible in the self-representation of Princeton University (*The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 1999). We shall also see, however, that Princeton's auto-epistemic efforts are not purely in line with neoliberal imperatives but instead present us with a conglomerate of liberal-humanist notions infused by neoliberal thinking.

Princeton's self-representation, then, is affected by its position in the competitive market of higher education, structured by technological innovation, and informed by the totalizing structures of neoliberalism. From these factors, a number of communicative objectives can be deduced: The first is to sell a product, namely a spot in the freshman class, by creating an attractive brand and encouraging as many people as possible to apply. In this

context, the materials employ the language of marketing and advertising, for instance by positioning the potential applicant as active agent and emphasizing the notions of choice and opportunity: "At Princeton, you have the freedom to explore your intellectual interests and follow your passions" (*Experience Princeton* 4). The second objective is to bind people to the institution, to inspire loyalty and create lasting relationships that generate long-term funding. Here, the institution relies on the register of civil religion to create an affective relationship between its students and their alma mater. This is not only actualized through language—the persistent use of a collective 'we', the notion of a complete transformation through the Princeton experience, etc.—but also supported by ritual practices, such as the annual progression across campus during Reunion Weekend. A third objective informs both of these epistemological endeavors, namely the legitimation of Princeton's own existence in the overall socio-cultural and political landscape of the United States. In this context, the materials draw on the rhetoric of diversity and social justice, for instance by including a disproportionately large number of minority students. These three objectives are reflected in the epistemological frames I discuss in the following section of this chapter—the diversity paradigm, the notion of the good life, and the trope of community building.

The primary addressees of these materials are prospective applicants and their families, but they also speak to current students and alumni, as well as to and for American society as a whole—institutions such as Harvard, Stanford, or MIT enjoy international reputations of excellence, after all. Stephanie Kim, writing about the South Korean "fad" of getting into US elite colleges, points out that an "Ivy League education certainly carries a global brand." These institutions, among "the most successful and singularly American brands" (Cappello 11), thus serve as globally legible symbols of American exceptionalism.

Among the most important of these channels are official brochures, available in both print and online versions; a youtube account featuring a variety of promotional videos; an Instagram account showcasing photos of the campus as well as encouraging users to post photos using the hashtag #princetagram; and the official website. In addition to these materials, I also consider the speeches of President Eisgruber as examples of intra-community knowledge production, as well as the meanings created and transported by the campus space itself and its staging during official campus tours. Most of these materials are produced or coordinated by the Office of Communications, which, according to its mission statement, is charged with the task of "promot[ing] and protect[ing] Princeton University's reputation of excellence" ("About Us").

In the process of telling "Princeton's story to a wide range of audiences around the world," the Office of Communications names four central priorities: the exceptional scholarship and teaching of Princeton's faculty; the university's diversity, "with special attention to our unparalleled commitment to affordability through financial aid" (ibid.); the university's international role, and the work of President Eisgruber.

In all of the processes, I propose, Princeton has to navigate a number of tensions. First, it has to cater to different types of eliteness—social, cultural, financial, and intellectual—not all of which are entirely compatible. Second, the media discourse of impossibility and pathology described above creates an ambiguous communicative situation for elite institutions. On the one hand, they profit from the relentless dramatization of their own eliteness; after all, their unattainability is widely regarded as evidence of excellence and distinction. On the other hand, this unattainability has to be perceived as malleable enough to merit applying—elite colleges would suffer financially and otherwise if a critical mass of students was to stop from doing so. Not only would they then be faced with a smaller pool of qualified applicants to choose from, but, more importantly, one of the major signifiers of eliteness would lose potency: the admissions rate, which serves as an indicator of exclusivity and, accordingly, of desirability. Parents, moreover, might be hesitant to send their children to an environment perceived as fostering loneliness, depression, and anxiety due to its hyper-competitive, hyper-demanding nature. In its self-representation, Princeton has to navigate these various tensions, and it does so, I argue, by generating what I want to call a 'meritocracy of affect'.

Modulations of the Meritocracy: From Effort to Affect

Experience Princeton, the university's primary promotional brochure, features several instances of the conventional meritocratic narrative, which I call the 'meritocracy of effort'. One example, from the section "Student Stories," in which current students describe their reasons for choosing the college, encapsulates this perfectly. Chance Fletcher, a sophomore from Oklahoma, explains his unlikely path to Princeton:

> I never really thought about attending college outside Oklahoma. I'm from a small town, and many students from my high school don't go on to college. In high school, I was lucky to have opportunities that opened my eyes to schools like Princeton. The summer before my junior year, I attended the

> LEADership, Education and Development (LEAD) summer program at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College. I then become involved with QuestBridge, a nonprofit organization that guides low-income students through the college admission process. I was admitted to Princeton as a QuestBridge Scholar. I also received a lot of support from my community. I'm a member of the Cherokee Nation, and my tribal councilor is a key reason why I am at Princeton. […] I was in student government in high school and am now president of the sophomore class. I'm also social chair of the Pre-Law Society, a fellow in the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, a member of the College Republicans, and one of the founders of the Native Americans at Princetons student organization. One of my favorite classes so far has been 'Introduction to American Studies'. I enjoyed debating the idea of the 'American Dream' with classmates. I'm a poor kid who went to Princeton and became class president. I'm living my American dream. (23)

Chance Fletcher's narrative includes most of the staples of the meritocracy of effort: the general trajectory of upward mobility, a nod to the diversity paradigm, a reference to the mechanisms that ensure the meritocracy is fully functioning (programs like QuestBridge), involvement in organizations, leadership skills, and a little bit of luck and humility. The only thing missing is test scores and grades, though these credentials seem implied in the general success narrative.

While these vignettes of the meritocracy of effort still play an important role in Princeton's self-representation, a range of crucial changes to key elements of this meritocracy become apparent when taking into account the whole of *Experience Princeton* and other materials. The traditional meritocracy is a system in which the individual proves herself—her talent, her abilities, her ambition—through a number of standardized tests and other rituals of distinction, to then be admitted to the next level and rewarded with certain advantages, such as a superior and more prestigious learning environment like Princeton. The meritocracy is a hierarchical system, shaped like a pyramid, and determined by competition; each contestant has to beat a number of other contestants to advance to the next level. The decision-making powers in these processes lie in the hands of the agents governing the system, not with the students themselves.

The Princetonian self-description differs from this blueprint in important ways. The neoliberal modulation of the meritocracy of effort creates what I call

a meritocracy of affect, which is informed, in part, by the cultural imperatives discussed by sociologists Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski in their seminal work *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999/2006). Boltanski and Chiapello describe the "profound transformation in the spirit of capitalism over the last thirty years" (57) by reading an assorted collection of management literature from the 1960s and the 1990s. The texts from the latter period, they argue, create a "new managerial norm" by criticizing, explicitly and implicitly, the ideological features of mid-century capitalism, specifically "large, hierarchized, planned organizations" (64). They do so by incorporating some of the main points of contention raised in the artistic and social critique of the 1960s and '70s, for instance the "demands for authenticity and freedom" (97). Among the most important changes Boltanski and Chiapello discuss is the "transition from control to self-control" (81), an "obsession with flexibility" (84), the primacy of the network metaphor (ibid.), and an insistence on the value of creativity, intuition, and visionary thinking (78).

Boltanski and Chiapello describe how the new spirit of capitalism extracted some of the core themes of the "oppositional writings of the 1970s," decontextualized and detached them from their original critical trajectories, and employed them in the name of neo-management:

> [T]he qualities that are guarantees of success in this new spirit—autonomy, spontaneity, rhizomorphous capacity, multitasking (in contrast to the narrow specialization of the old division of labour), conviviality, openness to others and to novelty, availability, creativity, visionary intuition, sensitivity to differences, listening to lived experience and receptiveness to a whole range of experiences, being attracted to informality and the search for interpersonal contacts—these are taken directly from the repertoire of May 1968. (97)

As we will see below, these motifs and imperatives occur in Princeton's self-description as well. The ideology of the meritocracy, this demonstrates, is flexible enough to adapt in subtle and not-so-subtle ways whenever its legitimatory basis is in danger—changes may occur in the conceptualization of its central category, merit; in the emphasis on or downplay of certain cultural norms; or in the overall affective or aesthetic framing of the meritocratic structures. The interplay between effort and affect can be traced to different speaking positions within the materials. Whenever current or former students talk about Princeton, they tend to frame their experiences in the mode of the traditional meritocracy of effort. They list the various activities in which they engage,

for instance, or name honors they have received. When the university itself speaks, however, there is a strong emphasis on passion and choice. As I show in more detail below, the (neoliberal) modulation of the meritocracy includes the notion of the student as agent/customer, the absence of competition, an insistence on love and passion as guiding principles, and the promise of limitless opportunity. In all of these cultural scripts, affect outranks effort, and there is a continuous projection of ease and pleasure.

Let me outline the amalgamation of these two models in a little more detail. First of all, *Experience Princeton* introduces the students, rather than the university, as agents. On the first pages, a box titled "Why I Picked Princeton" features two students explaining their decision to attend, both beginning with "I picked Princeton because […]" (2). This subtly puts the student in the position of the customer who, with a number of choices at her disposal, makes an informed decision based on her interests and desires. The student-as-customer trope is a common occurrence in neoliberal discourse on education, as Marnie Holborow explains:

> The identification between what was a traditional customer in receipt of a good in exchange for money and a student in a learning institution is a metaphor redolent with ideology. It evokes superficially positive factors, in this case of putting the student first and responding to what he or she might want. But the terms of reference that the metaphor evokes are patently false. (61)

She argues that the customer metaphor does not accurately describe the "rounded experience of teaching and learning," since education as such cannot be bought or sold, but requires the effort and engagement of the student. Instead, the metaphor mirrors "new funding mechanisms which have increasingly been displaced from the institution to the individual student" (61). Under the guise of valuing agency and choice, then, the student-as-customer reflects the pernicious dismantling of the educational system in the era of neoliberalism.

The trope of the student as agent/customer moreover explains another crucial difference between the meritocracy of effort and Princeton's self-representation: the utter absence of the notion of competition. The brochure does not mobilize this notion at all, neither in explaining why students got into Princeton nor in detailing what they do once they are there. The 2015 version of *Experience Princeton* included as its first page a stylishly designed numeri-

cal overview of a variety of facets of the Princeton experience, including the following information:

> The undergraduate population is approximately 5,250.
>
> Students from nearly 100 countries outside of the U.S. make up 11% of undergraduates.
>
> Princeton's financial aid comes in the form of grants that do not need to be repaid. Because students are not required to take out loans, 83% of recent seniors graduate debt free. Those who chose to borrow graduates with an average debt of $6,600.
>
> The Princeton University Library has more than 8 million books in 10 buildings across campus.
>
> 42% of undergraduates are Americans of color.
>
> Students may chose from 36 majors and 50 interdisciplinary certificate programs.
>
> The student-to-faculty ratio is 6-to-1.
>
> Princeton's International Internship Program offers summer internships in approximately 60 countries.
>
> 98% of undergraduates live on campus.
>
> Students participate in 300+ student organizations.
>
> About 60% of students receive financial aid. The average annual grant for aid students admitted to the Class of 2019 is en estimated $46,350. (1)

The nodal points around which this self-description revolves are diversity, opportunity and choice, and the quality of the educational experience. The admissions rate, a strong signifier of the intense competition generated by the admissions politics of elite educational institutions, is conspicuously absent from this description. Princeton does not present itself as a place where everyone tries to outdo everyone else, but rather as one that encourages the

productive collaboration of all its inhabitants in a variety of exciting projects and endeavors. The student body is not conceptualized along the lines of a hierarchical composition, but as a community of equals who are united in their common identity as Princetonians. The absence of competition is in line with the metaphor of the student as customer, which, as Holborow points out, is "not naïve. 'Customer' equalizes everyone; applying it beyond those involved in a purely commercial transaction to other groups of people distorts social relations and effaces social power. The oppressive state of affairs [...] is blithely smoothed away in the customer designation" (64). This insistence on internal cohesion and equality is in notable contrast to the image of elite education created in the media discourse.

Another dominant motif in Princeton's self-description, and particularly of those parts in which the university itself speaks, is the notion of love and passion for one's work. The Office of the Dean of the College urges the students to "[s]tudy what you love, take advantage of the opportunities around you and find help when you need it" (16), thus connecting the notion of the possible to that of passion, which the brochure likewise emphasizes. The affective framework of conceptualizing the college experience is actualized when students are asked to "follow your passions" (6) and "discover new passions" (10); when the brochure tells us that students choose their senior thesis topic "based on their passions" (16) or when one students explains that his "passion is in public and global health" (23) and another that she is "passionate about programming and cryptography" (18). Princeton professors, too, "have a passion for teaching" (14), and coaches support student athletes in pursuing "other passions" (35) beyond sports. A second brochure, focusing on undergraduate research at Princeton, even marks this emphasis in its title, *Pursue Your Passion*, and tells the reader to "[s]tart with curiosity. Study what you love. Make something happen. The process of learning is for you to explore." Passion is at the heart of what Princeton conceptualizes as the ideal student, as another brochure points out: "You may be a good candidate for Princeton if your pursue everything you do with equal passion" (12).

This rhetoric of love and passion is complemented by a poetics of limitlessness that revolves around the nodal points 'opportunity' and 'choice'. The second section of *Experience Princeton*, for instance, is titled "Freedom to Explore," and explains that "[a]t Princeton, you have the freedom to explore your intellectual interests and follow your passions" (*Admissions Viewbook* 4). Students are furthermore "encouraged to explore many academic and extracurricular opportunities" (4), a "multitude of international opportunities"

(6), "unrivaled opportunities" (20), "ample opportunities" (22), "many opportunities" (34), "new opportunities" (32), and "endless opportunities" (35). In terms of academics, the brochure explains that students "can choose from among 37 concentrations" (7) and "can choose from among 53 certificates of proficiency" (9), but the individual choice seems almost secondary, since "[a]ny field you choose will teach you to think critically, solve problems, express yourself clearly" (6). Students can choose where they want to live, where they want to eat, which clubs they want to join; in short, they can "choose from a multitude of experiences" (37)

The rhetorical and ideological architecture of neoliberalism is thus certainly adopted, but only partially. While vocabulary from the semantic field of 'creativity'—as described by Boltanski and Chiapello above—is frequently used (choice, freedom, flexibility, multiplicity, etc.), the materials eschew the language of corporate business, which is such an important part of the culture of neoliberalism: competition, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, supply and demand, etc. Princeton's self-representation creates a new paradigm of elite education that merges traditional, liberal-humanistic notions of learning and self-fulfillment with the neoliberal frames and scripts described by Boltanski and Chiapello. This new paradigm, I want to suggest, reflects Princeton's knowledge of its core audience: members of the upper and upper middle class, who value achievement and financial success, but at the same time betray a strong nostalgic penchant for college as a haven of learning and self-fulfillment in the tradition of liberal humanism.

4. Epistemological Frames: Diversity, the Good Life, Community

The meritocracy of affect is embedded in and bolstered by three different epistemological frames that further mark and inform Princeton's self-representation: the diversity paradigm, the notion of the good life, and the trope of community. These frames help to situate and actualize the meritocracy of affect, and alleviate the tension between elitism and egalitarianism. The three categories that form the core interest of my book—merit, class, and eliteness—are negotiated in particularly interesting ways in the context of these frames. Meritoriousness is the central implication of the diversity paradigm, but it is rarely made explicit; class or, more specifically, upper-classness is the central implication of the notion of the good life, but it is translated into a certain aesthetic and spatial experience; and eliteness, finally, is the central

implication of the trope of community—it is an elite community, after all, marked by exclusivity, excellence, and power—even though it is not explicitly articulated as such. The epistemological frames thus allow for the communication of different types of eliteness: academic eliteness in the context of the diversity paradigm, economic eliteness through the notion of the good life, and, finally, social eliteness in the frame of elite community building. In the following, I discuss all of these dynamics in more detail.

There are important ruptures in this self-presentation, however, which I also want to address. For each epistemological frame, I highlight a way in which it is undermined or challenged: First, the insinuation of class diversity that the brochure and other materials create is exposed as fraudulent when one considers the findings of the Equality of Opportunity Project. Second, the notion of the good life, which is aestheticized and thus de-politicized through the campus tours and the official staging of the campus space, is exposed as problematic by one of the newest additions to that campus, Whitman Hall, and the "obscene" wealth it represents (cf. Woodhouse). The trope of community, which Eisgruber creates in his speeches, and which assumes that differences of any kind dissolve into the singular and homogeneous identity of a Princetonian, is revealed as defective by the continued debates about the legacy of Woodrow Wilson at Princeton, as my reading of the building of the Wilson School demonstrates.

Diversity

The cover of the 2001-2002 admissions brochure of the University of Wisconsin shows a group of students at a football game, appropriately clad in the red and white of their team, the Badgers. One of the students in the picture is black—Diallo Shabazz, a senior whose photo had been included in promotional materials time and again. This time, however, there was a crucial difference: Diallo had never actually been to a UW football game. University administrators had photoshopped his face into the original picture, thus manufacturing a fake image of diversity. Diallo Shabazz sued the University of Wisconsin and "asked that, in compensation, the University put aside money for *actual* diversity recruitment of minority students" (Wade). He won, and a total of ten million dollars was supposed to flow into diversity initiatives across campus—until the Governor "vetoed part of the earmark and many initiatives wore off without turnover" (ibid.).

For years, staging diversity has been a staple of college advertising. As Lisa Wade points out in an article about the Shabazz case, "we have a commodification of diversity"— racial and ethnic diversity is relatively easy to visualize and helps to sell an institution. In their attempts to capitalize on the notion of diversity, colleges—along with businesses, travel guides, and movie producers—do not shy away from fabricating what Wade calls "cosmetic diversity," even if the reality of these institutions often speaks quite a different language. In a recent paper, aptly titled "We've Got Minorities, Yes We Do: Visual Representations of Racial and Ethnic Diversity in College Recruitment Materials," a team of sociologists analyzed more than 10,000 photographs from 165 US colleges in order to assess the accuracy of the visual depiction of diversity in promotional materials. Their research shows that the institutions are "inaccurate in their symbolic representations of race and ethnicity," both in the sense of over-representing minority students in general, and in over-representing black students specifically in comparison to, for instance, students of Asian descent (278). This misrepresentation, the researchers point out, can have very real consequences for students with minority backgrounds, who may find themselves in an environment that is muss less diverse than anticipated.

The Diversity Paradigm in Princeton's Self-Representation

Princeton does not have a Photoshop scandal similar to that of the University of Wisconsin, but likewise relies heavily on the paradigm of diversity in its self-representation. A case in point is the section "Student Stories" in *Experience Princeton*, which features eight students, all of whom are marked as 'diverse' either visually (by the color of their skin), via their surnames (Hispanic, Asian, Indian), or through their own narratives. The only white student, a senior from Indiana, talks about her involvement with the LGBT center. This insistence on diversity is mirrored in the numerical presentation of facts about Princeton quoted in a previous section, which positions the national and ethnic diversity of the student body prominently, and insinuates socio-economic diversity by stating that more than half of all Princeton students receive financial aid. To showcase its commitment to diversity, Princeton furthermore created *Experience Princeton: Diverse Perspectives*, an additional publication meant to illustrate "how our community comes together:"

> Our driving philosophy is to ensure an environment where you will be comfortable and challenged. We spend many months seeking students who will

> help us build a community that is as diverse and intellectually stimulating as possible. Living and learning in such a rich cultural environment will transform your life. (1)

What is interesting about this publication is that it represents a broad understanding of diversity. In the article "Finding Her Niche," for instance, student Lily Gellman explains that she is "queer, white and Jewish, and all those inform my worldview and my politics as well" (16). The brochure includes articles focusing on race and ethnicity ("Understanding the Impact of Race on Public Education" (36); "What Does It Mean to Be Asian American?" (9); "Multicultural Organizations and Campus Centers" (12)), but there are also some engaging with religion ("Being a Muslim at Princeton" (18)), regional and national background ("Testing My Texan Beliefs" (27); "Staying Engaged on Two Continents" (31), being a woman ("Breaking the Glass Ceiling" (51)), and how to cope with disabilities ("Building Bridges Between the Deaf and Hearing Communities" (11)).

Though it is arguably one of the central goals of the diversity paradigm to present the college as an institution committed to the ideals of equality, fairness, and social justice, it is not necessarily framed in that kind of rhetoric. Instead, there is a lot of emphasis on pleasure and enjoyment, and on how diversity contributes to a pleasant educational experience. The brochures also do not explicitly state that diversity has become a crucial part of the conception of merit, even though the college clearly views a student's 'diversity factor' as an asset he or she brings to the institution. Meritoriousness, then, is a central theme in the subtext of diversity.

A particular focus of both brochures, in line with the Office of Communications' mission to highlight Princeton's financial aid policy, lies with students from low socio-economic status families. "I'm on full financial aid," explains freshman Ricardo Diaz in *Experience Princeton*, before describing his daily routine, which neatly encapsulates the twin imperatives of endless opportunities and passionate intensity: "I decided once I came here I wanted to take full advantage of what's offered. I'm involved with seven student organizations, run my own startup company, have three campus jobs and take four classes. […] Princeton has been a dream come true for me" (20). Two other current students talk about their precarious financial backgrounds: Lukas Novak describes how he thought he would never be able to go to college at all, because "the money just wasn't there"—until he received Princeton's financial aid offer (47). Daniel Sprull likewise expresses his gratitude for how Princeton allowed

him to overcome the impossibilities of his background: "My family literally couldn't pay anything for me to go to college. Not only am I here on a full aid package, but Princeton also helped me purchase a laptop, iPad and health care!" (49). Princeton's diversity brochure likewise includes a number of articles focusing on the issue of class: "How to Prepare Low-Income Students for College" (14), "Ensuring the Affordability of a Princeton Education" (20), "From Newark's Inner City to Princeton" (22), and, finally, a professor's account of her own experiences: "Professor Sandra Bermann Reflects on Her First-Generation Journey" (25).

Combined with the nodal points opportunity, possibility, and passion, which I have described above, the rhetorical and narrative mobilization of the diversity paradigm indicates a twofold commitment to core American values: The 'anything is possible' narrative, on the one hand, signifies equality of opportunity and fairness, thus creating legitimacy for the institution. On the other hand, the 'endless opportunities' narrative alludes to choice and individual freedom and thus serves as a highly effective strategy of marketing and selling a product. As counter-discourses that aim to contradict the overall discourse of impossibility, the materials are free to talk about the institutions in a quasi-egalitarian way, one that implies that they fulfill their role as engines of mobility, as 'great equalizers'. They can do so only because the markers of exclusivity needed to establish the elite status that is so important for these institutions' success are manufactured elsewhere—in the "anxiety articles" and the rankings, for instance.

Rupture: Class

The brochure also offers some statistics regarding class at Princeton: "The average grant for households with incomes up to $65,000 covers 100% of tuition, room and board," and "60% of undergraduates received aid in 2014-15," and "83% of recent seniors graduated debt free" (21). In their polysemy, these numbers communicate different things to Princeton's primary audience, upper- and upper-middle-class families. On the one hand, they offer reassurance about the financial burden of paying for a Princeton education—the institution's financial aid policy is generous, consisting of grants rather than loans, and the majority of students are eligible. On the other hand, the fact that sixty percent of undergraduates receive financial aid seems to indicate a solid degree of socio-economic diversity, and the average grant for families with incomes up to $65,000 sounds very generous. The inclusion of these numbers

achieves a similar effect as that of those indicating racial diversity; it reassures the reader of the general fairness of the admissions process, and emphasizes Princeton's efforts at addressing class-related issues, such as affordability.

And yet, if we compare these numbers to those published by the Equality of Opportunity Project discussed in the previous chapter, the image changes considerably. If 83 percent of recent seniors graduated from Princeton without any debt, it might be because 72 percent of Princeton undergraduates come from families in the top fifth of the income distribution (more than $110,000 per year), and 17 percent—918 out of the 5,400 undergraduates—grew up in top one percent families, making about $630,000 or more per year. The number of students receiving the full coverage because their families made less than $65,000 (incidentally, a cutoff that is $10,000 above the median income in the United States) is necessarily small, very likely smaller than that of students from the top one percent. Given the prominence given to matters of class and financial aid in the materials, the actual degree of socio-economic diversity at Princeton is so astoundingly small as to be almost negligible. The institution's emphasis on affordability points to a blind spot in its engagement with class-related issues, since an even bigger problem is that most students from low-income families are either disadvantaged through their lack of access to important educational resources, or they do not even come up with the idea of applying in the first place. In her aptly titled article "The Ivy League was another Planet," Clare Vaye Watkins compares the recruitment strategies of elite colleges with those of the military, and finds that the latter is far more successful in reaching out to students with low-income backgrounds. Elite colleges, by contrast, do not make much of an effort to make themselves known to students outside of their traditional clientele, meaning that, as Watkins points out, "even the most talented rural poor kids don't go to the nation's best colleges. The vast majority […] do not even try."

To sum up: The diversity paradigm is one of the central frames in which the meritocracy of affect presents itself. Princeton is a multicultural space, it suggests, a space in which everyone can fulfill their dreams and aspirations in accordance with the guiding principles of the meritocracy of affect—flexibility, passion, collaboration. With regard to the central questions of this study, the diversity paradigm plays a particularly important role since it is the institution's primary means of negotiating the tension between elitism and egalitarianism. The insistence on diversity is meant to communicate that there is no discrimination against specific groups in the admissions process, im-

plying, in turn, that the admissions process is fair and rewards merit rather than privilege or other forms of capital. The very fact that this assumption still carries so much weight is another example of the merit fallacy. The emphasis on diversity is thus particularly important for those students who do not fall into the paradigm, since it assures them of the legitimacy of their own place at Princeton by suggesting that they gained access via a just process of selection.

The Good Life

A recent promotional brochure published by Princeton University welcomes its students by explaining that "[a]t Princeton, you will study hard and play hard, in a beautiful place, where you will live well, eat well, and get the financial support you need" (*Experience Princeton*). At the center of the institution's official self-conception, then, is a holistic notion of what the 'Princeton experience' entails: not only hard work and intellectual challenges, but a good life, full of extracurricular activities, friends, food, and fun. This notion is tied, inextricably, to the campus itself—the 'beautiful place'—and it is consolidated and embellished rhetorically and performatively in a number of different ways and contexts. In this section, I explore the notion of the good life as the second epistemological frame that situates the meritocracy of affect in the self-representation of Princeton University.

I began this chapter with the premise that Princeton has to be many things to many people, and has to communicate different types of eliteness in different contexts and to different audiences. While the diversity paradigm revolves around the nodal points of meritoriousness and equal access, the notion of the good life reassures the parents of prospective students that their children are in good hands and that life at Princeton is governed by the same principles that govern their own: a life lived in a safe and beautiful place, offering pleasures for mind and body, without scarcity or need. In part, this emphasis on the good life can be seen as a response to the discourse of pathology I discussed earlier in this chapter.

In the following, I want to concentrate on the ways in which Princeton presents its campus as a means to communicate the notion of the good life to prospective applicants and their families. Building on a brief theoretical excursus on the practice of reading space, I discuss in some detail the meanings produced via the campus itself and campus tours, drawing on a tour I took in December 2015 as well as the so-called *Guide for Guides*, a publication

intended for student tour guides. In its official staging of the campus, I argue, Princeton translates the implications of upper-classness and wealth into an aestheticized spatial experience, informed by the beauty of the campus landscape and its architecture. In so doing, it communicates a form of social and economic eliteness that is absent from the instantiations of the diversity paradigm discussed earlier, and yet vital to its recruitment of solvent students. As I want to suggest in the concluding section, however, the frame of the good life has its limitations as well: I use one of the most recent additions to the campus, Whitman College, as a legible symbol of what Anthony Bianco has called the "dangerous wealth of the Ivy League." Moreover, Princeton's decision to build Whitman Hall in the style of Collegiate Gothic can be seen as problematic, suggesting that the university feels comfortable returning to an aesthetic tradition that echoes a history of imperialism, colonialism, and white supremacy.

Theory: Reading Space

For reasons of scope and feasibility, the theorization of the practice of 'reading space' will necessarily be limited; nonetheless, I want to pause for a moment to briefly contextualize my approach. My interest in the role of place as a constitutive component of Princeton's official practices of image cultivation is situated within the framework of what is commonly referred to as the 'spatial turn'. The phrase describes a paradigm shift that has been recognized as such since the beginning of the 1990s, as the categories of space and place increasingly gained currency across several disciplines, among them cultural studies. The preoccupation with space can be traced further back as well, however; Michel Foucault diagnosed the shift from temporal to spatial concerns as early as 1967 in his lecture "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." While "the great obsession of the nineteenth century was […] history," Foucault argued, the twentieth century "will perhaps above all be the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (1997: 237). This sentiment is echoed by Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, editors of the volume *Thinking Space* (1999), who assert confidently in their introduction that "[s]pace is the everywhere of modern thought. It is the flesh that flatters the bones of theory" (1).

In an article connecting the 'spatial turn' with the notion of textuality as it is employed in cultural studies, Jürgen Joachimsthaler stresses the importance

of reading space as a culturally inscribed and meaningful structure: "Kein Ort ist nur er selbst. In den Bewusstseinen ist Raum untrennbar verknüpft mit Sinnzuschreibungen, mentalen Repräsentationen, ‚Texten' aller Art, Lokalisierungen und lokalen Verknüpfungen von Bedeutung(en)" (247). Space is thus an integral part of the Weberian 'webs of significance' that constitute the realm of cultural experience. Drawing on the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, Edward Said describes this appropriation of meanings as "a kind of poetic process" during which "space acquires emotional and even rational sense" and "the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here" (55). Sigrid Weigel, in her influential essay on what she calls the "topographical turn," points out that space should no longer be thought of as that which "occasions events and their narration, but rather [as] a sort of text in itself whose signs or traces necessitate semiotic, grammatological, or archaeological decoding" (194). These three positions demonstrate that the production of meaning in and through space(s) can and has to be subjected to the same kind of analyses as other cultural formations—texts, practices, or artifacts.

The increased focus on spatial aspects does not mean, however, that one should disregard the temporal dimension. In the case of the Princeton campus, for instance, both the place itself and its discursive articulation have evolved, changed, and grown more complex in the course of the decades and centuries of the institution's existence. The temporality of such a place causes meanings upon meanings to accumulate, displacing, contradicting, informing, and reinforcing one another. The issue of simultaneity raised by Foucault thus has to be accounted for: what does it mean for a place to exist in time and thus for different meanings to exist contemporaneously? In this context, Aleida Assmann's notion of the city as palimpsest proves to be helpful, since it allows me to conceptualize the various layers of meaning coexisting in and through the collegiate space at Princeton:

> Der Palimpsest ist eine philologische Metapher, die Parallelen zur geologischen Metapher der Schichtung aufweist. Die Architektur der Stadt lässt sich als geronnene und geschichtete Geschichte beschreiben und somit als ein dreidimensionaler Palimpsest aufgrund wiederholter Umformungen, Überschreibungen, Sedimentierungen. Wir können hier auch mit Reinhard Koselleck von „Zeitschichten" sprechen. Die Formel von der Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen gilt als paradigmatisch für die unterschiedlichen Schichten urbaner Bausubstanz. (18)

As I will argue in more detail below, the notion of the campus as a palimpsestuous structure can be implemented productively in a number of contexts, ranging from the different grand narratives about itself that Princeton is distributing to the meanings accruing from individual buildings.

It follows from this brief contextualization that space—understood as both physical structures themselves and the practices and experiences that make them meaningful—is more than just background or setting. Spatial configurations such as buildings, pathways, landscapes, and vacancies assume meanings that go above and beyond their mere utility; they can thus be read as one would read any other legible system of signification. A place like the Princeton campus moreover becomes meaningful not only when it is experienced immediately but also through its various representations and discursive manifestations; both dimensions will figure in my discussion of the institution's utilization of space below.

'An One-Hour View of Paradise': Elite Spaces and the Good Life

Princeton's campus is open to the public; anyone interested can simply walk around the college grounds and have a look. Close to 50,000 visitors annually—primarily prospective students and their families, but also "retirees, foreign travelers, job applicants, nostalgic alumni" (Maynard 2009)—choose a more structured approach to experiencing the place by taking a student-led campus tour. In the professionalized machinery of college advertising, campus tours play an increasingly important role by presenting the institution, along with its facilities and resources, and allowing prospective applicants and their families to meet current students and catch a glimpse of their daily lives on campus. Since the majority of candidates from well-to-do families tend to apply to at least a handful of schools, and tend also to visit most of them, guided campus tours have become an important means of communication for elite educational institutions. So important, in fact, that universities and colleges can now book private consulting firms to optimize their tours in the hopes of boosting application numbers. Journalist Jacques Steinberg, who has written extensively on elite education, refers to the "remaking of the campus tour" as "the latest development in the pitched competition among colleges to woo the most talented applicants" (2009).

In 2006, Princeton officials, aware of the importance of attractive and persuasive campus tours, responded by moving Orange Key, the student organization responsible for the guided tours, from University Services to the Office

of Admissions in an attempt to streamline the university's concerted efforts at presenting itself to the public (cf. Maynard 2009). According to the university website, Orange Key Tours are an enjoyable as well as informative way of familiarizing oneself with the college; they are led, after all, "by student volunteers who enthusiastically share their love and knowledge of Princeton" ("Orange Key Tours"). Prospective applicants and their families are interested not only in the academic resources an institution has to offer, but also in the everyday life of current students, in social activities, and the general flair that characterizes the campus. The more direct and unfiltered their access appears, the more likely they are to be convinced by the information given. Participants can choose among a number of guides who introduce themselves briefly before starting the tour in order to ensure that everyone feels comfortable. With regard to the institutional self-presentation, it is vital that the members of Orange Key represent the diverse student community and thus communicate to prospective applicants Princeton's commitment to diversity and inclusion. In this and in other respects, the organization caters to the needs and desires of its 'customers', and has long done so: When the Campus Guide Service, as it was then called, was founded in 1932, two out of the three original members hailed from the South, so as to appeal to Southern applicants. Today, in turn, guides are expected to "represent the panoply of a transformed student body," as Maynard puts it (2009)—the college's commitment to the diversity paradigm thus extends beyond the brochures and videos.

Princeton particularly prides itself on Orange Key because unlike its equivalents at Harvard and Yale, Princetonian tour guides work on a voluntary basis and are not paid for their efforts. This, members claim, enables them to speak freely and without official interference about the Princeton experience: "What we say is from the heart and not regulated in any way," as one guide puts it (quoted in Maynard 2009). The objective of the tours, according to the guides themselves, is thus not only to welcome people to campus and introduce them to Princeton, but to "give students a realistic vision of the University, to decide if they should expend the time, effort, and money to apply" (tour guide quoted in Maynard 2009). This gesture of establishing authenticity is a crucial aspect of Princeton's self-presentation; advertising, after all, is always more likely to be successful if the endorsement is perceived to be honest, heartfelt, and independent.

Orange Key tours draw on the so-called *Guide for Guides*,[5] an eighty-page publication that describes itself as "the atlas of significant places, the encyclopedia of legends and lore, and the Bible of trivia for Princeton University" (Kogler 5). The *Guide* includes relevant information on architecture and history, sample tours, and a collection of questions frequently asked by participants. Several times, the "important responsibilities" of Orange Key guides are emphasized; since the guides may be the only Princeton students prospective applicants meet and talk to, their experiences during the tour "may generate their lasting perception of Princeton" (ibid.) and thus play a vital role in their decision-making process. In addition to asking the guide to dress appropriately and "save the gym shorts, ratty jeans and bare feet for another time" (Kogler 8), the pamphlet also points out that "the best tours are informative, entertaining and fun," qualities which "come naturally if you just let your enthusiasm for Princeton shine through" (Tan 2). Guides are expected to perform a form of affective labor in the name of their alma mater.

The *Guide for Guides* provides fairly specific suggestions for the route to take along campus, and while the individual guides are "allowed to modify the route to their liking," they are at the same time "discouraged from taking tour groups south of the Frist Campus Center to the more recently constructed parts of campus" (tour guide quoted in Lian). The usual tour starts out at Clio Hall, walks past Nassau Hall and Alexander Hall to the famous Blair Arch, then via the Dillon Gym to the Wilson School, pausing at the monumental Chapel and at Firestone Library, and going past East Pyne Hall before returning to Clio. Each stop is used to address aspects of the Princeton experience—academics, social life, sports, campus activities, and others. Aspects that are stressed are the excellence of the faculty, the vastness of the resources available to Princeton students, the university's global reach, and the strength of the campus community and the resulting alumni network.

If the typical Orange Key tour, then, encourages a distinct reading of the place, it does so not only by selecting the information given at any point during the tour but also by selecting the very route itself. Orange Key does not provide its participants with a genuinely comprehensive experience of the place, but instead with an elliptical one—an experience that is carefully orchestrated to maximize certain impressions and minimize others. The resulting spatial experience, I want to suggest, revolves around the notion of

5 I have had access to several versions of the *Guide* in the archives at Princeton.

the good life—the quality of the food, the beauty of the built environment, the abundance of opportunities to find self-fulfillment.

In a recent article in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, Maynard describes the work of Orange Key as offering an "hour-long view of paradise" (2009). While this may be a hyperbole of sorts, Princeton's campus is indeed beautiful, and reliably makes the countless lists of the most attractive campuses across the US. Princeton, through Orange Key, presents visitors with a place that is characterized first and foremost by harmony and coherence; the tour creates the seamless experience of an aesthetically consistent space without undue disruptions. The few spatial features that could be perceived as disruptive due to their style or position strengthen rather than undermine the coherence of their surroundings. The purpose of this selective approach to staging the campus space seems to be an avoidance of dissonance in terms of both style and substance. Creating a place that is beautiful and makes sense to those traversing it, this spatial practice reflects the visitors' expectations and desires, and it is not a stretch to assume that it makes prospective applicants want to claim it as their own.

The Princeton campus is not only beautiful and coherent, however; it is also compact and composed, a place that suggests shelter and safety. The semi-open courtyards signify community and belonging while at the same time denoting privacy and discretion. The neatness and cleanliness of the paths and gardens indicates that this is a place populated by neat and clean people. This dimension of spatial communication is particularly important when one takes into account that it is not only prospective students that Princeton wants to woo; it is their parents, as well. Parents who, more often than not, are the ones to pay the steep tuition bills and thus want to be assured that they leave their children not only to receive an excellent education but also to live in a safe and pleasant environment.

Despite these dominant characteristics the campus does not, as one might assume, seem boring. Marked by two centuries of history and development, the Princeton campus is an organically grown web of buildings, paths, and landscaped areas; its layout does not immediately reveal itself to the observer. In fact, a sense of mild disorientation prevails during the first visits, but because the place is well groomed, lovely, and safe, this disorientation is enticing rather than disconcerting—there remains room for exploration, discovery, surprise. This also means that it takes time and a little effort to fully familiarize oneself with the place, thus offering a process of spatial initiation, of sorts, to each incoming freshman class. The element of pleasurable

mystification is moreover mirrored in the discursive renditions of the place in the promotional materials I discuss below. Here, the campus is repeatedly referred to as a 'magical place' with spiritual qualities.

What, then, is the overall spirit of the place presented during the Orange Key tours? In the section of the campus featured during the guided tours, Princeton exhibits a moderate degree of architectural diversity within an overarching frame of aesthetic coherence. When Nassau Hall was completed in 1756, then-president of the college, Aaron Burr, Sr., explained proudly that it had been built "in the plainest and cheapest manner, as far as is consistent with decency and convenience, having no superfluous ornaments" (quoted in Maynard 2012: 13). It is safe to say that this notion of humility and thrift no longer characterizes the spatial spirit at Princeton. On the contrary, while the place is undeniably charming and attractive—even, as some would have it, "exhilarating" (Maynard 2009)—it is at the same time certainly imposing. With regard to the size and aesthetics of most of its landmark buildings, the place first and foremost bespeaks the institution's enormous wealth, and quite ostentatiously so, as recent additions such as Whitman College, discussed in detail below, demonstrate. The humility and practicality invoked by Burr is a thing of the past.

Interestingly, none of the three central categories on which I focus in this study is addressed or mobilized to any great extent. While the ethnic and racial diversity of the student body as well as the gender dynamics are mentioned briefly, there is no discussion of socio-economic factors. While 'excellence' is a dominant feature of the self-description, 'selectivity' or 'exclusivity' are not emphasized. And lastly, while both academic and extracurricular activities are discussed at length, potential competitiveness is played down, and the characteristics of admitted students are not really a topic of discussion. Major parts of the Southern and Eastern campus are left unexplored; the issues identified as controversial by Liz Lian in her critical article about Orange Key Tours—those that guides are expected not to "get into:" sex, alcohol, stratification, and the subpar accommodations in some of the residential colleges—are not addressed.

It is no surprise that the tour guides leave out or de-emphasize certain facets of the Princeton experience and certain parts of the campus in the interest of creating an overall attractive image of the university. After all, the tours are intended not only to inform but also to convince, and to prompt prospective applicants to become actual students. Not all guides feel entirely comfortable with this practice, however; one tour guide explains that until

she became more familiar with the college, she "didn't realize how much we commodify […] and sell Princeton" (cf. Lian). She claims that even though the Office of Admissions does not "outright say stretch the truth and bend it," the guides are expected to "manipulat[e] the material of Princeton to sell the product of Princeton" (ibid.).

Spiritual Meanings and the Power of Place

In addition to the actual experience of the physical space during the campus tours, the epistemological frame of the good life is also actualized in a number of discursive renditions of the campus space. Princeton's official Youtube channel, for instance, features a number of videos that dramatize the campus; place figures prominently in the longest introductory video, "Experience Princeton," which consists mainly of various impressions of the campus, and place is the main protagonist in shorter films such as "Summer Scenes Unfold on Princeton's Campus" or "Fall Color Transforms the Princeton Campus." The cinematography and the selection of the buildings shown mirrors the aesthetic paradigm of coherence, harmony, and beauty I have outlined in the last section. In *Experience Princeton*, President Eisgruber describes the significance of the campus as follows:

> An intense love for Princeton's campus is one of the most powerful bonds shared by students and alumni—myself included. Students are awed by the majestic vistas, inspired by the historic footprints, and embraced by the warm living and learning spaces found throughout our campus. This is truly a magical place. ("Experience Princeton" 14)

Framed by a number of different visual impressions of the campus, this statement touches upon several dimensions of meaning. According to Eisgruber, students are "awed," "inspired," and "embraced" by the collegiate space, its landscaped courtyards, its architecture and art. His description is rendered in the rhetoric of the sublime, and thus bespeaks not only the aesthetic qualities of the place but also its power, majesty, energy, and strength (cf. Novak 29-30). Oscillating between the closeness of being embraced and the distance of awe, this bespeaks a strikingly emotional, perhaps even spiritual relationship between people and place. Eisgruber's description furthermore concisely summarizes the pillars upon which Princeton's self-conception rests: history and tradition, community and communality, authority and excellence. All of these qualities, the brochure suggests, are reflected in and generated by the physical presence of the university. The interplay of the sublime, historical

significance, and the affective bonds it inspires is what turns the Princeton campus into a place that exhibits a very particular kind of charisma—"a *magical* place" (my emphasis).

The topographical approach and the evocation of spiritual meanings are echoed in Toni Morrison's aptly titled "The Place of the Idea; The Idea of the Place," a speech delivered at Princeton's 250th anniversary convocation in 1996. Morrison launches her speech by articulating her hope "that those of us gathered here by simple love of the place and allegiance to its mission would be receptive to some meditation on genius loci—the 'spirit of the place'—Wordsworth's eloquent use of the conceit that certain sites, natural sites, held genii which 'spoke' to the contemplative passerby." Here, too, the collegiate space is presented as one that is loaded with meaning, or, to use Morrison's words, "redolent with the breath of the emotional life lived here and the intellectual life made manifest here." The campus itself plays a vital part in binding institutional, national, and personal concerns and bridging past, present, and future, as Morrison explains: "The place of the idea represents the value of tradition, of independence; the idea of the place is its insightful grasp of the future." The buildings, the gardens, the art—the entire physical fabric of the university—thus figure prominently in the institution's self-presentation, and in the story Princeton tells us about itself.

In attributing spiritual meanings to the campus, Eisgruber and Morrison can be seen as emblematic of the ways in which the institution and its affiliates make sense of the place. The collegiate space thus provides a physical and symbolical center for those affiliated with the school. Current and former students, administrators, and professors alike have traversed and marked this space, and many of them return regularly for a variety of events. Perhaps the most significant example of this is the continued success and popularity of Princeton's annual Reunions Weekend, which attests to the "intense love" the institution inspires in its graduates. Once a year, on a weekend in early summer, 25,000 Princetonians convene to march in the so-called P-Rade, dressed entirely in orange and black, and celebrate each other and their alma mater. It is not surprising, then, that among its elite peers, Princeton boasts the most loyal alumni crowd. This is reflected not only in the $60 million donated to Princeton during the Annual Giving Campaign 2014/15, but also in the annual giving rates, which at roughly 60% reliably beat those of comparable institutions by a landslide—Harvard, for instance, only has 19%. The power of place, I argue, is harnessed to create ties that bind, and the emotional attachments

thus formed are translated easily into the less sentimental terms of philanthropic giving.

In striking a balance between the storied past and the dynamic present, Orange Key tours have over the years proven to be a very successful element in Princeton's self-presentation machine. Harold Dodds, former Princeton president, captures this success poignantly when he states that "[t]hese undergraduates are our best ambassadors" (quoted in Maynard 2009). The epistemological frame of the good life, as it is created through the campus tours, has implications the brochures would never openly acknowledge: In complete contrast to the diversity paradigm, the notion of the good life promises homogeneity and cohesion, and in particular socio-economic homogeneity and cohesion. The campus space and all its attendant qualities—harmony, beauty, sublimity, safety, pleasure—are physical expressions of the institution's wealth, and of the wealth of its community. Upper-classness is not something Princeton would overtly advertise, but it certainly plays an important role in the recruitment of students. The staging of the campus space as the locus of the good life functions as a tacit means of communicating this upper-classness to the respective audiences.

Rupture: The Spectacle of Wealth at Princeton, or: 'The House that Ebay Built'

In 1977, Margaret Cushing Whitman, called Meg, graduated from Princeton with a bachelor's degree in economics. She went on to receive an M.B.A. from Harvard and, ultimately, became the CEO of Ebay, turning the "small U.S.-focused Internet trading site [into] a global marketplace with 42 million registered users" in the process ("Meg Whitman"). In 2002, Meg Whitman, by now a Princeton trustee and member of the board's Executive Committee, pledged $30 million toward the construction of a new residential college, to be named after her. In a statement, she explained that she "had a great time as a Princeton undergraduate" and that she is "pleased [...] that my gift will benefit the University for years to come" (ibid.). Whitman College was completed in 2007 and caused something of a stir within the university community and beyond. After "a very hefty debate" (Whitman quoted in Maynard 2012: 233), the trustees had decided to build the new complex in the style of Collegiate Gothic, even though it would be more expensive, not to mention anachronistic. Noted traditionalist architect and Princeton alumnus Demetri Porphyrios, who had done similar work at Oxford, if on a decidedly smaller scale, was

commissioned to design the buildings; construction began in 2004. Unlike other such 'retro' projects, however, Whitman College was not only meant to look Gothic, but to actually be built according to its principles, as Maynard explains:

> In what Porphyrios calls a remarkable 'renaissance (on American soil) of traditional construction', the one-and-a-half-foot thick walls were all masonry, without a steel skeleton. […] Against a backing of cement block, seventy-seven workmen laid six thousand tons of facing stone, 150,000 blocks total. Great care was taken in hiring talented masons (over 250 applied) and in erecting twenty wall-mockups. In imitation of the old Princeton stone, five types of fieldstone that resemble it were quarried in New York and Pennsylvania. (2009)

Whitman College is a physical expression of the epistemological frame of the good life: beautiful, luxurious, and a lasting emblem of Princeton's insistence on giving its students the best that money can buy. In fact, Whitman College can be seen as an escalation, almost a caricature of this notion—in terms of its aesthetics and its costs, then, the building also represents a stumbling block in this epistemological frame by exposing its covert commitment to class homogeneity and its indifference toward the more problematic aspects of its history, exemplified in the use of the collegiate gothic.

Not surprisingly, responses to the completed buildings varied. Meg Whitman, whose "fondest memories" of her time at Princeton include having lived in Blair and Holder Halls, was very happy with the result, as were university officials. Architecture critic Catesby Leigh likewise praises Princeton's audacity: "The fact remains that a rich institution has placed a huge bet on a truly unconventional vision, and by and large the bet paid off. Whitman College provides Princetonians with ample cause for celebration, and it's well worth a visit from architecture aficionados of all stylistic proclivities." Praise also came from the home of the Gothic, when English architecture critic Ellis Woodman stated that "Princeton University's new Whitman College uses the American collegiate gothic with such skill it makes modernism pale in comparison" (quoted on the website of Porphyrios Associates).

Not everyone agreed that Whitman College "will stand as an exemplar for the future and as an indictment of the recent past" of modernist architecture, as *Traditional Building* concludes (quoted in Maynard 2012: 235). Among the most vocal critics was MIT's former dean of architecture, William Mitchell, who called the entire project "silly" and "stultifying," and argued that it signi-

fied "an astonishing lack of interest in architecture's capacity to respond innovatively and critically to the conditions of our own time and place" (quoted in Bernstein, "Dorm Style"). Architect Frank Gehry, who designed the stylistically antithetical science library that was completed around the same time, showed himself surprised that "a forward-looking institution would go mucking around in the past" (quoted in Bernstein, "One Campus"). Stephen Kliment found the most drastic words of criticism when he called Whitman "deflowered Gothic" and "a sad effort at compromise between full-fledged Gothic, and Modernism" (quoted in Maynard 2012: 235).

Leaving aside for a moment these valid, if conflicting, positions on the (in)adequacy of traditionalist architecture in the twenty-first century, the question remains what Princeton wants to communicate through Whitman Hall. The institutional reasons for building another residence hall were Princeton's desire to increase its student body and to introduce a new form of housing that would allow students from all classes, including graduate students, to live, work, and play together. Commenting on the news of Meg Whitman's impending donation, then-president Shirley Tilghman explained: "The changes set in motion by this gift will allow Princeton to strengthen the educational experience of undergraduates in a number of ways and will permit us to expand and enhance the residential college system, which is at the heart of student life" ("Meg Whitman"). But why did Princeton choose to build the new college in the style of Collegiate Gothic? Which meanings does the institution generate about itself through this new spatial configuration?

Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Princeton trustee and dean of the University of Miami School of Architecture, explains that one of the major reasons for the decision was that the historic parts of campus were growing smaller in relation to the modern parts. The university community, and especially the students themselves, were concerned that Princeton would lose parts of its identity. The decision to re-activate the Collegiate Gothic was thus seen as a consciously compensatory attempt to "expand the historical image of the place," as Plater-Zyberk puts it, to strengthen institutional identity and emphasize continuities of style and mission. Edward Tenner, historian of science and Princeton alumnus, summarizes the attractiveness of Collegiate Gothic for the Princeton community as follows: "I can see Whitman as a way to affirm something students really want […]. Other schools also have great professors, great teams—what we have here is tradition. Whitman emphatically says 'Princeton'" (quoted in Maynard 2012: 253). What, then, does it mean for Whitman College, in its Gothic aestheticism, to "emphatically say[] Princeton"?

Architecturally, Collegiate Gothic is indeed the most continuously dominant style found on campus, in particular in those sections that are subject to the Orange Key tours I have described above. Drawing on "paradigms in Oxford and Cambridge" (Kidder Smith 311), the style became popular in the late nineteenth century, reflecting an attempt "to return to the traditions of medieval humanism and learning" (ibid.). Most of Princeton's famous buildings—Blair Hall, the Graduate College, the Chapel, Firestone Library, and Dillon Gym—follow the aesthetic imperatives of the style. The late nineteenth-century shift to Collegiate Gothic was no coincidence, in fact, but part of a carefully orchestrated effort at institutional self-positioning; Princeton trustees "mandated that the Collegiate Gothic style alone was to be used for all future construction" (Coulson et al. 103). This aesthetic change "belonged to a period of institutional reinvention" that began when the College of New Jersey gained full university status and became Princeton University. The period of intense building activity that followed, and the aesthetic paradigm that dominated this activity signified a "heightened self-confidence and a desire to proclaim its scholastic prowess and stature" (Coulson et al. 103).

The decision to coordinate all future development along the aesthetic lines of Collegiate Gothic was part of the institution's efforts to change its outward appearance to better match its new institutional identity. Ralph Adams Cram, the leading architect responsible for the transformation, "sought to liberate Princeton from what he described as its 'pleasure park' appearance, a random coalition of buildings of varied styles and little cohesion, and transform it into a coherent entity unified both in its architecture and layout" (Coulson et al. 103). Tilghman defended the use of Collegiate Gothic as a return to a path of coherence and allegiance to an architectural expression of the values that mark a scholarly community:

> Some may argue that a cutting-edge research university with a distinguished School of Architecture should be promoting modern architectural forms, just as we encourage new kinds of scholarship and research. But from my perspective, the language of Collegiate Gothic architecture has endured since the Middle Ages for a reason. Its beauty and solidity evoke quiet contemplation and seriousness of purpose, while its imaginative flourishes and interconnected yet separate spaces reflect the individuality and solidarity to be found within a community of scholars. (4)

Demetri Porphyrios, the architect responsible for Whitman College, emphasized that it is not only a matter of style and aesthetics, but also one of sub-

stance and longevity: A "modernist building envelope is designed to fail and must be replaced in fifteen to twenty years; whereas, the stone masonry wall will have a life of 300 years and upwards" (quoted in Tilghman 4).

There are two ways to read the use of Collegiate Gothic at twenty-first-century Princeton that go beyond criticizing its architectural or aesthetic trajectory. One is to take a look at the semantics of the style and the cultural work its implementation in the American context performs. Wilson's reasoning for supporting Gothic was that it signified "the historic traditions of learning in the English-speaking race" (quoted in Kemeny 137). For an American university to use this style, then, was to implement an architectural language that promised legitimacy and authenticity, or, as Paul Fussell puts it: "Deeply engraved on the American consciousness is the superstition, abundantly visible in the Gothic flourishes of our university architecture, that institutions of the higher learning are the more authentic the more they allude to their two great British originals" (73). Wilson's statement also demonstrates something else, however, namely that the Collegiate Gothic is a style that is comfortably situated within a tradition of Anglo-Saxon dominance, and echoes a long history of imperialism, colonialism, and white supremacy. Architect Henry N. Cobb thus argues poignantly that Wilson's rationale, "with its overtones of culturally arriviste insecurity, class-consciousness, and racial superiority would seem grotesquely dated and out of place in today's university" (quoted in Maynard 2012: 137). Porphyrios and others hold against such criticism that "Wilson's reading of the Collegiate Gothic need not be ours today" and that the style is meant to evoke the intellectual tradition of the universities of Great Britain rather than its imperialist program. But these problematic aspects remain written into the aesthetic language of Collegiate Gothic; they cannot simply be erased from its semiotic structure. One way of reading Princeton's neo-Gothic buildings, then, is as a renewed visualization of the institution's commitment to its past, including the racism and sexism that were part of it.

A second and complementary way of reading Whitman College and its meanings for Princeton's institutional identity is through the lens of cost. Princeton spent a total of $136 million on the project; fifteen percent more than it would have on a modern structure. The triple-glazed mahogany windows made from leaded glass and other such amenities resulted in a price of roughly $272,000 per bed—more than twice as much as colleges usually pay for housing, as Bernstein points out ("Dorm Style"). Anthony Bianco thus calls Whitman College "a billionaire's mansion in the form of a dorm" and argues poignantly that its "extravagance epitomizes the fabulous

prosperity of America's top tier of private universities." In its monumental, anachronistic, and imposing physical presence, then, Whitman College does not merely conjure up visions of humanistic education and sober scholarly pursuits. Nor does it only mobilize markers of imperialist exploitation and pseudo-scientific claims to racial superiority. Whitman College also signifies Princeton's immense wealth. It can thus serve as proxy for the "fabulous prosperity" (Bianco) of elite colleges and universities and, by extension, points to the plight of the severely underfunded public schools struggling to make ends meet. Bianco argues in this context:

> However, the increasingly plush Ivy Plus model casts into sharp relief the travails of America's public institutions of higher learning, which educate 75% of the country's college students. While the Ivies, which account for less than 1% of the total, lift their spending into the stratosphere, many public colleges and universities are struggling to cope with rising enrollments in an era when most states are devoting a dwindling share of their budgets to higher ed.

The buildings that make up Whitman College thus point toward blind spots in Princeton's self-representation by serving as embodiments of class-conscious elitism and its attendant socio-cultural costs. They thus point to the economic foundations of the good life and reveal the necessity of wealth to guarantee its continued upkeep. In so doing, Whitman College articulates what otherwise remains implicit in Princeton's self-representation: that eliteness is almost always underwritten by affluence, and that the institution is as committed to courting economic and social elites as it is to academic excellence.

Community

In March 2013, Susan Patton '77 published a letter in the *Daily Princetonian*, titled "Advice for the Young Women of Princeton: The Daughters I never had." She describes how she learned, from many conversations with current and former students, that female Princetonians are more interested in talking about dating and friendship than about their professional careers, and promptly encourages her metaphorical daughters to "[f]ind a husband before you graduate." The older a woman gets, Patton cautions her readers, the smaller the pool of suitable husbands becomes—men regularly marry younger women, after all, while women rarely marry younger men. This predicament is particularly dire for female Princeton students, who by virtue

of being just that have "almost priced [themselves] out of the market." During their time on campus, however, they are "surrounded by this concentration of men who are worthy" and thus, Patton recommends, should make good use of it.

Patton's letter provoked a range of responses, marked overwhelmingly by varying degrees of outrage, first in the *Daily Princetonian* itself but eventually in major national news outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Huffington Post*, and *The Washington Post*. Despite the vocal criticism, however, Patton remained adamant and shortly thereafter published *Marry Smart: Advice for Finding the One* (2014), a book-length version of her initial letter. On the cover of her book and in most of the headlines it inspired, Patton is identified as 'The Princeton Mom', in reference to the maternal gesture of her initial intervention and her elite addressees. In her various public appearances, she frequently presented herself clad in Princeton's trademark orange and black, thus unmistakably appropriating her alma mater's name and iconography in her self-marketing.

A few months later, Patton again made the headlines with a number of provocative statements about date rape, which she alternately referred to as "a clumsy hookup drama" and a "learning experience" (Gillman). Understandably, not all Princetonians agreed; a group of more than one hundred alumni published an open letter distancing themselves from Patton's view and criticizing her use of Princeton regalia: "The wider world continues to see this woman dressed in orange and black associating her out-of-touch personal beliefs with our alma mater. We—along with many other alumni—see these views as outrageous and unworthy of being associated with Princeton" ("Date Rape"). Through her appropriation of the institution's name and colors, Patton's statements seemed to communicate something about Princeton; the outrage this caused within the university community turned the letter and the book—neither of which were particularly original in their line of argumentation—into a full-scale controversy that spurred publicity and sales. Patton's arguably strategic utilization of her connection with a famous elite university thus proved to be as successful for her as it was problematic for Princeton.

The Patton controversy represents a minor rupture in the last epistemological frame I want to discuss in this chapter: the notion of community. This frame is especially important in the context of generating loyalty and affection among graduates, which in turn are needed to secure generous donations and other kinds of involvement. The social capital and network structures the university is known for are likewise closely related to this frame. The trope of community is particularly prevalent in the writings and speeches

of Princeton's president, Christopher L. Eisgruber, which will form the core of my analysis in this section. The rhetoric of belonging and togetherness is furthermore put into practice quite effectively by means of a number of recurring collective rituals that structure the school year and engage the entire Princeton community: Opening Exercises, Commencement and Graduation, and, most importantly, Alumni Weekend. These formalized festivities constitute an integral part of the college's intra-institutional epistemology and of the ways in which the community makes sense of itself.

The elite community provides the social frame in which the meritocracy of affect can unfold. Eisgruber uses hyper-affective and dynamic language along with a set of rhetorical modes I discuss in detail below, and in so doing creates a quasi-spiritual framework of institutional self-conceptualization. In conjunction with the ritualistic practices of celebration mentioned above, this manner of self-making instills a strong sense of belonging and affiliation with the institution in those who participate in it. Princeton, students are told over and over again, is not merely a place of learning and research; it is a charismatic institution with ontologically transformative powers. In the course of their four years within its walls, students will change not only with regard to their minds or skills, but will be transformed entirely and, ultimately, become 'Princetonians'. In line with this framing, the dominant mode of self-representation is a surplus logic: Princeton is always 'more than…' This notion creates an elusive and almost mythical factor of distinction that sets Princeton apart, at least in the minds of the community.

In some ways, these dynamics are not specific to Princeton, nor even necessarily to elite universities. Many colleges capitalize on the trope of community in order to bind graduates to their alma mater and thus ensure long-term involvement, financial and otherwise. A crucial difference, however, lies in the specific institutional assets that are mobilized in these processes. Whereas a large state university might rely heavily on its football team to create cohesion and identification, Princeton draws on its history, its prominence and involvement in the process of nation-making, its excellence in research, the tightness of its community, and the overall influence its graduates command in all kinds of contexts. Princeton's efforts at self-creation are thus rooted, fundamentally, in its eliteness: in its exclusivity, its excellence, and its power. The trope of community furthermore implies that the different types of eliteness that come together in a place like Princeton—academic, social, financial, and cultural—merge into one.

In his speeches, Eisgruber thus creates a notion of an all-encompassing community that dissolves all difference into a cohesive identity as Princetonian. Meritoriousness is not articulated explicitly but assumed as a common point of departure. Important markers of cultural, social, and economic structuration and stratification—class, for instance—are not acknowledged at all. Despite its professed celebration of difference, then, Princeton expects the members of its community to privilege their 'Princetonianness' over their other identity affiliations. As I show below, however, there are ruptures in this frame that go beyond largely trivial cases such as the Patton controversy: A closer look at another building, the one that houses the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, reveals it as the center of debates that challenge and destabilize the notion of a homogeneous elite community. Princeton's commitment to honoring Wilson's legacy prominently and permanently in its very physical fabric is seen by student activists as emblematic of the continuous problem of racism on campus and the institution's failure to adequately address it. The meritocracy of affect, which assumes an attitude of post-racial color-blindness toward the issue of race at Princeton, is exposed as fraudulent through these dynamics.

Elite Community Building

In line with what I have written about the meritocracy of affect so far, Eisgruber frames his conception of the Princeton community in a language that is both dynamic and affective. This is not a rhetoric of rigid hierarchies and relentless competition, but one that mobilizes the tropes of flexibility, creativity, warmth, and movement. The Princeton campus, then, is not a quiet community of solitary scholars, on the contrary; it "buzzes with fresh energy, high hopes, and dazzling possibilities." Movement, energy, and transformation characterize life and work on campus, and the underlying conception of excellence, as I show in more detail below, is not exclusively or even primarily intellectual. The Princeton experience, accordingly, captures the individual whole, touching her mind, body, and spirit.

The relationship between students and professors is similarly conceptualized not in the framework of utilitarian knowledge transmission, but rendered in a language of spiritual guidance and intellectual awakening. Professors at Princeton, Eisgruber claims, transform their students' lives: They "fire their imaginations, dispel their misconceptions, explode their prejudices, stir their spirits and guide their passions." These phrases neatly exemplify the af-

fective and dynamic language Eisgruber uses—teachers at Princeton do not merely teach, they 'fire', 'explode', and 'stir', and their work does not merely affect students minds, but their 'imaginations', 'spirits', and 'passions'. Fittingly, the four years of undergraduate education are described not as a period of hard work and sacrifice—as they often are in public discourse—but in a rhetoric of affection and love: "While you are here," Eisgruber tells incoming students, "you will have extraordinary opportunities to do what you love and to explore passions new and old—passions for ideas, for the arts, for service, for athletic competition, for spiritual growth, for what matters most to you." This abundance of passion is mirrored in the work of the professors, who seek to "share […] the joy of scholarship and discovery that is so thrilling to us." Their goal, Eisgruber explains, is not only to educate and transmit information about any given subject, but to "kindle deep and persistent love of learning" within their students. Studying, teaching, and research at Princeton, it becomes clear, are matters of affect as much as intellect.

In addition to rendering the campus experience of the Princeton community in this affective and dynamic language, Eisgruber employs a number of rhetorical modes in his speeches to discursively create and strengthen the trope of the elite community. The first is the mode of *initiation*, which marks the new students' inclusion in the community. Eisgruber expresses his joy at this task; he repeatedly mentions that he is "thrilled" and "excited." Entering the Princeton community marks a decisive and permanent shift in the students' identity; they "have now become, and […] shall forever be, Princeton's Great Class of 2017"—or any other given year. A collective walk "into campus through the FitzRandolph Gate" marks this shift performatively. The freshmen, Eisgruber insists, have entered "a quite extraordinary community," a "special community," which he refers to as "Princeton's honor world." Pairing the rhetorical with the performative initiation thus marks the transformation from high school graduates into Princetonians, and serves as an indication of Princeton's self-conception as more than an educational institution.

A second rhetorical strategy employed by Eisgruber, and supported by the collective rituals mentioned above, is that of *unification*. In the speeches as well as in his other writings, Eisgruber posits the notion of a unified Princeton community, comprising a diverse group of people held together by their shared identity as Princetonians and the emotional affiliation with the institution they share in common. This notion is actualized not only in Eisgruber's recurrent use of the collective "we," but also articulated quite explicitly on a number of occasions, for instance when the freshmen are told that in becom-

ing part of Princeton they become part of "a community devoted […] to sustaining a warm and inclusive network that has its heart on this campus but extends across geography and time, binding together alumni of all generations." Eisgruber's rhetoric of belonging and togetherness is supported by rituals of what he calls "joyous return"—"We go back to Nassau Hall for Reunions, for Commencement and Baccalaureate, for Alumni Day and the Service of Remembrance, and occasionally for special ceremonies." The purpose of this rhetoric and these rituals of return is to strengthen the bond between the people and the institution, or, as Eisgruber himself explains: "[W]e renew the camaraderie that enlivens our commitment to this University, and we rededicate ourselves to the principles for which Princeton stands and upon which it depends." The implicit assumption of this mode of unification is that the community is unified in its eliteness: Eliteness brings them together, keeps others out, and marks their identities beyond graduation.

A third rhetorical mode that serves a similar affective purpose is that of *historicization*. Here, Eisgruber situates the current Princeton community in the illustrious history of the institution; group identity and unity are thus created also through the commemoration of a shared past. This insistence on historical significance and national prominence is one of the key factors that distinguishes Princeton's efforts at self-making from that of non-elite institutions. Eisgruber begins by pointing to the long tradition of Opening Exercises, which "dates back at least to 1802," thus adding the gravitas of history to the ritual of initiation. Eisgruber also locates Princeton within the larger context of American history, stressing the importance of Nassau Hall as the "interim home of the Continental Congress, and so the seat of this nation's government," and pointing out that Princeton was "the site where James Madison […] acquired the learning that eventually made him the father of America's constitution." For the students about to begin their time at this old and venerable institution, Eisgruber explains, "this means joining the storied tradition of students who have left their marks on the Princeton campus—and the world—through their intellect, creativity, and passion." To support this claim, he mentions a number of famous Princeton graduates, ranging from John Alexander to Woodrow Wilson, from Alan Turing to Sonia Sotomayor. Ministers, statesmen, scientists, and Supreme Court justices—Princeton's diverse historical legacy adds a distinctive and powerful layer of authority and legitimacy to the institution and its affiliates.

A last rhetorical paradigm occurring in all of Eisgruber's speeches is a *rededication* to the university's mission. "Through our teaching and research

endeavors," Eisgruber explains, "we seek to educate the next generation of leaders, to unlock knowledge for the betterment of society, and to encourage all of our students to examine questions about what it means to live a life of purpose." Princeton self-professed mandate, then, operates on several levels: the level of the individual student and her life and career choices; the level of society in general, along with Princeton's contributions to its betterment; and, more specifically, the level of educational politics in the US. Here, too, eliteness plays a major role, not only in optimizing the individual member of the elite community but also in the institution's claim to influence on a national and even global level.

With regard to individual students, Princeton aims to help them to find out "what it means to live a successful human life," which, according to Eisgruber, can be summed up as a life that adheres to the twin imperatives of individual happiness and service to others. As part of the individual pursuit of happiness, students are encouraged to make use of the university's many resources, not only to build a satisfying professional career but also to develop and deepen extracurricular interests—sports, music, politics, among others. While doing so, however, students are also asked to reflect on possible ways to contribute meaningfully to society—"not just on holidays and special occasions, but every day." Princeton does not actively encourage its students to join the public service sector, however, since "[n]early any honest vocation will enable you to make a contribution to the world if you do it right." Importantly, Eisgruber also asks the freshmen to not only focus on "what is practical, functional, and utilitarian" but to "dream audaciously" and keep an "eye toward the beautiful and the profound." Encouragements such as this implicitly point to the privilege enjoyed by Princeton students by virtue of their membership in the elite community.

The triad "learning, leadership, and service" sums up Princeton's self-professed role in society. Eisgruber encourages all Princetonians to "marshal their interests and talents to find their own ways to contribute to the well-being of society," since "all Princetonians have a responsibility to try to make a difference by confronting difficult issues that affect citizens of America and the world." Again, this notion does not negate conventional professional success, as Eisgruber's only specific examples of how one might be able to achieve this contribution is rendered in a rhetoric of excellence: "[The Princeton student] may end up being a pathbreaking scientist, a celebrated writer, a dedicated public servant or an influential business leader."

A third dimension on which Princeton's mission operates is that of its "obligation and opportunity to play a leadership role in public discussions about the value of research and collegiate education today." It does so not only by championing the value of a traditional liberal arts education in the age of MOOCs and for-profit colleges, but also by supporting the public universities, in a continuous attempt "to realize more perfectly the ideals to which we are committed"—diversity, equal opportunity, excellence in teaching and research, among others. Eisgruber asks his audience "to join me in recognizing that, in the decade to come, one of the most important things that we as Princetonians can do to be 'in the nation's service' is to continue to make the case for this country's public universities."

To sum up: Using decidedly affective and dynamic language, Princeton's President Eisgruber employs a number of rhetorical modes—initiation, unification, historicization, and rededication the institution's mission—that together establish a strong affiliation with the elite community. Princeton as the alma mater is conceptualized as a holistic institution whose objectives go beyond the merely utilitarian—the Princeton experience is not a means to an end. The meritocracy of affect is thus embedded in a surplus logic of institutional transcendence that incessantly tells its participants that Princeton is 'more than…'—it is more than a university because it is also a home; but it is more than a home because it is also the place where students find "the closest friends of [their] lifetime," but it is more than that, too, because it is also a place that "build[s] characters" and allows students to find and transform themselves. It is still more than that, however, because it offers students to immerse themselves in a whole array of extracurricular activities; and more than that since it also connects students to their country and the world.

This entire surplus logic is furthermore mirrored in Eisgruber's conception of education as more than "a purely intellectual or utilitarian activity involving nothing more than the transmission of information from one brain to another." Instead, he argues, the Princeton experiences includes and "requires qualities of character and feeling and judgment: motivation, engagement, initiative, persistence, resilience, curiosity, and daring." Research at Princeton should "generate insights of surprising and transformative power"; teachings should "provid[e] students with transformative educational experiences." But it is not only in the professional or educational realm that the notion of transformation is employed; it is more than just the minds of the students that the institution seeks to affect. Eisgruber uses the metaphor of the "exciting new Princeton journey" when he talks to the students about what lies ahead,

and he emphasizes the transformative powers of the Princeton experience: "You are at the beginning of a Princeton adventure that will challenge you, thrill you and transform you." This claim to influence and change the whole person, the very being of the student is also reflected in the notion of becoming a 'Princetonian' or a 'Tiger', as Eisgruber often puts it. Princeton thus presents itself as a charismatic community with ontologically transformative powers—it changes the very identities of its members and binds them to the place and the name forever.

Rupture: Woodrow Wilson, the Black Justice League, and the Issue of Racism

As my brief discussion of the Patton controversy has shown, the actual Princeton community is not quite as cohesive as Eisgruber's deliberations might lead us to believe. While the disagreement over Patton's claims indicates more general differences of opinion with regard to the gendered experience of the elite educational space, there are other ruptures in the community that are arguably even more profound. In accordance with the frame of diversity discussed above, Princeton's official image is one of multiculturalism and the mutual acceptance and even celebration of difference. A number of recent developments suggest, however, that not all the undergraduates feel that the frame accurately reflects their realities on campus. In 2014, for instance, a blog project was started at Princeton that aimed to give students of color a public forum to address their grievances and raise awareness about the many ways in which racism still informs the lives of non-white Princeton students. Modeled on the first of such projects, *I, Too, Am Harvard*, the blog's agenda is described as follows:

> In the wake of a post-racial ideology circulating in our society today, it is imperative that the light of the struggles that categorize this nation is not erased. With this circulation also comes the muting of the voices that make up the sound of the U.S. This is an opportunity to turn the volume back up. We hope to offer the opportunity to build a stage on which men and women of color can be included in the atmosphere of this campus. Most of all, we want to continue the momentum pushed forth by other I Am movements across the nation and the world. We strive to inspire and motivate other marginalized peoples in all communities to push through invisible boundaries and make their voices heard. We, Too, Are Princeton. We, Too, Are Human. ("I, too, am Princeton")

The project signals on the one hand that Eisgruber's notion of a collective elite identity that takes primacy over all differences does not capture the lived experiences of Princeton students. Race-based discrimination, prejudice, and various forms of social, cultural, and political oppression continue to shape the elite educational space as they do the United States in general. On the other hand, the organizers' claim that "We, Too, Are Princeton" seems to indicate that there is a possibility of this collective identity, if it were only possible to rid it of its underlying racism. The valid critique voiced in *I, Too, Am Princeton* thus in some ways contributes to the epistemological frame of community building.

The blog is not the only instance that reveals ruptures in the elite community. In late 2015, debates began on campus that challenged the university's uncritical celebration of the legacy of Woodrow Wilson. These debates congealed around the demand to change the name of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, which eventually were denied by the school's Board of Trustees. In the process of the debates, however, the building that houses the school and its iconic look had become physical embodiments of Princeton's history of racism and discrimination, and remain visual reminders of the continued problem of racism to this day. In the following, I want to use the building as a point of departure to discuss this important rupture in Princeton's self-making in order to illustrate on of the ways in which the epistemological frame of community is destabilized through the very physical fabric of the university.

First, though, a brief architectural excursus: "Modern architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri," writes architecture historian Charles Jencks, "on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 pm (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme [was] given the final *coup de grâce* by dynamite" (9). The city of St. Louis had found itself in the midst of a severe housing crisis two decades earlier, and had responded by building a large complex of high rises, consisting of thirty-three buildings of fourteen stories each. The first occupants moved into Pruitt-Igoe—named after Wendell O. Pruitt, who had been a fighter pilot in World War II, and William L. Igoe, a former US Congressman—in 1954, and the initial impressions were overwhelmingly positive.[6] Pruitt-Igoe was designed and built in the modernist spirit of creating an architectural idiom that would

6 A recent documentary, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* (2011; dir. Chad Freidrichs), chronicles the development and ultimate destruction of Pruitt-Igoe, and includes many interviews with former residents.

speak to its inhabitants and change their lives; its purist aesthetics, its clean and clear style, and the wideness of the spaces in between the buildings were all "meant to instill, by good example, corresponding virtues in the inhabitants," as Jencks puts it (ibid.). These aspirations, however, did not come to fruition. In the years leading up to their eventual destruction, the buildings had been "vandalized, mutilated and defaced" (Jencks 9) and the sense of hope and excitement that had characterized the move-in days were long gone. A good twenty years after its completion, then, the complex was "finally put out if its misery" (ibid.). The story of Pruitt-Igoe has come to signify the comprehensive failure to respond to the crises of racism and poverty, and demonstrates quite impressively, among other things, the impotence of architectural didacticism in the face of systemic oppression.

What kind of bearing does all of this have on the poetics and politics of the elite collegiate space, however? Before modern architecture died, it turns out, it found its way to Princeton. In fact, the architect who had designed Pruitt-Igoe in the late 1940s, Minoru Yamasaki, was chosen to build a new home for the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. This is noteworthy insofar as the institution Yamasaki's building houses has recently come under scrutiny in the Princeton community for its connection to systemic racism—thus establishing yet another link between Yamasaki's two structures that goes beyond their architectural patrimony.

The Woodrow Wilson School describes itself as "a major center of education and research in public and international affairs" and offers a range of degrees and certificates related to public policy. Founded in 1930, it was originally called the School of Public and International Affairs; in 1948, upon initiating a graduate program, it was "renamed to honor Woodrow Wilson," as its website explains ("About WWS"). In 1961, Princeton received an initially anonymous donation of $35 million, which, among other things, enabled the erection of a new building to house the Wilson School, subsequently named Robertson Hall in honor of the donors, who by then had been identified. This is the extent of historical information available on the Wilson School's website.

Intending to make "a dramatic statement" that would "instantly […] raise [the Wilson School's] profile and prestige" (Maynard 2012: 185), then-president of Princeton, Robert F. Goheen, commissioned architect Yamasaki, who designed the building itself and the adjacent plaza in the early 1960s. Yamasaki was at the height of his career—he had made the cover of *Time Magazine* in January 1963; representing a modern, worldly approach to architecture, he would

go on to design the World Trade Center. When it was completed, Robertson Hall differed markedly from its Gothic surroundings:

> Prominently sited at the western gateway to the precinct, it was a concrete temple that elegantly blended the strikingly modern with echoes of Antiquity. A soaring atrium inside was enclosed on the exterior by a ribbon of slender, tapering, concrete columns that marched in locked step around its perimeter. Brilliantly white in sunlight, at night light radiated luminously out from its soaring vertical expanses of plate glass. (Coulson et al. 109)

Responses to the finished building varied, however. President Goheen proudly "hailed Yamasaki's 'brilliant and monumental design' that celebrated 'the high aspirations we hold'," and many observers commended its confidence and uplifting spirit (Maynard 2012: 188). Others, in turn, were quite critical, lamenting the building's aloofness, its lack of contextualization and substance. Hugh Hardy called it "fairly absurd," Michael Graves "thought it was a very thin piece of architecture" and Paul Goldberger felt "saddened" by it (all quoted in Maynard 2012: 188). Alumni were likewise disappointed.

Yamasaki's design was meant to signify a sense of globalism—citing Japanese gracefulness as well as classic Greek influences—and a spirit that transcended mere functionality and utilitarianism (cf. Maynard 2012: 187). The architect himself explained that he wanted the building to be "monumental" in spirit, so that it "would stimulate students of government to higher aspirations" (ibid.). Again, the modernist conception of an architecture that would have an impact of people's thoughts and behaviors becomes discernable. The modernist didacticism of Pruitt-Igoe ultimately failed, among other things, because of the structural and individual racism that governed midcentury St. Louis; the destruction of the complex was a testament to a very general failure of attempts to alleviate the consequences of systemic racism. Here, it was both the formal characteristics of the buildings themselves that were charged with failing their purpose and the "politics, economics, and such things as the presence or absence of prejudice" (Moore) that determined their context. At Princeton, the situation was, and is, different. The initial criticism leveled against the building originated largely from its stylistic otherness; the stark aesthetic discrepancy between Robertson Hall and its immediate architectural environment, the old campus beloved by many, was deemed inappropriate and unsatisfactory.

Tracing the building's trajectory, however, demonstrates that, in the manner of a palimpsest, various competing meanings accrue over time and be-

come attached to the building itself as well as to the institution it houses. The building's aesthetics are no longer subject to critique; it is now the institution—or, more specifically, the institution's name—that has come under scrutiny. At Princeton, the debate about the Wilson School started in late 2015, when the Black Justice League, a student organization formed in the aftermath of the Ferguson police shooting, began to voice their concerns about the university's "deep adulation" of Woodrow Wilson, as one representative of the BJL put it:

> It is impossible to be a student at Princeton without being constantly confronted with Wilson's legacy, or at least a counterfeit reproduction meticulously engineered by our University. Despite his extensive presence on campus, Wilson's legacy—one distinctly rooted in racism and bigotry—is rarely discussed. However, just as our nation reevaluated its bizarre attachment to the confederate flag, it is time for our University to reevaluate its blind veneration to its deeply racist demigod. (Tanjong)

In the course of the following weeks and months, the BJL and their allies formulated a list of demands and engaged in different kinds of activism on campus in order to be heard. The university responded by appointing a special committee "to consider Woodrow Wilson's legacy at Princeton, and, more specifically, whether changes should be made in how the University recognizes Wilson's legacy" ("Report of the Trustee Committee"). Comprising ten members, the committee considered a variety of sources on Wilson's biography and political career, including the expert opinion of nine scholars and more than 600 submissions from the university community. Furthermore, a number of discussion groups took place on campus during the investigation. The committee's final report, published in April 2016, acknowledges that the debate about Wilson is "emblematic of larger concerns about the University's commitment to diversity and inclusivity" and "emblematic of a failure to acknowledge the pain and sense of exclusion that many people of color have experienced, and in some cases continue to experience" on campus. The report also admits that this is in part due to "the narrow lens through which the University presents its history." For reasons that remain relatively vague, however, the committee reached the decision not to change anything about the presence of Wilson's name on campus. Instead, they advocate for more "transparency in recognizing Wilson's failings and shortcomings as well as the visions and achievements that led to the naming of the school and the college in the first place." The report claims, moreover, that the original reasons for

using Wilson's name still remain valid today. One of the central recommendations the report makes is to "make a concerted effort to diversify campus art and iconography, and to consider the possibility of commissioning artwork that honors those who helped to make Princeton a more diverse and inclusive place, or expresses the University's aspiration to be more diverse, inclusive, and welcoming to all members of its community." In President Eisgruber's response to the report, he explains that he "concur[s] fully with the committee's analysis and recommendations" and acknowledges that he, too, now has "a deeper appreciation for Wilson's failings and for what those failings have meant to this country and our campus" ("Statement on the Wilson Legacy"). Eisgruber follows the report's recommendation of striving for transparency and critical openness when it comes to the problematic aspects of Wilson's (and Princeton's) past, and claims to "agree wholeheartedly" with the report's conclusion that "our most significant and enduring challenges pertain to enhancing the diversity and inclusivity of our community." Eisgruber concludes by urging the university community to "strive energetically and imaginatively to make this campus a place where all of our students, faculty, staff, and alumni can feel fully at home" (ibid.)

It is hardly surprising that the Black Justice League was not satisfied with the committee's decisions. In a statement issued after the publication, the BJL criticizes the "various, largely meaningless platitudes" found in the report as well as the institution's impotence in dealing with the persistent issues of racism on campus—the "initiation of yet another committee" to address these issues is not deemed sufficient. The BJL's disappointment and anger at the outcome is articulated clearly and forcefully:

> Princeton remains unable to even reckon and wrestle with its white supremacist foundations and its ongoing role in perpetuating racism, instead delivering shallow words and hollow promises. […] Princeton's decision today demonstrates unambiguously its commitment to symbols and legacies of anti-Blackness in the name of "history" and "tradition" at the expense of the needs of and in direct contravention with the daily experiences of Black students at Princeton. ("Statement on Trustee Report")

The board of trustees declined to change the name of the Wilson School, and the building that houses it still stands and now serves as a physical reminder of the debates described above. The charges of racism and the institution's inability and unwillingness to face these charges in a way that activists such as the member of the Black Justice League would accept are now part of the

building's iconicity—the newest layer of the palimpsest, as it were. Yamasaki's Japanese and Greek aesthetics no longer merely signifies modernism, globalism, and the venerability and seriousness of government; it also demonstrates that space and place are not neutral. It matters to the experience of individual students to whom a place is dedicated and whom it serves to remember; it matters because it determines who can feel safe in this place and who cannot, and because it determines who feels confident enough to claim and mark a place as their own. Ultimately, it matters since there is a distinction between history and heritage, as James W. Loewen argued eloquently in the debate about the renaming of Yale's Calhoun College, a distinction that Princeton refuses to address adequately. The Wilson School's website, it should be mentioned in this context, does not offer any indication of its eponym's racist attitudes and politics. Since Robertson Hall has assumed all of these meanings during the months of the debate around the Wilson School, it now constitutes a stumbling block in Princeton's self-representation and a continued challenge to the epistemological frames that situate the meritocracy of affect.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I analyzed an array of self-representational materials produced by Princeton University in order to assess the epistemological contribution of the affirmative mode to the discourse of elite education. My guiding questions were how the affirmative mode negotiates the tension between elitism and egalitarianism, how the three categories of merit, class, and eliteness figure in these negotiations, and what role the criticism of elite education plays in these dynamics. While I had initially assumed that Princeton would use a traditional meritocratic framework of effort and hard work to explain and legitimize its prestigious and privileged status, my research showed that the university instead relies on a modulation, of sorts, of this framework, a modulation I have called the 'meritocracy of affect'. The meritocracy of affect, I have argued, is a response to two main tensions that inform the communicative situation Princeton finds itself in as an elite, private college in the beginning of the twenty-first century: First, the institution is part of a highly competitive marketplace in which it has to communicate different, and at times contradictory, visions of eliteness to different segments of its audience. Second, Princeton is at the center of a critical media discourse that dramatizes elite education along the lines of the impossible and the pathological.

While the college certainly benefits from the relentless iteration of its own eliteness, it also has to respond in some way to the critique raised in this discourse. The meritocracy of affect, I suggest, is Princeton's answer to these multiple tensions.

Characterized by a commitment to opportunity, passion, flexibility, creativity, and choice, it is in many ways in line with what Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski have described as 'the new spirit of capitalism'. Among the central tropes structuring this paradigm is the metaphor of the student as agent and customer, the absence of competition, a strong emphasis on love and passion as guiding principles of work and life, and the promise of limitless opportunities. In all of these conceptions, affect trumps effort. Neoliberal imperatives account only for parts of this paradigm of meaning-making, however; the meritocracy of affect also owes a debt to a vision of eliteness more in line with humanistic conceptions of learning and self-fulfillment. This modulation gives evidence to the flexibility of the ideological structure of the meritocracy, which is able to adapt in subtle and not-so-subtle ways to changing circumstances without losing its potency. It also demonstrates Princeton's knowledge of its core clientele: upper- and upper-middle class families, whose expectations of the collegiate experience are informed by two primary imperatives—on the one hand, social and economic success, and on the other hand, a somewhat nostalgic notion of the collegiate experience as a time of self-fulfillment and self-development in the tradition of liberal humanism.

The meritocracy of affect, as I have argued in the last major section of the chapter, is embedded in three epistemological frames that allow for a more differentiated and adaptable negotiation of key issues: the diversity paradigm, the notion of the good life, and the trope of elite community building. The diversity paradigm is Princeton's primary response to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism. Its commitment to multiculturalism, social justice, and the celebration of difference is meant to communicate fairness and legitimacy. A student's diversity factor—racial, ethnic, socio-economic, or otherwise—thus becomes a form of meritoriousness. As I have also outlined in this section, however, there are ruptures in the presentation of the diversity paradigm: Taking into account the findings of the Equality of Opportunity Project, for instance, exposes the insinuation of class diversity as fraudulent.

The notion of the good life, which I have discussed primarily in the context of Princeton's staging of its own campus space, can be seen as a response to the discourse of pathology on the one hand, and as a counterweight to

the diversity paradigm on the other. The ways in which Princeton utilizes its physical space, I argued, translates upper-classness and wealth into an aestheticized spatial experience, and thus communicates a commitment to social and economic eliteness that is all but completely absent from the content informed by the diversity paradigm. The rupture I have discussed in this context is embodied by Whitman College, one of the most recent additions to the Princeton campus. Whitman College can be seen as an escalation of the frame of the good life, a caricature, almost, of its tenets: Its aesthetics are an arguably somewhat ill-conceived homage to an architectural tradition that has been associated with imperialism, colonialism, and white supremacy, and its astronomical cost symbolizes the unequal dispersion of funds in the American educational landscape and demonstrate Princeton's covert commitment to class homogeneity.

The trope of community building constitutes the social frame for the meritocracy of affect. Drawing on speeches and writing of Princeton's president, Christopher L. Eisgruber, I have traced his conception of the elite community, modeled along the rhetorical modes of initiation, unification, historicization, and rededication to the university's mission. The image of the elite educational space that is part and parcel of this notion is that of a charismatic institution with ontologically transformative powers, framed in a surplus logic that posits that the institution is always more than the sum of its parts. The premise of Eisgruber's elite community, as I have argued, is that the cohesion of this elite community is strong enough to dissolve or render meaningless all other distinctions, which is why the diversity paradigm, for instance, plays no major role in this conception. Here, too, ruptures can be found: I have used an extended reading of another building—the one that houses the Wilson School of Public and International Affairs—as a point of departure to discuss racism as a major disruption of the trope of community. The debates stirred by Princeton's continued celebration of Wilson's legacy on campus expose the post-racial attitude inherent in the meritocracy of affect as fraudulent, especially in light of the continued race-based discrimination and prejudice shaping the lives of students of color at Princeton.

As my remarks have shown, the three epistemological frames manage each other and create a flexible and adaptable mise-en-scène for the articulation of the meritocracy of affect. In so doing, they allow for the amalgamation of the seemingly opposed imperatives of humanistic and neoliberal eliteness and thus provide the university with a number of effective cultural scripts to employ in different communicative contexts. The frame of commu-

nity building, for instance, complements and complicates the other two in crucial ways: It acts as counterbalance to the notion of diversity by assuring students and parents that despite their differences, all Princetonians share the same core identity. This cohesion is needed to create loyalty and generate ties that bind, which is an important part of the institution's efforts at guaranteeing long-term funding and involvement. It is not surprising to note, in this context, that the frame of diversity occurs more frequently in Princeton's external communication, whereas that of community building dominates its internal conversation. With regard to the notion of the good life, the frame of community adds the important elements of togetherness and belonging. The good life at Princeton, after all, is not an individual endeavor but a collective effort. This also counters the implications of the eliteness-as-pathology discourse outlined in the first section of this chapter. Life in the framework of the meritocracy of affect, the materials maintain, is not governed by relentless competition, anxiety, and loneliness; instead, it is full of pleasure and ease, self-fulfillment and collaboration.

IV. Imagination: Fictionalizations of the Elite Educational Experience

1. Introductory Remarks

When John Humperdink Stover boards the train to New Haven, "leisurely divest[ing] himself of his trim overcoat" (1) in guarded anticipation of "[f]our glorious years, good times, good fellows" (Johnson 13) at Yale College, he is one of the first fictional characters to explore, and thus to an extent to create, the elite educational space. Part football fiction, part poignant social critique, Owen Johnson's 1912 novel *Stover at Yale* stands at the beginning of a long and rich literary tradition in the United States, a tradition that produced some of the most popular and commercially successful narratives along with some of the most memorable protagonists in the American cultural inventory.[1] Its present obscurity notwithstanding, *Stover* was immensely successful both as a college story and as a critical intervention in debates about education and snobbery at Yale; and numerous references in later works of fiction attest to the novel's lasting influence in shaping the image of collegiate America—it was, after all, the "text-book" (33) guiding Amory Blaine and his classmates through their years at Princeton in F. Scott Fitzgerald's debut novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920).

In his article on "Academic Novels" in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature* (2002), Rob Morris explains in a somewhat prosaic manner that campus fiction is concerned with two main questions: "What happens on a college campus? and What is college for?" (1). Even a cursory glance at the many instantiations of the genre demonstrates, however, that fictional explorations of the (elite) educational space do much more than that. Campus novels, films, and television series contribute, in various ways, to conversations about class,

1 *Catcher in the Rye*, *Love Story*, and *Dead Poets Society*, to name but a few examples.

stratification, and (in)equality; they offer powerful negotiations of the implications of race and gender in institutional settings; they ask pertinent questions about the issues of belonging, Americanness, merit and mobility. For many of us, moreover, they are the first and often primary source of information and imagery to explain what elite education is and does. Fictional texts thus form a seminal part of the epistemology of elite education in the United States—a blue print, almost, of how to experience and understand the elite campus—and, as such, they constitute some of the most important primary materials to examine in this study.

This chapter explores the epistemological mode of imagination and its contributions to the discourse of elite education by way of a comprehensive analysis of Curtis Sittenfeld's 2005 novel Prep. The chapter's position in the book—preceded by the analyses of sociological and journalistic studies and self-representational materials—is not coincidental: I propose to read the realm of fiction as an imaginative space that embraces the critical-analytical as well as the affirmative mode of knowledge production. The unique epistemological contribution of fictional texts to the discourse, I suggest, is their ability to contain and complicate the various contradictions and the 'messiness' of elite education in the United States. In so doing, fictional texts add to the overall ambiguity of the elite educational experience and its cultural ramifications. They reiterate and thus consolidate its peculiar charisma and attraction, but they also expose some of the utopian positions presented by the critical materials—most notably the possibility of a classless eliteness—as faulty and impossible to put into practice.

In choosing Sittenfeld's novel, which is set at a boarding school rather than a university, I depart from the focus on the collegiate space that has characterized the previous two chapters. There are a number of reasons for this decision: First, exclusive high schools, and prep schools in particular, form an important part of the system of elite education—a "set of tightly interlocking parts," as Deresiewicz calls it, that consists not only of colleges and universities, but also includes "private and affluent public high schools" (2). Second, prep school novels form an important subgenre of the student-centered campus novel, from classics such as John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* (1959) to more recent publications like Tobias Wolff's *Old School* (2003) or Christine Schutt's *All Souls* (2009). By and large, they follow the same conventions as the collegiate campus novel with regard to structure and content—the protagonist, usually a social and cultural outsider, enters the exclusive campus and has to navigate his or her new surroundings, often feeling overwhelmed

and out of place. The similarities between the two variants of the genre are reflected, moreover, in Walter Benn Michaels's decision to discuss *Prep* alongside Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), a novel that resembles *Prep* quite closely in all respects but its collegiate setting. The connection between prep school and college in the realm of fiction is also illustrated by the journey of Owen Johnson's protagonist Stover, who migrates from his prep school in *The Lawrenceville Stories* (1910) to college in *Stover at Yale* (1912). A third reason for focusing on *Prep* is that the novel's treatment of the issues that interest me in this study—merit, class, eliteness—is exceptionally nuanced and productive, and thus lends itself well to analysis. The text's main insights, moreover, apply to the collegiate realm as much as the prep school, and its analysis therefore complements and enriches my exploration of the epistemology of elite education in important ways.

In the following, I proceed in three steps: I begin with a brief expository section that discusses the role of fiction in the discourse of elite education and reflects on the ambivalent treatment of campus novels in the popular and critical landscape. The second section, "*Prep* in the Discourse," explores in detail the position of the novel in its different discursive contexts: publicity and marketing, professional and lay reviews, and academic criticism. The highly successful marketing campaign that accompanied *Prep*'s publication, I suggest, positioned the novel in a depoliticized discourse revolving around the nodal point 'preppiness'. The reviews, by contrast, followed a markedly different trajectory and emphasized *Prep*'s engagement with the issues of class, status, and agency. Academic criticism, the last discursive position I discuss in this section, focused on the novel's alleged affirmation of certain grand narratives of the neoliberal era. Walter Benn Michaels places *Prep* squarely within what he calls the 'neoliberal imagination', and argues that the scholarship novel as such serves to strengthen the illusion of class diversity at elite institutions. He furthermore faults *Prep* for rephrasing the problem of inequality in the rhetoric of identity. While I partly agree with his conclusions, I also contend that *Prep* is more complicated than that. The novel refuses to follow the structure of the neoliberal narrative of mobility qua merit, and instead confronts the reader with a protagonist who is passive, static, and almost paralyzed by her circumstances. I argue that in so doing, *Prep* continually pushes the reader herself into the position of the neoliberal observer, thus opening up the potential for both affirmation and subversion of neoliberal values.

The third section, "*Prep*'s Cultural Work," offers a close reading of the text itself and discusses its engagement with diversity, class, and merit/mobility. I

begin with an examination of the social taxonomy the protagonist, Lee Fiora, proposes to make sense of her elite surroundings. Lee and the elite school both, I argue, embrace what I call the 'diversity paradigm', a semiotic structure that allows for, and sometimes even encourages, conversations about some identity markers (race, ethnicity, and gender) while rendering others—especially class—invisible. In its appropriation of the diversity paradigm the novel is firmly in line with current instrumentalizations of multiculturalism as a means of masking socio-economic inequality. In a second step, I discuss in some detail the ways in which the narrative, driven and guided by the protagonist, articulates class and the various cultural and social implications of socio-economic otherness. In its complex and multilayered treatment of class, *Prep* contributes important insights to the discourse of elite education. Lee's attempts at navigating Ault's social landscape demonstrate the 'peculiar dialectics' of class (Jones) as a category located at the intersection of material and psycho-cultural factors. The narrative's insistence on the relevance of class and on the importance of affect and embodiment in the performance and experience of socio-economic otherness constitute a much-needed intervention into a discourse that is all too often concerned primarily with questions of access and statistical representation. In the third and concluding part, I return to the notion of mobility through merit and interrogate the ways in which it relates to an expanded conception of a neoliberal imagination and aesthetics. *Prep* complicates its own stance toward the hegemonic value system by subverting the 'normalcy of mobility' (Jones)—though whether this inspires a critical politics of resistance against the dominant neoliberal narratives of what it means to be(come) a deserving, successful human being or an affirmation of these very narratives seems to remain within the eye of the beholder.

2. Exposition: Fiction in the Discourse of Elite Education

Campus fiction, regardless of whether it focuses on prep schools or colleges, is a staple of the American cultural imagination in general, and of the discourse of elite education in particular. What, beyond mere entertainment, is the epistemological contribution of this kind of fiction? The British novelist and academic Malcom Bradbury describes the importance campus novels assumed for him as a first-generation college student as follows:

> In the early 1950s, a very innocent young man, I went off to a small redbrick university called University College, Leicester, […]. I was the first of my family to aspire to such educational heights, and when I disembarked at the college gates, opposite the cemetery, and confronted the converted lunatic asylum in which the emergent university was then housed, I had […] little confidence of my right to be there. Even so, I had had some glimpses of what to expect, and these came from what can be called university novels. […] And it was from such books […] that I knew what to expect: rooms shared with a son of the aristocracy, hours spent writing poems that had better be modern, or else, late night philosophical conversation, mostly about G.E. Moore's Principia Ethica, conducted over a mixture of claret and cocoa, and so on. (1990: 49)

Reading campus novels had granted Bradbury some degree of preparation, however faulty and clichéd, for his time at college. An important part of the cultural work elite campus novels do, then, is to provide access to an exclusive and privileged world that would otherwise remain closed, or hidden, to many readers. Like the gated community, the summer resort, or the country club, elite campuses are characterized by opacity and hyper-visibility at the same time, and hold a sense of intrigue and mystery to outsiders. Elite campus novels satisfy their readers' curiosity about life behind the ivy-covered walls of highly selective institutions, an almost voyeuristic desire that is often informed by adulation and resentment alike. Pleasure may be derived from catching a glimpse of the daily lives of the elite—witnessing behaviors that can be illicit or scandalous, glamorous or full of intrigue, but surely never boring. Campus fiction in this regard exhibits similarities with specific types of journalistic coverage that sensationalizes elite education by reporting on the more 'juicy' aspects of campus life, such as scandals of hazing, sex, drugs, or cheating.

Bradbury, however, had to contend with a representational fallacy of sorts: Oxbridge loomed disproportionately large in the fictional landscape; there were hardly any accounts of "the provincial redbrick" (1990: 50) he was about to attend. In the American context, elite institutions are similarly overrepresented in campus fiction[2]—a fact that simultaneously reflects and helps to generate these institutions' popularity. Here, too, campus novels serve as

2 According to John E. Kramer's *The American College Novel: An Annotated Bibliography* (2004), the most frequently represented colleges and universities are Harvard/Radcliffe (77); Yale (32); Princeton (21); Berkeley (19); the University of Chicago (18); Cornell

points of access to exclusive spaces and, in the process, can develop real-life influence: As Calvin Trillin explains in *Remembering Denny* (1993), an autobiographical account of undergraduate life at Yale in the mid-twentieth century, Owen Johnson's novel was the reason why he applied in the first place: "While [my father] was growing up—in a poor family of Russian-Jewish immigrants in St. Joseph, Missouri […]—he read *Stover at Yale*. He wasn't able to go to college himself, but even before he married he knew that his son would go to Yale" (34). His father, Trillin continues, even went so far as to name him Calvin "because he believed, incorrectly, that it would be an appropriate name for someone at Yale" (ibid.). Bradbury's and Trillin's accounts thus illustrate one of the role campus fiction plays in the epistemology of elite education; it serves as a gateway into the exclusive space of the elite campus, both for those who are about to attend a prestigious school and for those to whom the actual iron gates will remain closed.

In addition to thus providing a contact zone between an interested audience and the elite educational space, these novels serve as common points of reference in the overall discourse. Tropes and topoi established within the literary field frequently travel to other segments of the discourse, and in the process create or solidify certain aesthetic and rhetoric paradigms associated with the elite educational space. In his discussion of the Protestant ethos in the history of the Big Three, Karabel for instance uses Franklin Delano Roosevelt's time at Harvard as a point of departure, and he begins by employing the 'arrival trope' so common in campus fiction:

> On a clear fall morning in late September of 1900, a lanky young man with patrician features and pince-nez glasses stood among the more than five-hundred freshmen gathered to register at Harvard. Though neither a brilliant scholar nor a talented athlete, the young man had a certain charisma about him—a classmate later described him as 'gray-eyed, cool, self-possessed, intelligent… [with] the warmest, most friendly, and understanding smile'. (13)

The archetypical scene of the protagonist pausing, for just a moment, before the gates of the institution he or she has long waited and worked hard to join, the metaphorical and actual initiation into the elite educational space, is a staple in campus fiction and occurs at the onset of almost every campus novel.

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(12); and Columbia (9). Together, elite institutions make up well over a third of the settings of campus novels.

In the social sciences, moreover, campus fictions can serve as shorthand for a specific period in the history of elite education—Karabel speaks of the "Dink Stover era at Yale" (201)—or they are cited as emblematic of specific issues revolving around elite education. Anthropologist Sarah A. Chase, for instance, uses *Prep*'s depiction of gender in her study *Perfectly Prep: Gender Extremes at a New England Prep School* (2008), and Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández draws on the novel in his discussion of race and class at elite boarding schools. A number of other works of campus fiction (F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*, Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons*, and the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989; dir. Peter Weir), among others) are frequently mentioned in sociological studies and magazine articles.

The institutions depicted in these narratives, too, engage with campus fiction. The *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, for example, features an article on "the Fictive Princeton," in which several stories are discussed favorably (Waldron). Yale, by contrast, has a more conflicted history of rejecting and appropriating *Stover at Yale*—initially seen as a critical intervention and rejected by the institution, the novel was ultimately claimed as a representative artifact and copies of *Stover* now line the top shelves of the Yale Bookstore as decorative artifacts.[3] Harvard, too, positions itself with regard to the fictionalizations it inspired: the Harvard library offers a succinct overview and points for example to Theodore Hall's "Harvard in Fiction: A Short Anthology," published in the *Harvard's Graduates Magazine* as early as 1932, or a piece by Edmund H. Harvey in the *Crimson*, titled "A Half-Century of Harvard in Fiction" (1955), which complains about "short-sighted satire" giving "distorted views" of the college (Harvey). The fictional narratives themselves likewise sometimes exhibit an awareness of the complex citational system of which they are part, as for instance when Lee Fiora in *Prep* states with contempt that "this wasn't some movie about boarding school" (137), perhaps alluding to the picturesqueness of student life as depicted in *Dead Poets Society* and similar accounts. These examples demonstrate that the meanings of American elite education are ne-

3 For a more detailed discussion of Owen Johnson's *Stover*, see my two articles on the novel: "The Contingencies of Knowledge: *Stover at Yale* and the Debate on U.S. Elite Education." *Knowledge Landscapes North America*. Eds. Christian Kloeckner, Simone Knewitz, and Sabine Sielke. Heidelberg: Winter, 2016. 119-137; and "No Longer the 'Text-Book' of any Generation: *Stover at Yale* and the Non-Canonical." *Reading the Canon: Literary History in the 21st Century*. Ed. Philipp Löffler. Heidelberg: Winter, 2017. 387-403.

gotiated in an ongoing conversation that extends across established lines of text type, genre, and medium.

The fictional campus, as a glance at the secondary literature confirms, is a polysemous space, and one of its central ambivalences lies in its relationship with the 'real world'. As is the case with most genre fiction, one of the most frequent questions is aimed at the possibility of allegorical readings. What, if anything, does the fictional campus refer to outside or beyond itself? In fact, as Merritt Moseley points out, reading campus fiction for its own sake is seen as suspicious: While "no one suspects that Cormac McCarthy's novels about cowboys are read only by cowboys, or by anomalous non-cowboys for whom some excuse needs to be found," interest in academic novels and "in reading about the professorial life is an anomaly to be explained" (7). One answer may be that people like to read thinly veiled fictionalizations of institutions they know well. This is the case, for instance, with Mary McCarthy's 1952 novel *The Groves of Academe*, which satirizes her experiences at Bard and Sarah Lawrence, and Randall Jarrell's response, *Pictures from an Institution* (1954). Both novels belong to the genre of the *roman à clef*, and knowledge of the direct correspondence between the real institutions and people and their fictional counterparts holds the key to appreciating the narratives.

In addition to this, critics distinguish two dominant metaphorical relations between the (fictional) campus and society: one in which the former mirrors the latter, and one in which it presents an alternative to it. David Lodge, for instance, argues that "the university is a kind of microcosm of society at large, in which the principles, drives and conflicts that govern collective human life are displayed and may be studied in a clear light and on a manageable scale" (261). This is echoed by Bradbury, who sees the campus as a "significant setting" and the "the world of student, academic or general intellectual experience as an emblematic place in culture" (1988: 330). Jay Parini similarly sees the campus as "becom[ing] a microcosm, a place where humanity plays out its obsessions and discovers what makes life bearable" (12). In these readings, the campus's temporal and spatial restrictions render it a particularly productive imaginative space to explore by proxy, relationships, values, and conflicts that characterize the human experience at large.

According to Fredric Jameson, by contrast, the opposite is the case—he conceptualizes the campus as "somehow extraterritorial" and emphasizes its separateness: "There is the real, and then there is the university; and of course in one sense (the best sense) the university is that great vacation which precedes the real life of earning your living, having a family, finding yourself

inextricably fixed in society and its institutions" (39). Literary critic and historian George Watson goes even further and complains that "there is something wrong with a literature in which universities are felt to be consumingly interesting; I hear myself murmuring, with Coriolanus, that there is a world elsewhere" (43). Here, campus fiction is seen as escapist in the best and worst possible sense—as an imaginary space that might foster pleasurable and productive utopianism as well as destructive regression. The campus is thus variously regarded as a microcosm representing society at large, as the locus of escapist fantasies, or simply as boring and irrelevant—to use Adam Begley's words, "the province of the pretentious, the dangerously dull and self-absorbed, the militantly complacent, and the resolutely hypocritical" (150). *Prep*, the novel at the center of this chapter, claims to be "a singular portrait of the universal pains and thrills of adolescence" (*Prep*, back cover), thus perhaps attempting to steer a middle course between the singularity of the elite educational space and the universality of Lee's feelings of dislocation and otherness. The reviews and responses I discuss in the next section demonstrate, moreover, that most readers interpreted the fictional campus as a microcosm of rather than a viable alternative to American society at large.

Regardless of the specific ways in which campus novels are read, their position in the discourse of elite education is informed by their popularity, which means that they are not always accepted as serious contributions to the conversation. Many campus novels have been bestsellers, and the number of high profile authors who have written campus novels—in the broadest possible sense—ranges from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Vladimir Nabokov, from Don DeLillo to Bret Easton Ellis, Donna Tartt, and Jonathan Lethem. In addition to these more prestigious texts, however, campus fiction also includes an array of (often serial) young adult novels. It does not seem too far of a stretch, moreover, to mention Joanne K. Rowling's oeuvre in this context, because what is *Harry Potter* if not a series of campus novels set at an elite institution? A corollary its popularity, then, is that critics and academics are cautious and often critical of campus fiction. A.S. Byatt, for instance, an author of a 'serious' academic novel, judges what she deems the less sophisticated specimens of the genre quite harshly as "secondary secondary world[s], made up of intelligently patchworked derivative motifs […] written for people whose imaginative lives are confined to TV cartoons, and the exaggerated […] mirror-worlds of soaps, reality TV and celebrity gossip."

Hence, the position of campus fiction in public discourse is ambiguous. Oscillating between popularity and critical obscurity, they are read sometimes

as serious contributions to debates about class, education, or adolescence, and sometimes dismissed as guilty pleasures, representatives of a second-tier genre unworthy of sincere consideration. This is mirrored, to some extent, in academia, where campus fiction inhabits a similarly indeterminate position. Of course, academics do read and write about campus novels, but, collectively, the genre is not considered 'serious'—a fate it shares with most genre fiction. While perhaps not everyone would agree with Watson, who admits to hoping that "Anglo-American campus fiction will fade away and die" (43), there is a long list of apologies for or dismissals of the genre. In *The College Novel in America* (1962), for instance, John O. Lyons complains about the "general lack of excellence" (xiii) characterizing American campus fiction and ventures that "thinness and pallidness are perhaps a convention" (xvii) of the genre. Janice Rossen seems to agree when she writes in *The University in Modern Fiction: When Power is Academic* (1993) that the "mass of University novels [...] are admittedly minor" (185). This kind of generalized apologetic gesture is usually used to explain the prevalent critical focus on the professor-centered academic novel rather than the student-centered campus novel that I examine in this chapter. Despite these dismissals, however, fictionalizations of the elite educational space inhabit an important and influential position in the overall epistemology of elite education—intertwined with and responding to institutional, academic, and journalistic voices. A discussion of (self-)descriptions of the American elite education system would thus not be complete without taking into account the realm of fiction.

A Brief Synopsis of *Prep*

Published in 2005, Curtis Sittenfeld's debut novel *Prep* is described as follows:

> Lee Fiora is an intelligent, observant fourteen-year-old when she leaves her family behind in Indiana to attend the prestigious Ault School in Massachusetts. Over the next four years, her experiences at Ault—complicated relationships with teachers, intense friendships with other girls, an all-consuming preoccupation with a classmate who is less than a boyfriend and more than a crush—coalesce into a singular portrait of the universal pains and thrills of adolescence. (*Prep* blurb)

While this description is not, strictly speaking, false, it does omit some of the main preoccupations of the novel and, I would argue, misrepresents its tone, which has been more accurately described as "dark and obsessive" (Groskop). *Prep*'s main source and motor of conflict lie in Lee's failed attempts to reconcile

her lower-middle-class background with the upper-class elite environment in which she finds herself at Ault, her omnipresent anxieties and struggles with navigating the school's social and academic landscape, and her growing alienation from her family. In what follows, I offer a brief synopsis of the plot so as to contextualize the in-depth reading following in later sections of this chapter.

Prep is narrated and focalized by Lee herself, who recounts her experiences from an unspecified time in the future. The novel consists of eight chapters of roughly equal length, each of which revolves around one or two main issues or experiences. The first chapter, "Thieves," revolves around Lee's arrival at Ault, introduces her roommates Dede and Sin-Jun, and shows Lee's difficulties in adjusting to her new environment—she is anxious and shy, hardly talks to her new classmates, and is plagued by feelings of inferiority. The chapter's plot revolves around a series of thefts—someone is stealing money from their classmates. In the end, it is Lee herself who catches the thief: Little Washington, her class's only black girl, who is subsequently expelled. In the second chapter, "All School Rules Are in Effect," Lee's academic issues become more serious; her feelings of dissociation deepen, as does her loneliness. The plot revolves around the school's surprise holiday, which Lee spends at the mall, where she wants to get her ears pierced. Through a series of coincidences, she spends the afternoon with Cross Sugarman, the "coolest guy in our class" (45) and some of his friends. The third chapter, "Assassin," is dominated by Lee's acquaintance with Conchita Maxwell, a Mexican American girl interested in Lee, who is hesitant about the prospect of a friendship. When Conchita's mother invites them for a visit to Boston, Lee meets Conchita's friend Martha and they instantly become friends. The second major plot point is a school-wide game called Assassin, which Lee delves into with uncharacteristic abandon, hoping that she will somehow be able to initiate contact with Cross, whom she has not talked to since the surprise holiday. In the fourth chapter, "Cipher," Lee meets her new English teacher, Ms. Moray, who shares her Midwestern background. Lee's academic record keeps worsening due to a mixture of anxiety and indifference on Lee's part. Her relationship with Ms. Moray is difficult and based on mutual misreadings. Other than that, Lee starts cutting her classmates' hair and experiences a sense of calm and achievement that has eluded her before. Martha believes that Lee does as a "way of having contact with [her peers] without having to really get close" (145). As the title suggests, the fifth chapter, "Parents Weekend," focuses on Lee's parents' visit and the worries, resentment, and shame this stirs up in her. Predictably, the weekend

turns out to be a disaster and Lee's parents leave early after a heated argument between her and her father. This chapter accentuates Lee's class-related anxiety and illustrates her liminal position between a home from which she feels alienated and a school she cannot claim as her own. The sixth chapter, "Townie," begins with Sin-Jun's attempted suicide and Lee's racist shock and surprise at her ex-roommate's depression. At the hospital, Lee meets Dave, who is part of the Ault kitchen staff and asks her to dinner. Though she initially accepts his invitation, she ultimately cancels because she does not want to be seen with a "townie" (242) who lacks the money and manners of an Ault student. The seventh chapter, "Spring-cleaning," returns to Lee's academic issues. She has to pass an important math exam or else be "spring-cleaned" (255), i.e. be asked to leave Ault. While Martha (and Cross) are elected senior prefect—the school's most prestigious position—Lee almost fails her exam and passes only because of Martha's help. The fact that her roommate and her love interest both succeed at Ault serves to accentuate Lee's failure further. In the last chapter, "Kissing and Kissing," Lee begins an affair with Cross, carried out secretly in the day student room. While she is in love with him, he does not seem interested in her as a girlfriend. They meet regularly and sleep together, but toward the end of the school year, the relationship ends, leaving Lee sad and confused. When she is asked by the school's headmaster to be interviewed by a *New York Times* reporter who is working on a feature on Ault, she accepts. She tells the reporter more than she wants to about her experience as a lower-middle-class "nobody from Indiana" (363) and is shocked when the article comes out and is met with criticism and resentment from her peers and her parents. The novel ends with a brief glimpse into the future, recounting the personal and professional paths chosen by the main characters.

3. *Prep* in the Discourse: Publicity, 'Preppiness', and the Neoliberal Imagination

Prep was published on January 18, 2005, with an original run of just 13,000 copies.[4] Despite initial doubts, the novel sold well, and Random House quickly responded to its increasing popularity by adding another 24,000 copies. Both the hardcover and the paperback edition eventually became bestsellers. *Prep*

4 Other sources say that the first run included 16,000 (cf. Lee) or 15,000 copies (cf. Stuever).

was translated into several languages and chosen as one of the best books of 2005 by *Slate*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and a number of smaller newspapers and magazines[5]; Paramount optioned the movie rights (Boss). Perhaps most importantly, *The New York Times* included the novel as one of its ten best books of 2005, thus putting Sittenfeld into the ranks of Haruki Murakami, Zadie Smith, Joan Didion, and Ian McEwan. *Prep* was furthermore long-listed for the prestigious Orange Prize. Some of the reviews, however, and, notably, Sittenfeld's own account of her initial success also point to the less successful prelude to the novel's publications: The manuscript was rejected by fourteen out of fifteen publishers (Sittenfeld 2005). Sittenfeld's literary agent, Shana Kelly, explains that the publishers "loved it but weren't sure they could sell a lot of copies, because they couldn't figure out how to market it" (quoted in Boss). On the one hand, this is noteworthy because it points to the novel's genre hybridity, which plays a role in determining its position in the discourse. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, the mythologization of the novel's genesis transforms *Prep* into the protagonist of precisely the kind of obstacles-overcome success story that, I argue, the diegesis resists and potentially subverts. In the following, I introduce and discuss in detail the novel's discursive position, beginning with the marketing campaign that established it as a fun take on an American subculture, before moving on to professional and lay reviews, which emphasized *Prep*'s treatment of class and status, and, finally, academic perspectives, which criticized the novel as an expression of neoliberal ideology.

'Preppification'

The story of the novel's triumphant marketing began with the change of its original title, *Cipher*, into the decidedly more evocative *Prep*, and the matching publicity campaign developed by a team of young and "extremely on-the-ball" (Sittenfeld 2005) publicists at Random House. Press materials for *Prep* featured Sittenfeld's Groton School class photograph and yearbook page, as well as a picture of her high school crush (Lee). The campaign furthermore included gift baskets for editors at women's magazines, which, as Sittenfeld explains, came in the form of "translucent pink oversize Chinese-food cartons containing, along with *Prep*, items reminiscent of what teenage girls take

5 Among them *The San Jose Mercury News*, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, *The Capital Times*, and *The Rocky Mount Telegram*.

with them to school: flip-flops, notebooks, Lip Smacker lip gloss" (Sittenfeld 2005). In allusion to the novel's cover, which showed a "supremely cute pink-and-green grosgrain-ribbon belt" (ibid.), *Prep*-inspired belts were given out at readings. Random House credits the "catchy title and book cover and creative marketing and publicity" (Boss) with the novel's unexpected success, and Sittenfeld herself admits that she cannot disagree with those who "railed against *Prep* as a 'corporate hype job'" (2005).

The marketing campaign capitalized on the novel's prep school setting and thus opened up a discursive space that is very different from that discussed in the reviews, which I address in more detail below. As Sittenfeld herself asks: "[G]iven that *Prep* is sometimes a dark book, with commentary on class and gender, what was up with the festive jacket?" (ibid.). Preppies feature in the American cultural landscape at least since working-class Radcliffe student Jenny Cavalleri famously dubbed her future husband Oliver Barrett a "preppy" in the hugely popular film *Love Story* (1970; dir: Arthur Hiller), pointing out that he looked "stupid and rich." Since then, depictions of the preppy way of life have always been tongue-in-cheek, simultaneously mocking and celebrating this particular American cultural formation. Notable publications in this context include Nelson W. Aldrich's article "Preppies: The Last Upper Class?" (1979) and the tremendously successful *Official Preppy Handbook* (1980). Aldrich offers a description of what he calls "a small but usually recognizable species of Americans" (56), arguing that "'Preppie' is a catch-all epithet to take the place of words too worn or elaborate for everyday use, words such as *privileged, ruling class, aristocrat, society woman, gentleman,* and *the rich*" (ibid., emphasis in the original). His article explores the cultural characteristics and practices associated with preppiness, ranging from money, status, and prep school affiliation to fashion, mannerisms, and values. Shortly after Aldrich's musings were published in *The Atlantic*, the perhaps definitive 'preppy' publication entered the discourse: *The Official Preppy Handbook*, edited by Lisa Birnbach. A tongue-in-cheek how-to guide to preppy culture, the *Handbook* has figured in recent years as one of the founding texts of a whole collection of blogs dedicated to the preppy way of life[6] and has thus maintained its cultural relevance despite being out of print.

6 For example: *The College Prepter* (www.thecollegeprepster.com), *Classy Girls Wear Pearls* (www.classygirlswearpearls.com); *F.E. Castleberry New York* (www.fecastleberry.com), and *The Southern Prepster* (www.thesouthernprepster.wordpress.com).

Even though more than two decades lie between these two publications and Sittenfeld's novel, it is important to situate the latter in this discursive context, since much of its appeal derives from this connection. In an interview, Sittenfeld herself addressed the *Preppy Handbook*'s influence on her understanding of the subject matter (cf. Wood), and it is thus not surprising that her novel features a number of more or less oblique references to the *Handbook*, thus further establishing the connection: Lee points out, for instance, that unlike her boarding school peers she "did not have, among other things, a middle name" (69), and wonders whether she should give herself one when she goes off to college (308). The *Preppy Handbook* emphasizes the cultural importance of middle names by mentioning in its very first chapter that "Mummy and Daddy have carefully selected first and middle names (at least one of each)" (Birnbach 15). Lee furthermore drily mentions that her peers' mothers "had names that made it hard to imagine they'd ever held real jobs: Fifi and Tinkle and Yum" (167), thus invoking the *Preppy Handbook*'s list of the most popular preppy nicknames, which include Kiki, Topsy, Tiffy, Bitsy, and Corkie (Birnbach 18). The color palette of the novel's cover furthermore alludes to a section in the *Preppy Handbook*, titled "The Virtues of Pink and Green," which points out that "[t]he wearing of the pink and the green is the surest and quickest way to group identification within the Prep set" because "no one else in his right mind would sport such a chromatically improbable juxtaposition" (Birnbach 156). The reader is then asked to color the illustration accordingly.

What most publications dealing with preppiness—and in particular Aldrich's and the *Preppy Handbook*'s take—have in common is a depoliticization of their subject matter: Aldrich, for instance, points out that "[i]deological struggle is too shaming to talk about these days. Life-style rivalry is the new engine of history" (56). Both emphasize the quaintness and eccentricities of 'prepdom'—the obsession with nautical imagery, for instance, or the "unwavering taste for luminescent pastels and hard primary colors, a taste evidently designed to evoke the infantile gaiety of the nursery" (Aldrich 59). Both furthermore stress the alleged openness of preppy culture. While Aldrich claims that there are two types of Preppies, "the self-made and the hereditary" (57), the *Preppy Handbook* as a whole comes in the guise of a How-to guide and, in its opening remarks, makes the following claim:

> It is the inalienable right of every man, woman and child to wear khaki. Looking, acting, and ultimately being Prep is not restricted to an elite minority

> lucky enough to attend prestigious private schools, just because an ancestor or two happened to arrive here on the Mayflower. You don't even have to be registered Republican. In a true democracy everyone can be upper class and live in Connecticut. It's only fair. *The Official Preppy Handbook* will help you get there. (Birnbach 11)

Given this emphasis on becoming part of the preppy culture, it is not surprising that the insistence on the novel's preppiness also connects it to a specific segment of contemporary American consumer culture. This begins with the grosgrain ribbon belts given out at readings—these belts are typically produced by traditional American brands such as Brooks Brothers and Vineyard Vines—and also manifests itself in a *Newsweek* style segment, in which an L.L.Bean Tote bag is described as "perfect for your new copy of *Prep*." A brand long associated with affluent New Englanders, L.L.Bean is mentioned several times in *The Official Preppy Handbook*, and experienced a "record year" upon its publication and the concomitant preppy boom—its business "nearly doubled in two years" (Gorman 143). Similarly, Arthur Cinader founded the clothing line J.Crew in 1983 "in the hopes of capitalizing on the success of *The Official Preppy Handbook*" (Bourne). It is important to note that *Prep* directly contradicts the popular notion of preppiness as a lifestyle choice. The novel is primarily concerned, after all, with the protagonist's failure to become part of her preppy surroundings, showing that contrary to the *Handbook*'s assertion, it does take more than a pair of khaki slacks to do so.

Prep has to be situated in this context because doing so demonstrates how the novel both benefits from existing cultural structures and practices around the signifier 'prep' and, in turn, helps to generate some of its own. It also illustrates the interweaving of different positions in the discourse: Fiction, fashion, consumer practices, and cultural knowledge are all part of the same citational system and gravitate around the same signifiers, feeding on similar cultural meanings. The overlap of the narrative of merit, class, and consumer culture is summed up perfectly by the description of *Prep* in *People Magazine*: "Straight As get Lee into the Ault School on scholarship, but fitting into the Abercrombie crowd is tougher" ("Picks and Pans").

Interestingly, all of this happens shortly after a presidential campaign in which two graduates of exclusive preparatory schools competed for the presidency: John Kerry graduated from St. Paul's School in New Hampshire in 1962, and George W. Bush's alma mater is Phillips Academy Andover, where his father had gone before him. Kerry and Bush are also both affiliated with another

elite institution: Yale University and its secret society Skull and Bones. *Prep* comments on the importance of famous graduates when Lee's parents recognize the names of renowned politicians and actors:

> I had told them before about these alumni, […] who'd gone on to acclaim; to people outside the school, it was the existence of famous graduates—and not, say, current students' median SAT scores—that seemed to most validate Ault. At home, if my parents' friends knew one thing about the place I went to school, it wasn't where it was or even what it was called; it was the names of the celebrities who'd graduated before me. (181)

Though referenced in this quote, the actual socio-political power held by elite educational institutions has not entered the discourse of 'preppiness' in any meaningful way. When the *LA Times* claims that "[p]rep schools have become fiction's 'new black'" (Shin), or Carol McD. Wallace—one of the original co-writers of *The Official Preppy Handbook*—confidently states that "We're All Preppies Now," they are referring to cultural and aesthetic aspects only. There was and still is very little awareness in these kinds of discursive positions as to the actual role exclusive preparatory schools play in the United States. Still, all of this suggests that 'preppiness'—in all its various meanings—was very much in the air in early 2005.

Reviews of *Prep*

On popular rating and discussion platforms such as *Goodreads* and *Amazon*, *Prep* has received mixed reviews. On *Amazon*, the novel received 592 reviews with an average rating of 3.3 out of 5 stars, and on *Goodreads*, it received 3,368 reviews and 46,325 ratings, with an overall score of 3.33 out of 5 stars. *Goodreads* also tells us that 79 percent of its readers "liked" the novel, though it does not specify exactly what that means. A comparison with some of the other novels listed as "Best Books of 2005" in *The New York Times* demonstrates that *Prep* has received a relatively high number of reviews in relation to the somewhat moderate number of ratings. Assuming that those who write a review of a novel also rate it, it follows that one in thirteen raters has written a review for *Prep*, whereas only one in fourteen reviewed McEwan's *Saturday*, one in fifteen reviewed Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*, and one in seventeen reviewed Smith's *White Teeth*. Given these discrepancies, it is not far-fetched to assume that while fewer people 'liked' *Prep* than the other novels, it generated stronger opinions, and prompted readers to share them online. A compari-

son with other recent campus novels further illustrates *Prep*'s popularity and reach:

Professional reviews[7] were overwhelmingly positive; as Hank Stuever pointed out in the *Washington Post*, *Prep* was received with "near universal praise" and became an "immediate success." Tom Perrotta called it "[o]ne of the most impressive debut novels in recent history" (quoted in "Prep: A Novel"). In addition to the *Post*, the novel was reviewed in *The New York Times*, *The New York Observer, Newsweek, The New Yorker*, *Slate*, *People Magazine*, *Guardian*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and a host of less well-known news outlets. Reviewers almost universally lauded Sittenfeld's style and her attention to detail—the "exacting intimacies" of a "richly textured narrative" (*The New Yorker*), her "craft and detail" (*Earth Goat*), the novel's "almost clinically accurate and absorbing glimpse into the daily life of an exclusive, privileged place" (Stuever). *The Washington Post Book World* praised "Sittenfeld's perfect pacing and almost reportorial knack for describing what it's like—psychologically, logistically—to be fifteen" ("Curtis Sittenfeld: Prep"). Dave Eggers called her prose "sharp and economical" and commended her "sly and potent wit, which cuts unexpectedly" (quoted in "Prep: A Novel"). Criticism was leveled against the somewhat slow plot: Elissa Schappell in *The New York Times* complained that "[r]ead as fiction, Sittenfeld's novel sets up dramatic expectations that aren't met," while Laken pointed out that "many of the novel's events are predictable." *People Magazine* complained, in an otherwise positive review, that "there's not much of a story here."

Taken collectively, the reviews gravitate to three nodal points: class, agency, and authenticity. The reviewers seem to agree that class is at the heart of the novel. Felicia R. Lee states that "*Prep* is very much a novel about class"; Schappell wants to see the novel on every summer reading list because of "the incisive and evenhanded way in which Sittenfeld explores issues of class," Laken praises Sittenfeld for "illuminat[ing] the way class lines divide students not externally but internally," and Wood concludes that "*Prep* is largely about one girl's discovery of class and her subsequent learning curve." It is striking to see, however, that hardly any of the reviews actually engage with the issue of class (in the novel or elsewhere) in any depth. Schappell is one of the few who ventures a little deeper, only to conclude that Lee's story demonstrates "a lesson some never [learn]: that the rich cannot only be complex and interesting, they can teach a judgmental middle-class girl

7 I have read and analyzed roughly twenty-five reviews of the novel.

something about tolerance and grace." Statements such as this already point to the novel's complicated and problematic treatment of class, discussed in more detail below.

A second nodal point generated in the reviews is the question of agency and the attribution of blame. Reviewers agree that Lee's story is largely a story of failure—in many ways, the novel is reminiscent of the "meritocracy lamenters'" misery memoirs (cf. Koganzon 108) discussed in the second chapter of this study. Even though the contrast between her lower-middle-class background and the elite environment at Ault is related to her inability to cope, most reviewers hold Lee herself responsible for the difficulties she experiences at the school. Stuever calls Lee "the unlovably self-conscious narrator" and points out that due to "her complete inarticulateness and shyness, she makes a high school career of marginalization," thus perhaps insinuating that she actively and consciously attempts to capitalize on her marginality. Laken refers to Lee as a "highly sensitive girl adrift—by her own volition" and concludes that "what isolates Lee is not anything as unchangeable as her face or her pocketbook, but the more complicated matters of her personality and her own resistance." Schappell argues that "Lee is not saint, and no victim, but rather a willing cog in the machine of exclusion," and Hulbert sees Lee's trajectory as "neither peripatetic nor tragic" since it is Lee herself who makes sure that "no one could catch her being intellectually committed, socially invested, or emotionally engaged." By individualizing Lee's experiences at Ault, the reviewers thus depoliticize the novel's position on class—Lee's failures are attributed to her personal inadequacy, and not to systemic factors.

The third nodal point structuring the majority of reviews is the notion of authenticity and, related, that of verisimilitude. If, following *People Magazine*, *Prep* offers a "voyeuristic trip inside an enclave of privilege," reviewers want to know whether the novel's observations are 'authentic'. It is important to note, however, that this is not only an issue of whether or not the portrayal of the elite educational experience is deemed realistic and convincing or not, but very much rests on Sittenfeld's author position. As a graduate of Groton, she is depicted as having a legitimate claim to tell the story. The importance of this notion of membership again reflects the incestuousness of the discourse of elite education discussed already in the context of the critical-analytical studies. The reviews are thus full of gestures of authenticity and legitimacy that seem necessary to establish credibility within this discourse: Schappell states that "Sittenfeld's dialogue is so convincing that one wonders if she didn't wear a wire under her hockey kilt" and concludes that

Prep "feels like a memoir." Laken similarly points out that the "narrator's voice is crafted so naturally that the novel has the feeling of a memoir or a girl's diary." Furthermore, thanks to Random House's successful publicity campaign, Sittenfeld's ties to Groton are common knowledge. Few reviews thus get by without asking "How much of the first-person book is Curtis and how much is Lee?" (Lee). Stuever concludes that "it's hard to really know how much of *Prep* is autobiography." In her many interviews, Sittenfeld concedes that the novel's Ault School is based on Groton, but otherwise stresses its fictionality, pointing out that it is a "very plotted book" and that only "few of the characters are composites or based on real people" (quoted in Lee). Felicia R. Lee dedicates an entire article in *The New York Times* to the question of autobiography, titled somewhat awkwardly: "Although She Wrote What She Knew, She Says She Isn't What She Wrote." Colleen Long, writing for the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, puts it more poignantly: "Author Not Neurotic Dork of *Prep*." In many ways, this emphasis on the author's claim to her narrative is distinctive to the discourse of elite education, which does not seem to allow outsiders to participate to any meaningful extent.

Almost all of the reviews create intertextual connections between *Prep* and other novels and films, thus positioning the text within the landscape of fictional explorations of the elite educational space. Perhaps the most common comparison is that with J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*: The *US News & World Report* reports that "[f]or everyone who wished that Holden Caulfield was a girl, your time has come" ("Curtis Sittenfeld: Prep"); the *Washington Post*'s title says "Move over, Holden: Curtis Sittenfeld Writes About Boarding School Life as if She's Been There" (Stuever). The basis for this comparison seems to be no more substantive than the boarding school setting—even though large parts of *Catcher in the Rye* do not, in fact, take place at Pencey Prep—and Sittenfeld herself, while "incredibly flattered," does not really see many similarities between the two novels (2005). Most of the other texts mentioned in reviews share the elite setting: *Dead Poets Society*, John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*, Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons*, Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, the *Harry Potter* series, and *Clueless*. Because Sittenfeld's protagonist is female and unhappy, and because the author was the winner of the *Seventeen Magazine* fiction contest in 1992, there is a fair share of Sylvia Plath comparisons as well. Surprisingly few intertextual connections stress the issue of class, such as *The OC*, *The Great Gatsby*, and the novels of Edith Wharton. One reviewer alludes to "the old kind of class novel—about striving and trying to move up by learning the upper-class code" and mentions Dreiser and Crane as possible points of

comparison (McGrath). All in all, it is interesting to note that even though the reviews stress the novel's examination of class and alienation, the boarding school setting seems to dominate completely in terms of intertextual connections. Interestingly, none of the reviews mentions any of the other, more recent campus novels set at elite boarding schools or colleges, for instance Tobias Wolff's *Old School* (2003) or Tom Perrotta's *Joe College* (2000), both of which feature protagonists who, like Lee, do not fit in at their elite institutions, but who are more successful in trying to overcome their outsider status. Another curious absence is the *Gossip Girl* series, whose first installment was published in 2002, and which is set at a private school in Manhattan and features two middle-class characters adrift in the world of privilege.

There is a noticeable disconnection between the signifiers mobilized by the marketing campaign and the reviews of the novel. The publicity generated by Random House's Team Prep revolved around the signifier 'preppiness', which suggested a quirky, fun take on an American "subculture." The items involved in the campaign—the belts, the gift baskets, the yearbook pages—point toward the genre of Chick Lit. The reviews, however, almost unanimously read *Prep* as a serious novel about class (and, to a lesser extent, race and gender) at an elite boarding school, and while most of them acknowledge the specificities of the setting, many also mention the novel's universality: According to *Newsday*, "Sittenfeld captures the universal conundrum of teen life," while *The Detroit News* praises her for being "superb at […] floating ideas about human nature, education and the society that invented prep schools" ("Curtis Sittenfeld: Prep"). Many of the reviews talk about Sittenfeld capturing 'high school experience' or 'adolescence' perfectly, thus abstracting the novel from its immediate setting at an exclusive private boarding school. *Prep*'s treatment of class is therefore likewise seen as a more general statement about socio-economic issues in the United States, not just on the elite campus. As this brief overview has demonstrated, *Prep* has not only reached a surprisingly large readership, but was also overwhelmingly taken seriously as a commentary on class and elite education in the United States. My discussion of the most prominent reviews has also illustrated, however, that only very few use *Prep* as a point of departure to actually think about (in)equality, class, education, and notions of Americanness.

Academic Criticism: *Prep* and the Neoliberal Imagination

Overall, *Prep* has generated relatively little academic attention.[8] A few months after its publication, however, Walter Benn Michaels published an article titled "The Neoliberal Imagination," in which he reads *Prep* alongside Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons*, a reading that later also finds its way into his much-discussed *The Trouble with Diversity* (2006). In the following, I want to take up and expand on Michaels's reading, which I find in equal parts compelling and reductive. Building on the notion of a 'neoliberal imagination' I want to interrogate the novel's complex relationship with the larger discursive context in which it was produced—a context in which neoliberalism is the dominant mode of meaning-making.

Neoliberalism

Before thinking in more detail about the peculiarities of the neoliberal imagination, a brief excursus on neoliberalism itself is necessary. Of course, whole books have been written in the attempt to offer a taxonomy of what Loïc Wacquant calls a "slippery, hazy and contentious category" (68). Indeed, according to Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins, neoliberalism has become "such a cross-disciplinary buzzword in recent years that some scholars suggest 'neoliberalism fatigue' may be settling in" (2). My account of the concept, then, will of necessity be brief and schematic, but nonetheless important to understanding *Prep*'s position within the neoliberal imagination.

According to Clive Barnett, neoliberalism evolved out of a "family of ideas" developed in the context of a revitalization and rethinking of economic liberalism in the mid-twentieth century (269). The success story of neoliberalism, Barnett continues, is told and re-told "through a standardized narrative that touches on a series of focal points:"

> [A] period of economic crisis which shook the foundations of the post-Second World War, Keynesian settlement as the conjuncture in which previously marginal neoliberal economic theories were translated into real-world policy scenarios; the role of economists from the University of Chicago in Pinochet's Chile in the 1970s, Reagonomics in the USA in the 1980s, and so-called Thatcherism in the UK in the 1980s; the role of key

8 A notable exception is Stefanie Schäfer's *'Just the two of us': Self-narration and Recognition in the Contemporary American Novel* (2011), which dedicates a chapter to *Prep*.

> international agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank as being responsible for diffusing neoliberalism globally through the so-called Washington Consensus in development and foreign aid policy; and the taken-for-granted claim that neoliberalism has, over time, been transformed from an ideology into common sense. (270)

This brief narrative already suggests a number of different dimensions on which the term 'neoliberalism' operates. On the one hand, as an economic theory and as the practical implementation of that theory in specific localized contexts, but on the other hand, in a broader sense, as an "ideational project" (Barnett 270) that seeks to create the subjectivities it needs in order to function. Even more broadly, neoliberalism is understood as what David Harvey calls a "hegemonic […] mode of discourse" (23): twenty-first century common sense. Since it has been pointed out time and again that neoliberalism in its purest form actually does not exist anywhere and the "theoretical utopianism of the neoliberal argument has worked more as a system of justification and legitimization" (Harvey 29)—retrospectively, rather than proactively, as it were—Barnett also introduces the term 'neoliberalization' to describe the various geographically and temporally uneven processes associated with the diffusion, articulation, and normalization of neoliberal thought (270).

If we assume that neoliberalism is involved in a constant struggle to create the subjectivities that enable it to function, and if we assume further that these subjectivities are not only created through the channels mentioned above—the economy, politics, the law—then it becomes imperative to trace neoliberal ideas and principles in the everyday images and texts we encounter, the practices in which we engage, the beliefs and convictions we have come to claim as our own. Thus, when a young student activist from the Netherlands yells "Yeah, fuck the neoliberal narrative" (quoted in D'Astous and Gerlings), she is referring to much more than her country's economic policies or the mindset of those institutions that regulate global finance and commerce, i.e. the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). She is referring to something much larger and yet more elusive, something which Wacquant, borrowing from Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, calls a "'generalized normativity', a 'global rationality' that 'tends to structure and organize, not only the actions of the governing, but also the conduct of the governed themselves' and even their self-conception according to principles of competition, efficiency, and utility" (69-70).

A helpful concept to make sense of the range and reach of neoliberalism is Michel Foucault's notion of 'governmentality', developed in a set of lectures at the Collège de France in 1978 and 1979. Etymologically, the term 'governmentality' derives from the French *gouvernemental* ("concerning government") and had already been used by Roland Barthes, albeit with a different meaning (Lemke 44). In his thoughts on power, Foucault argues for an opening of the notion of government:

> This word must be allowed the very broad meaning it had in the sixteenth century. 'Government' did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed—the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick. It covered not only the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, that were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others. (2000: 341)

The notion of neoliberal governmentality as a force that influences regimes and individuals alike helps to grasp the reach of the various neoliberalisms—transcending economic theory and political programs and entering cultural practices, everyday behaviors and consumption patterns, and, ultimately, the aesthetics and politics of twenty-first-century self-making. Thinking about neoliberalism through the lens of governmentality thus allows us to trace its impact beyond economic developments, political programs, and legislation. It also solves some of the apparent contradictions in neoliberal ideology, namely the seemingly incompatible imperatives of de-regulation on the one hand and government on the other: The ideology of complete freedom ultimately results in structures of restriction that are actualized not through overt force or regimentation but through internalization, rendering them all the more potent. Neoliberal governmentality thus merges these two contradictory demands.

Wacquant argues that neoliberal thought is actualized in four different spheres: the economic, the social, the penal, and the cultural. In the economic sphere, the narrative is one of entrepreneurial freedom and the conviction that human well-being will be advanced most effectively by "the extension of market or market-like mechanisms" (72). The realm of social policy, fittingly, is characterized by a "shift from protective welfare […] to corrective workfare" (ibid.)—assistance is thus turned from a right to a conditional privilege.

The "penal apparatus" (74) is drastically enlarged by "[e]xpansive and pornographic penal policy" (72), and Wacquant reminds us that this includes not only the ever growing prison population but also the increasing use of police force, "recourse to the courts" in all kinds of matters, the "hyperactivity of legislatures" (75), and, in general, the climate of fear and anxiety dominating the media and election campaigns. All of this ultimately results in "the bending of penal policy to emotive and symbolic parameters, in overt disregard for penological expertise" (75). Last, and for this context most important, the "organizational quadruped" (72) of neoliberalism is actualized in the "trope of individual responsibility as motivating discourse and cultural glue that pastes these various components of state activity together" (ibid.).

This "glue" can be traced across the entire cultural spectrum, from the booming self-help industry to Hollywood films, television series, and novels, from the advertising industry to the vast blogosphere that shows us how to optimize everything from our own bodies to our children and home décor. All these discursive formations congeal around the nodal points of self-management, optimization, transformation, and (physical, emotional, and intellectual) mobility. The meritocracy of affect propagated in the self-description of Princeton University, as I have shown in the previous chapter, is one instantiation of these dynamics; the images and narratives that constitute it reiterate and celebrate precisely these imperatives.

According to Mitchell Dean, neoliberal governmentality can be seen as constructing, via the above-mentioned and other channels, "a world of autonomous individuals, of 'free subjects'" (193). But, as he points out, this liberalism is highly ambivalent:

> This is a subject whose freedom is a condition of subjection. The exercise of authority presupposes the existence of a free subject of need, desire, rights, interests and choice. However, its subjection is also a condition of freedom: in order to act freely, the subject must first be shaped, guided and moulded into one capable of responsibly exercising that freedom through systems of domination. Subjection and 'subjectification' are laid upon one another. Each is a condition of the other. (ibid.)

Julie Guthman calls this process "responsibilization" and argues that it generates a "hyper-vigilance about control and self-discipline" (193), as for instance in the context of 'health':

> [N]eoliberal governmentality produces contradictory impulses such that the neoliberal subject is compelled to participate in society both as an enthusiastic consumer and as a self-controlled subject. […] Those who can achieve thinness amid this plenty are imbued with the rationality and self-discipline that those who are fat must logically lack. So, as thinness becomes a performance (and requisite) of success in a neoliberal world, it effectively becomes a criterion by which one is treated as a subject, a marker of deservingness in a political economy all too geared toward legitimizing such distinctions. Yet unlike the Puritan ethic, in which wanting less was a mark of salvation, the worthy neoliberal citizen must seem to want less while spending more. Spending money on becoming thin is the perfect solution for both neoliberal subjectivity and neoliberal capitalism more broadly. (ibid.)

The neoliberal subject, if it wants to be successful in reaping the rewards promised in the narratives and images currently in circulation, is thus encouraged to live in accordance with an ostensibly self-imposed regimen of optimization, structured by the imperatives of flexibility, transformation, mobility, and enthusiastic self-control.

Prep in the Neoliberal Imagination

While Michaels credits both *Prep* and *Charlotte Simmons* "for attempting to imagine an America in which the fact that some people have more money than others matters" he also places both of them squarely within the "neoliberal imagination" (93). The "imaginative world of neoliberalism" (101), according to Michaels, does not want to concern itself with class difference; indeed, at its very core is a desire not to counteract, nor even think about, socio-economic stratification. This makes perfect sense if we conceive of the neoliberal turn, with David Harvey, as "a political scheme aimed at […] the restoration of class power" (29). Michaels argues convincingly that the neoliberal imagination reframes class along the lines of race and gender, thus suggesting that the issue lies not in the difference itself but in condescending or discriminatory treatment of the difference: "[T]he politics of the neoliberal imagination involve respecting the poor, not getting rid of poverty—eliminating inequality without redistributing wealth" (110).

What, then, is Michaels's reading of the novels in the context of the neoliberal imagination? Essentially, he expresses two major points of criticism: First, that while the scholarship novel as such is often thought to "expos[e] the injustices of class differences" at elite institutions, it really only pretends

that there are class differences at these institutions to begin with (96). He is not wrong in pointing out the lack of socio-economic diversity at elite institutions, as the research conducted by the Equality of Opportunity Project has demonstrated. Because there is very little actual class diversity at these institutions, the scholarship novel, according to Michaels, fulfills the same function as "the (very few) poor people at Harvard," namely "to reassure the (very many) rich people at Harvard that you can't just buy your way into Harvard" (100).

Michaels's second point of criticism is his contention that *Prep* and *Charlotte Simmons* both rephrase the problem of socio-economic inequality in the language of identity politics, so that the problem is no longer the inequality itself, but what he terms the "'condescension' problem, the suggestion that at elite institutions, the poor are made to feel their poverty"(2005). Thus, according to Michaels, the issues faced by the novels' protagonists can be subsumed under the heading of 'classism'—precisely the pseudo-problem that the neoliberal imagination creates in order to mask the actual problem of socio-economic inequality.

Michaels's reading is, in part, certainly convincing—particularly when one takes the macro-level of the genre of the campus novel into account. Almost all recent exemplars of the genre follow the same blue print of lower- or middle-class protagonists entering the elite educational space via a scholarship, and then having to find their way among their upper-class peers. Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, Tobias Wolff's *Old School*, and Tom Perrotta's *Joe College*, to name but a few examples, all follow this structure. Incidentally, a similar phenomenon can be observed in the context of journalistic writing on the subject of elite education. Many of those who responded to William Deresiewicz's controversial critique of the Ivy League, for instance, were quick to establish their lower-(middle-)class credentials: Andrew Giambrone begins his article—suggestively titled "I'm a Laborer's Son. I went to Yale. I'm not trapped in a Bubble of Privilege"—by pointing out that he comes "from a family of construction workers and laundry-owners in Brooklyn, the descendants of Italian and Chinese immigrants, respectively," thus conflating his ethnic and socio-economic identities. J.D. Chapman, similarly, tells us in his first sentence that he "was born and raised in Roanoke, Virginia, a medium-sized city in the Blue Ridge mountains. It is not the sort of place that produces many Ivy League graduates." If one were to take campus novels and opinion pieces as the basis for an estimation of the socio-economic make up of elite schools and colleges, then, one would likely assume almost two thirds of the students to

come from lower-middle-class families. These and countless other examples thus support Michaels's claim that much of the discourse of elite education revolves around the pretense of socio-economic diversity and the concomitant issues of discrimination or condescension, even though actual student bodies at elite institutions remain largely dominated by the upper and upper middle classes.

At the same time, however, Michaels's reading of *Prep* is reductive and superficial. When, in his closing paragraph, he sums up the neoliberal "desire not to have to get rid of class difference," he claims that this desire "[a]most always [...] takes the form of insisting that class doesn't matter; that, like Lee's mom says, being rich doesn't make you a better person" (2005). This, I argue, is an almost complete misreading of *Prep*, a novel that certainly demonstrates that class *does* matter and offers a complex account of its material and cultural foundations and reverberations. In the remainder of this section, I thus want to expand and complicate Michaels's take on *Prep*.

Reading *Prep* as both product and constituent of the neoliberal imagination makes sense for three reasons: The novel's production context, its publication context, and its chosen setting. Curtis Sittenfeld is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. The creative writing program, as Mark McGurl argues in his seminal book *The Program Era* (2009), "stands as the most important event in postwar American literary history" (ix), and it is surely no coincidence that the success story of the writing program is largely coeval with the 'success' story of neoliberalism. Despite the ever-growing number of competitors, Iowa is doubtless the "best-known, most-established writing program in the country" (Delaney). As Loren Glass points out, in its attempts to streamline and standardize the process of becoming a successful writer, the "creative writing program as an institution exists at the intersection of contemporary neoliberalism and the creative class." Creativity, he argues, has been transformed into an integral part of the "ideology of the neoliberal era"—though surely he refers to a specific notion of creativity, efficient and goal-oriented, ultimately transmutable into something marketable.

Prep was not only produced but also published in a neoliberal context, as my discussion of the publicity and marketing campaign has illustrated, and it is safe to assume that *Prep* in some way reflects the neoliberal climate of its publication. In addition to the context of production and publication, the novel's setting—the elite boarding school—likewise encourages a reading through the lens of neoliberalism, since, as Michaels points out, educational institutions "loom larger" in the imaginative world of neoliberalism than they

did in the liberal imagination, because they have become the dominant mechanism of legitimizing the current status quo of socio-economic stratification (2005): Rich people are rich because they are smart and ambitious and went to the right schools; poor people are poor because they are stupid and lazy and did not go to any school at all. The importance of education in the neoliberal imagination is also reflected in its penchant for the concept of the meritocracy, a system of hierarchization in which educational credentials play a pivotal role. If we assume, with Raymond Williams, "that there are clear social and historical relations between particular literary forms and the societies and periods in which they were originated or practiced" (182-3) it becomes imperative to read *Prep* both as a variant of the campus novel and the coming-of-age story and as a part of the neoliberal imagination.

What, then, does it mean to ask whether a text is part of the neoliberal imagination? What *is* the neoliberal imagination? Are all novels produced in the neoliberal age part of the neoliberal imagination? Michaels, as we have seen above, defines the imaginative world of neoliberalism primarily in terms of what it renders invisible: class. In another article, in which he discusses the work of Michael Fried and Jacques Rancière, he describes the "neoliberal aesthetics" as one concerned with "the primacy of the beholder and [...] the subject" and diagnoses a "refusal of form" that is critical of "hierarchies of vision" but indifferent toward hierarchies produced by socio-economic factors. Critique within this neoliberal framework, according to Michaels, is always directed at "how we see ourselves and each other," but as class is not produced by how we see, it "cannot be overcome by *seeing* differently" (2011, my emphasis). Thus, Michaels argues, the aesthetics of anti-formalism are largely compatible with the politics of neoliberalism (Clune).

Employing the notion of governmentality here enables us to broaden the notion of the neoliberal imagination considerably and define it not only according to what it refuses to see, but also by why what it deems worthy of hypervisualization. Thinking about a neoliberal imagination or aesthetics assumes that there are certain forms of storytelling, certain modes of narration, certain images and imaginative inventories that are privileged within the hegemonic neoliberal governmentality. These might be narratives that mobilize certain neoliberal values or character traits—ambition, creativity, hard work, flexibility, individualism, transformation, success—and render invisible qualities that do not fit the mold of neoliberal subjectivity: exhaustion, depression, boredom, normalcy, failure, stagnation. It is interesting to note, in this context, that even narratives ostensibly critical of neoliberal ideation

often follow these trajectories. For instance, the article about the young Dutch student activist mentioned above is titled "Beginning to Win: Amsterdam, Red Squares and the Student Struggle," thus evoking a standard struggle-to-success narrative of winners and losers, and introduces the protagonist, Judith Baten, by pointing out that "[r]egardless of the fact that she had been averaging 2 hours of sleep for the last week, Baten was full of energy" (D'Astous and Gerlings). One might be tempted to point out that lack of sleep over a prolonged period of time is unhealthy, or that responding to sleep deprivation with an excess of energy is bordering on the pathological, but in the framework of the neoliberal imagination, descriptions such as this mobilize the topoi of resilience and perseverance and therefore inspire admiration rather than critique. Even those who are critical of and work to dismantle the neoliberal system—in this case, in the educational sphere—thus seem incapable of avoiding the tropes and the rhetoric of the neoliberal imagination.

Julie Levinson, in her 2012 book *The American Success Myth on Film*, examines a number of films ranging from the 1920s to the present with regard to the way they articulate the myth of work and success in America. She argues that at the core of these and other expressions of the American success myth "lies the promise of mobility and self-making:"

> Americans, these stories tell us, are endowed with the inalienable right to create an adult self out of whole cloth, rather than simply making do with the identity in which we find ourselves clad. We are active subjects rather than compliant objects of our personal destinies. Accidents of birth, rather than being implacable impediments to advancement, are merely challenges to be overcome through hard work. From log cabin to White House, from scruffy music club to arena rock superstardom, from the mailroom to the executive suite, the biographical and fictional heroes of success myth tales accomplish their rise through their single-minded application of the work ethic and their adherence to the individualist credo of competitive advantage. And if they can do it, these stories tell us, anyone and everyone can too if they want it badly enough. (21)

The cultural work in which these narratives engage, according to Levinson, is one of "normaliz[ing] the outliers. In a sort of cultural synecdoche, we extrapolate from the tales of people who have achieved significant social and vocational mobility the conviction that everyone in America can do the same" (22). These tales of rugged individualism, hard work, and steely determination, rendered in the dynamic language of inevitable progress and optimism, are

of course not an invention of the neoliberal era but evolve from a much older American archetype, rooted in the Declaration of Independence, the mythology of the frontier, and the notion of American exceptionalism.

The entrepreneurial spirit invoked in these narratives is of course associated with capitalism as well as neoliberalism, but the cultural imperatives it generates differ considerably depending on the framework. The neoliberal modulation of this script is one of hyper-individuation: An intensified focus on one's self as one's most valuable capital and, at the same time, as a perpetual construction site—the project of self-optimization can never be completed. While the traditional, capitalist American Dream narrative focuses on prosperity, success, and upward mobility through externalized achievement, the neoliberal dream instantiates the self as the primary locus of optimization and marketization. Success is measured in the management and improvement of one's own body, one's psyche, one's affects and emotions; the individual, in the process, is turned into the insatiable investor, shareholder, and CEO of his or her own Self, Inc.

In thinking about plot structures, tropes, and topoi that seem particularly compatible with neoliberal sentiment, the question of genre arises almost naturally. In recent years, as Elliott and Harkins point out, scholars have increasingly focused on "the way in which various forms of literary and cultural genres participate in struggles over the meaning of *neoliberalism* and the aesthetic terms that should be used to define the political present" (1). In their own special issue of *Social Text*, titled "Genres of Neoliberalism," the editors attempt to "map the current temporal and territorial imaginaries animating genres of neoliberalism" (4) by collecting pieces that engage with various genres and expressions of neoliberal topoi—temporal structures in Filipino cinema; the dystopian fiction of Octavia Butler; agency in Latin American genres of precarious criminality; agency as burden in popular print genres; the 'noir' genre in novels and film. Other forms or modes of storytelling that have come under scrutiny with regard to the question of how they "register implementations of and resistance to neoliberalism" (Elliott and Harkins 6) are Reality TV—in particular the make-over narrative—and narratives of multiculturalism that, according to Michaels, expose "the utopian imagination of neoliberalism" by reframing socio-economic difference "not as an inequality to be eliminated but as a difference to be respected" (2006: 299).

Levinson likewise addresses the importance of genre in the context of the emergence and consolidation of the American success myth—genre, after all, describes sets of stories that "we tell […] again and again [to] find com-

fort in their formulaic assurance that hard work and virtue reliably yield upward mobility and happiness" (23). In addition to conventional rags-to-riches stories—Levinson's prime example is Gabriele Muccino's 2006 biographical drama *The Pursuit of Happyness*, a film perhaps impossible to outperform in terms of the purity of its ideological content—Levinson mentions coming-of-age stories and the traditional Bildungsroman, and thus brings us back to the text at the center of this discussion, Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*.

By virtue of its setting—the elite boarding school—and its spatial and temporal structure, *Prep* can readily be described as a campus novel. Most of the plot takes place on campus, with Lee only occasionally venturing into the outside world—the mall, the trip to Boston, the airport, Christmas breaks at home in Indiana. The novel's temporal structure, too, reflects its academic setting: Starting, in the first chapter, with Lee's freshman fall, each of the following seven chapter is "set in academic time" (Showalter 7)—freshman winter and spring; sophomore fall, junior fall, winter, and spring; senior year. The temporal and spatial boundedness might be said to raise certain expectations as to the protagonist's mobility—entering the elite educational space in the beginning, then moving through the four years, and exiting the space toward the end of the narrative.

Most of the reviews, however, employ a different genre marker and refer to *Prep* as a coming-of-age story (e.g. Hunt, Laken, Wood, Boss, *EarthGoat*, Schappell, among others). This is also what the descriptive paratext on *Amazon* and *Goodreads* says: "Curtis Sittenfeld's debut novel, *Prep*, is an insightful, achingly funny coming-of-age story as well as a brilliant dissection of class, race, and gender in a hothouse of adolescent angst and ambition." The decision to make use of the marker 'coming-of-age' might have been strategic—as we have seen in the beginning of this chapter, the campus novel is a term laden with conflicting associations; furthermore, the coming-of-age story seems to hold a quintessentially American appeal, alluding, as it does, to classics such as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884/85) and J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951).

According to Jonathan Culler, genre markers function "to establish a contract between writer and reader so as to make certain relevant expectations operating, and thus to permit both compliance with and deviation from accepted modes of intelligibility" (172). What, then, are the expectations operative in the context of the coming-of-age narrative? Kenneth Millard, in his study *Coming of Age in Contemporary American Fiction*, traces the genre of the coming-of-age novel to its German predecessor, the Bildungsroman, a

term coined in 1819 and referring to "a novel recounting the early emotional development and moral education of its protagonist" (2). The coming-of-age story, the Bildungsroman, and related genres such as the autobiography and the memoir commonly follow the same ritualized structure: "The protagonist [...] starts out as a novice, encounters and overcomes the challenges of adversity, and ends his or her story as a more mature adult character as a result of their experience" (3). Kirk Curnutt, writing about *The Catcher in the Rye* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, argues that "[t]raditionally, adolescent fictions [...] caution against the stifling conformity, empty materialism, and false piety of the bourgeois home" (94). According to Schappell, readers might furthermore expect a "defining moment [...] where we feel that life will never be the same again, or some truth about human nature is revealed"—she offers the "Knowlesian Gene-and-Finny-in-the-tree scene" as an example.[9] Mitchell adds to this by noting the importance of innocence in the dramatization of adolescence: "How is such innocence conceptualized and configured by these novels, what forms of social experience does it encounter, and what kind of maturity might it be said to achieve?" (5). In any case, it is safe to assume that the marker 'coming-of-age' is associated with expectations of development, transformation, emotional and intellectual mobility—the protagonist is expected to grow in, through, and against his or her environment.

As a private, elite boarding school, Ault is in many ways an exemplary institution of the neoliberal era. Funded through tuition, endowments, and gifts, these schools often offer sizable tax breaks for parents who enroll their children. Private schools are thus situated at that neoliberal juncture of insisting on independence and minimal state intervention on the one hand, and yet on the other hand still directly and indirectly relying on and profiting from public structures and public money. In the grander scheme of higher education in the United States, elite boarding schools furthermore symbolize the neoliberal tendency of rewarding the few and neglecting the many: While a small number of select schools command vast resources and boundless opportunities for their students, the great mass of public schools are suffering from budget cuts, growing class sizes, and a lack of well-trained and dedicated teachers.

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9 One of the most famous examples of this is the formative moment in John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* when the protagonist, Gene, out of jealousy causes his best friend Finny to fall from a tree, hurting himself badly. Much of the novel is concerned with Gene's attempts to understand his behavior and cope with his guilt.

The value structure at Ault reflects the neoliberal modulation of traditional liberal values. The school's incentive structure is oriented toward competition, individual achievement, a well-developed work ethic, and the legitimization of privilege through a discourse of merit. These all figure in the liberal imagination as well. Lee's experience, however, demonstrates the degree to which the system has been permeated by neoliberal tendencies: At Ault, legitimization through merit works primarily through competitive distinction, through being better than one's peers—for instance through excelling academically, or by attaining positions such as the senior prefectship, or by becoming captain of one's sports team. Merit in Lee's environment is a flexible, multidimensional category that is not exclusively, or even predominantly, expressed through academic prowess. Even more importantly, as becomes clear in the course of the novel, those involved in the incentive structure care primarily about the success itself; the specific ways of achieving it are of secondary importance. This insistence on success for its own sake, in which the persuasive performance of liberal values is rewarded more than the actual engagement with them, is a product of the neoliberal imagination. Lee, however, refuses both sets of imperatives, the liberal and the neoliberal, and thus becomes a stumbling block in the system.

The process of infinite exclusification and the conception of this process as a zero-sum game mean, of course, that not everyone can be equally successful in this system. Failure is a part of Ault as it is of neoliberalism as such—but the novel demonstrates that those who fail do not fall too hard: Lee, despite her lack of accomplishments, is accepted at Mount Holyoke—one of the Seven Sisters and, according to *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, in the selectivity category "highly competitive plus"—and another student is "bitter now because he's going to Trinity" (378) instead of Harvard or Yale, even though, as Michaels points out, this is unlikely to have economic ramifications: "[T]he graduates of Trinity are also being ushered out of upper-middle-class adolescence into upper-middle-class adulthood" (2006: 100). In the neoliberal era just as before, capital, in all of its forms, is an effective tool to correct the failures of the individual.

Conclusion: The Neoliberal Reader

The reader—particularly when she is familiar with other coming-of-age stories set in educational spaces—is constantly waiting for that decisive moment that will set Lee's intellectual, psychosocial, or socio-economic development

in motion: The falling out between Dink and his crowd in *Stover at Yale*; the tree scene in *A Separate Peace*; the murder in *The Secret History;* the cheating scandal in *Old School*; the rape in *Charlotte Simmons*. This does not happen for Lee, who points out that the "big occurrences in life, the serious ones, have for me always been nearly impossible to recognize because they never *feel* big or serious. In the moment, you have to pee, or your arm itches, or what people are saying strikes you as melodramatic or sentimental, and it's hard not to smirk" (211). As Valerie Laken puts it in her review, "we wait in vain for Lee to blossom and find her place in the world." In what is certainly one of the most interesting comments *Prep* makes with regard to the neoliberal imagination, Lee comments on her own stagnation and lack of mobility and, implicitly, on the readers' expectations:

> I'd always loved the part in movies when a project, or even a person's whole life, came together: […] the twenty-something woman who finally lost weight, dancing through aerobics classes, mopping her brow while she rode a gym bike, with a white towel around her neck, and then at last she emerged from the bathroom all cleaned up, bashful but beautiful (of course, she had no idea how beautiful), and her best friend hugged her before she left for the date or party that would be her triumph. I wanted to be that person, and I wanted the in-between time when I improved myself to glide by just that smoothly, with its own festive soundtrack. (262-3)

Lee's reflection on her desire for a montage is instructive for several reasons. First, this reflexivity demonstrates that *Prep* is certainly to a degree aware of its own status as a novel in the neoliberal era, and of its somewhat precarious position as an expression of and simultaneously a comment on neoliberalism. Second, it is surely no coincidence that she uses a woman's physical transformation of "finally los[ing] weight" as an example; I have commented above on the importance within the neoliberal imagination of disciplining one's body—particularly the female body. Third, it demonstrates Lee's misreading of *sprezzatura*: She wants the effortlessness to be real, not performative; she wants "the in-between time when I improved myself to glide by just that smoothly." This indicates that she has fundamentally misunderstood the imperatives of the neoliberal imagination.

Along with Lee, we wait in vain for this kind of montage. When she asks her tutor Aubrey whether she would be able to pass an important math exam, he answers in the affirmative, but only if she were "willing to work very hard" (262). This, to Lee, is "worse than if he'd just said no" (ibid.), because "to really

learn precalculus would be laborious and miserable. Plus, it might still not work" (263). Lee thus does not even try; she is afraid of the discomfort and unwilling to take the risk of failure. During the math exam, she gives up after fifteen minutes. When her friend Martha enters the room, Lee represents the visual spectacle of failure: "I was lying on the futon, on my stomach, eating stale tortilla chips. I was hanging my head off the end of the futon so the crumbs would spill onto the floor, and the position was making blood rush into my face" (278). Lee has thus been turned into the specter of failure that haunts the neoliberal imagination: the lazy, timid slob. She nearly fails her math exam, and passes only because Martha does the work for her. Ultimately, Lee refuses to adhere to the imperatives of the merit narrative in both its liberal and neoliberal incarnations: She neither works hard nor performs well.

By playing with the reader's expectations and with the genre conventions of the coming-of-age story and the campus novel, *Prep* ultimately undermines and subverts the "normalcy of mobility" (Jones 12). I argue that, in resisting the conventional structure of the success myth and asking us to identity with a protagonist who—much to our dismay and discomfort—refuses to play along with the imperatives of the liberal and the neoliberal imagination, the narrative in fact creates a neoliberal reader. Her lack of self-discipline, of drive, of courage is offensive to us. We want Lee to grab herself by the bootstraps; we, in turn, want "to grab her by the collar, aggressively shake her, and help her avoid some of her regretful decisions" (Readfully), as one reviewer puts it; we want her to conform to the liberal notion of a sovereign, controlled, and deserving self. But we want this to happen in the neoliberal way: in the way of a smooth transformation, an inspirational performance of ease and mobility. The frustration with Lee's passivity and immobility is aggravated by the fact that she is a complicated protagonist; many readers experience difficulties and reluctance in their attempts to identify with her—she has been called "terribly unlikable" (Labell), "whiny and self-centered" (Writer in progress), a snob (Hulbert), a "willing cog in the machine of exclusion" (Schappell). Lee's racism and her arrogance toward those whom she believes to be in the lower echelons of the social taxonomy—Ms. Moray, Dave, Sin-Jun—add to these difficulties. Over long stretches, the novel thus makes it difficult to empathize with its protagonist.

Positioning the reader as a neoliberal subject creates a certain ambiguity. On the one hand, it might encourage a re-examination of neoliberal values and a questioning of the role of the elite education system in reproducing class structures. On the other hand, *Prep* individualizes and thus, to an ex-

tent, depoliticizes Lee's class-based experiences. As one reviewer puts it, ["i]t would be very easy to blame the school's not-so-subtle caste system for Lee's problems and unhappiness, but Sittenfeld doesn't" (Schappell). If the novel does not engage in a criticism of the way elite institutions make class meaningful or a criticism of how class as a systemic factor informs and often obstructs an individual's development, then what does it do? Levinson argues that the American success myth is "sustained by widely disseminated stories, both fact-based and fictional, meant to demonstrate that mobility is largely a matter of individual agency" (22). Does *Prep* then simply invert the formula of the success myth by individualizing failure and holding Lee responsible for her own immobility?

4. Diversity, Class, Mobility: *Prep*'s Cultural Work

The creation of a neoliberal reader and its ambivalent potential of subverting and affirming neoliberal values is one example of the complex processes of meaning production in which *Prep* engages. In the following I want to return to the notion of 'cultural work', introduced by Jane Tompkins in her study *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (1985). Tompkins's premise is that cultural artifacts should not be studied for their inherent artistic or literary merit, but "because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment" (xi). Since my overall research interest in this study is to understand the ways in which the United States via a number of different epistemological channels—institutional, fictional, academic, and aesthetic—makes sense of its own elite educational system, Tompkins's approach seems particularly appropriate and productive. Though I would not necessarily argue that the texts I am considering "have designs upon their audiences" (ibid.) in the sense that Tompkins uses the phrase, I do agree with her conceptualization of novels as "instruments of cultural self-definition" (xvi) and as "agents of cultural formation" (xvii). In the following section, I thus want to focus on the extent to which the novel gives room to questions and issues that preoccupy and destabilize the discourse of elite education.

An important distinction, in the context of *Prep*, has to be drawn between the *measurable* cultural work the text has inspired, becoming evident, for instance, in articles, reviews, and blog posts, and the *potential* for cultural work

that is inherent in the text itself and might unfold in the process of individual readings. As we have seen, the actual cultural work initiated by *Prep*, at least to the extent that I was able to trace it in public discourse, is fairly limited. While professional reviewers and lay commentators alike seem to agree that that the novel speaks meaningfully about class and that it is important, if uncommon, to do so in twenty-first-century America, very few of the contributions actually use this impetus in any productive way. Few, if any, connections are drawn between the novel's depiction of the inter-class clash experienced by Lee and the lived experience of many who suffer from the consequences of increasing socio-economic inequality. No one used *Prep* as a point of departure to interrogate the (elite) educational system with regard to its democratic duty of ensuring upward mobility and equal opportunity for all. Last but not least, only very few articles comment on the protagonist's—and, by extension, the novel's?—disconcerting racism. Furthermore, not one reviewer discussed *Prep*'s complex negotiation of liberal and neoliberal principles and values or commented on the ways in which the text seems to simultaneously affirm and undermine neoliberal narratives of well-deserved success. In the following, I want to complicate *Prep*'s position in the discourse of elite education by discussing the cultural work in which the novel engages with regard to three topics: the issue of diversity, the negotiation of class, and the imperatives of merit and mobility.

The Diversity Paradigm: 'We have girls, we have blacks, we have Hispanics'

According to its blurb, *Prep* is "a brilliant dissection of class, race, and gender in a hothouse of adolescent angst and ambition." All three categories inform Lee's experience at the Ault School and are addressed by her repeatedly, in ways that are sometimes insightful, but often problematic. Her account of "Ault's social strata" (14) is not merely descriptive, after all; it is normative. As she expounds on the implications of her classmates' race, ethnicity, geographical background, and gender, it becomes clear quite quickly that she is not only exposing the racism, sexism, and classism of the elite educational space, but also, quite disconcertingly, her own. Ultimately, it is up to the reader to decide which of her sentiments and resentments to attribute to Lee herself, and which to the elite educational space.

Toward the end of her senior year at Ault, Lee receives a note telling her to meet with the school's headmaster, Mr. Byden, who suggests that she be part

of a *New York Times* feature on the Ault School. Media attention, Mr. Byden knows, is "always a double-edged sword," especially at a time "when the general public isn't all that enamored with the idea of prep school" (353). He thus asks Lee whether she would be able to provide a "balanced as well as truthful" (354) view of the school, while conveying a sense of pride and gratitude for being part of the Ault community. Per her request, he explains the project:

> "[…] Now, the angle of the story as it's been described to me is the changing face of the American boarding school, with Ault functioning as a stand-in for Overfield, Hartwell Academy, St. Francis, et cetera. What they're saying is, these places are no longer enclaves for the sons of the wealthy. We have girls, we have blacks, we have Hispanics. Despite their reputation, boarding schools are mirrors of American society."
>
> "So I would be speaking as a girl?"
>
> "As a girl, or on behalf of any of your affiliations."
>
> I wondered if he thought there was more to me than met the eye—that I was Appalachian maybe. "Are there specific things I should tell them?"
>
> Mr. Byden grinned. I still think of that grin sometimes. "Just the truth." (ibid.)

This exchange is instructive in a number of ways. First, Mr. Byden's comments illustrate Ault's self-perception—or at least the impression the school wants to convey—as a space that fosters diversity, equality, and inclusion. This image is mirrored, incidentally, in Ault's real-world equivalent, the Groton School, which in its mission statement claims to be "committed to diversity and inclusivity," encouraging a "shared examination of our different perspectives […] especially in terms of race, religion, national origin, gender and sexuality, socioeconomic status, and political ideology" ("Diversity and Inclusion Statement"). It is not surprising, then, that Groton's "Facts at a Glance" section specifies the percentage of students of color—a somewhat remarkable 40 percent. Second, the exchange demonstrates that Mr. Byden feels comfortable mentioning sex, race, and ethnicity, but refrains from addressing the issue at hand: class. This unwillingness can be seen as symptomatic of the treatment of socio-economic factors—or, more precisely, the lack thereof—throughout Ault's "universe of privilege" (175). Mr. Byden clearly wants Lee to speak on behalf of her class background and her position as a scholarship student, but

he just as clearly does not feel comfortable telling her this. Lastly, the scene illustrates Lee's troubled relationship with her own class identity. It remains uncertain whether she really does not understand the role Mr. Byden expects her to play, which—given her obsession with her own and her peers' socio-economic backgrounds—would be surprising. Lee's suggestion that she would be speaking "as a girl" again reveals the lingering invisibility of class in comparison with other identity categories—it is hard to imagine Darden Pittard, the token black interviewee, thinking that he was supposed to speak as a boy. Race, then, is visible and expressible in ways that class is not. Lee's reluctance accentuates the unease she feels toward her own social standing as well as her inability or unwillingness to develop an affirmative stance toward her class identity—there is no place for her in the paradigm of diversity.

Prejudice and Racism

Lee introduces three students of color at Ault by name, one of whom, Kevin Brown—"a skinny chess whiz who wore glasses" (41)—is only mentioned once and in passing. The two others assume parts of some importance in the narrative and can be seen as somewhat crude representations of two types of coping with racial otherness in elite, white surroundings: defiance and assimilation.

Little Washington, a black girl from Pittsburgh, is one of the first classmates Lee interacts with and even considers "trying to become friends with" (13). According to Lee, Little's "blackness made her exist outside of Ault's social strata" (14), which allegedly gives Little "the choice of opting out without seeming like a loser" (ibid.). The reader does not learn much about Little Washington, but what little information is conveyed points to the fact that Little herself might not read her status as affirmatively.[10] The main narrative arc around Little is her exposure as the thief who has been stealing money from the other students in the beginning of freshman year, and Lee is the one who catches and exposes her, which results in Little's expulsion. It is telling

10 A minor storyline revolves around a student complaining to the head of house, Madame Broussard, that someone "is leaving pubic hair in the bathroom sink" (12). This complaint is voiced several times, though no one seems to take it seriously. Several days later, after talking to Little Washington in the bathroom, Lee notices "a sprinkling of short, coarse black hairs" and concludes: "So they were head hairs, Little's head hairs" (23). This anecdote illustrates the degree of separateness Little encounters as a black girl at Ault, and the ignorance, indifference, and even hostility she faces in her everyday life at the school.

that the novel opens with a subplot revolving around economic need and inequality, just as it is telling that Lee has no empathy for Little's situation. Little represents an unruly element within Ault's hierarchy, refusing to accept and internalize its perceived structures in the way Lee does. She maintains a critical distance and seems to see through much of what mystifies Lee. When Lee talks to her about Gates Medkowski, a senior whom she admires, Little drily responds: "She's rich. That's what Gates is. Her family has a whole lot of money" (22). While Lee sees only the charisma that accompanies wealth, Little recognizes the economic foundation on which it is built. After Lee has caught her stealing, Little is unapologetic: "'Their families are loaded […]. They don't need the money'" (35). She unsuccessfully tries to appeal to what she believes to be common ground between her and Lee—"You're gonna act like you don't understand? Don't even try to pretend like you're one of them. […] I can see with my own two eyes you're not paying your way here" (35). The case of Little Washington signals to the reader not only Lee's racism but also the precariousness of her own situation, which makes it impossible for her to show solidarity with her classmate.

The second student of color is introduced as the exact opposite of Little Washington. Darden Pittard is a basketball player from the Bronx, and, according to Lee, "our class's cool black guy" (41)—popular not only because his classmates genuinely like him, but also because "they liked the fact that they genuinely liked a big black guy from the Bronx" (119). Darden, in his "gold chain and rugbies that pulled across his muscular back and broad shoulders" (41) seems to have embraced the role the Ault community wants him to play: racially and culturally other, but comfortably, unthreateningly so. Toward the end of the narrative, the reader learns that this may well have been a conscious strategy of survival, as Darden explains to Lee that "[b]lack people who live in a white world learn to be careful […]. You learn not to make waves" (387). Whereas Little is expelled and has to leave Ault, Darden goes on to become a lawyer and a trustee for the school, thus signaling that assimilation is still the strategy rewarded by the elite system.

Lee's own racism becomes more obvious in her interaction with Rufina Sanchez, one of the three Latina girls in her class. Rufina, we learn, is so good-looking that Lee would have been "intimidated to talk to her if she were white" (44). Following a stereotypical exoticized description of Rufina's appearance—she "had long wild black hair and swollen lips and dark, thin, arched eyebrows over big eyes, and she wore tight jeans and tight shirts" (167)—Lee elaborates on her surprise that Rufina is dating Nick Chaffee, who

is part of a group of wealthy male students: "Surely he didn't want to be her boyfriend—Ault guys almost never went out with minority girls, and if they did, it was some geeky guy and some Asian or Indian girl, never a black or Latina girl from a city and definitely never one of the bank boys" (170). When the fact that Nick and Rufina are in a relationship is confirmed, Lee concludes: "Beauty trumped race, apparently" (201). Just as with Little Washington, Lee feels a "mystified admiration" for Rufina and her friend Maria because "they seemed not to care what people thought of them" (170). Again, Lee reads their ethnic otherness as the root of their freedom to "act irreverent"—"while I could pass, their ethnicity made their status as outsiders definitive" (ibid.).

Lee's system of classification also marks Asianness and Jewishness as deviant and thus defective qualities. A case in point is her treatment of her freshman year roommates, Sin-Jun and Dede. Initially, Lee tells us, she was shy and reserved even with Sin-Jun, because she "hadn't yet determined the hierarchies in a way that classified her as unthreatening" (232). For much of the novel, Sin-Jun, originally from Korea, is portrayed as stereotypically Asian: quiet, ambitious, and generally unobtrusive, except for her penchant for strange and smelly food. It should also be noted that just as Little Washington's speech is marked as African American Vernacular English, Sin-Jun speaks broken English during her entire time at Ault. When Sin-Jun tries to commit suicide during junior year, Lee is stunned: "[P]erhaps I'd underestimated her. Perhaps in the past I hadn't given her credit for having opinions or experiencing discontent—for being like me" (213). Immediately, Sin-Jun's social capital increases in Lee's eyes: ["I]n her new incarnation, I found Sin-Jun intimidating. I could imagine her having disparaging thoughts about me" (231). Lee is unable or unwilling to see the racially and nationally different Sin-Jun as an equal and even doubts her humanity—"having opinion or experiencing discontent"—thus again giving powerful testimony of her own racism and Anglocentrism.

While Lee dismisses Sin-Jun as blank and not fully human, she is downright contemptuous of Dede for being "a follower, literally a follower" (11) who tries to ingratiate herself with the cool kids, even though she is "neither rich enough nor pretty enough to be truly popular" (ibid.). When Lee learns that Dede is interested in Cross, her verdict is clear: "Dede had no chance with Cross. Yes, she was rich, but she was also Jewish, and, with a big nose and the last name Schwartz, she wasn't the kind of Jewish you could hide" (45). The reader does not learn much else about anti-Semitism at Ault, but the American elite educational system itself of course has a long history of dis-

criminating against Jewish students. It seems particularly problematic, then, that we learn toward the end of the novel that Dede ultimately gets a nose job (398), thus perpetuating a host of anti-Semitic stereotypes.

As these examples show, Lee is not merely and observer and chronicler of the racism and anti-Semitism permeating Ault, but an active participant in its construction and perpetuation. It remains unclear, however, where her prejudices originate, because she seems to bring this set of assumptions with her when she arrives. Since she does not tell us anything about overt racism at Ault and we do not have access to anyone's inner life except hers, it is difficult to judge the novel's position toward its protagonist's discriminatory thoughts and practices.

Another relevant axis in Lee's social taxonomy is region. Ranked highest in that hierarchy is New England, ranked lowest the Midwest, Lee's own native land. Other regions are mentioned—Aspeth and Conchita are from Texas, for instance, and Lee mentions some unspecified "Southern students" (351)—but they seem to be unmarked in the taxonomy. "Things are different on the East Coast," Lee tells Conchita during their first conversation, trying to sound nonchalant. Conchita, more open about her attitudes toward her surroundings, admits that when she arrived at Ault, she thought she had "landed on another planet" (69). The difference between the two regions is aesthetic—as Lee points out, "[f]all in the Midwest would be pretty but not overly pretty—not like in New England, where they called the leaves *foliage*" (6) and it is reflected in the behaviors and values of the people. Even though Lee sometimes acutely perceives the indifference and inconsiderateness of her surroundings—"Easterners really didn't care" (186)—her value judgments are clear: "It was Ault people I wanted to convince" (184).

When she first sees her new English teacher, Ms. Moray, Lee remarks on her "tan and muscular" calves—"the legs of someone who'd played field hockey at Dartmouth" (119). When Ms. Moray tells her students that she grew up in Dubuque and went to the University of Iowa, she immediately falls in Lee's esteem, who now "recognized a certain Midwesternness in her. It was in her clothes, especially the denim skirt, and also in her gestures" (122). In a conversation with Lee, Ms. Moray even remarks on their shared geographical background and "admit[s] to a soft spot for a fellow Midwesterner" since "there aren't a whole lot of us at Ault" (137), but instead of creating a common ground, Lee is horrified. After all, her own Midwesternness is not something she wants to be reminded of, much less claim in an affirmative manner. If the central conflict for Lee is between the Northeast and the Midwest, it is

because Lee uses region as a cipher for class; that is, she conceptualizes class differences—aesthetic, behavioral, social—in the rhetoric of region.

Gender

In addition to and conjunction with the racialized categories discussed above, gender is a decisive factor structuring Lee's taxonomy of the Ault School, with regard to social and academic stratification alike. Even though the school is now coeducational, life at Ault is still to an extent characterized by separate spheres and the distinct behaviors, norms, and regularities that accompany them, beginning with the living situation of "four boys' dorms and four girls' dorms" facing each other, "with granite benches in the middle" (7). When Lee visits one of the boys' dorms, she feels "utterly irrelevant, or even worse, like an intruder" because there seems to be no room for girls in the boys' homosocial sphere: "Girls always liked it when boys were around, but it often seemed to me that boys preferred to be by themselves, talking about girls in the hungry way that, I suspected, they found more gratifying that the presence of an actual girl" (150). Again and again, Lee comments on the gendered differences in behavior of boys and girls.[11] Girls' behavior, overall, seems to be more restricted and regulated; Lee feels, for instance, that she should not eat certain foods—"the more meaty or spicy a food was, the more incriminating to a girl" (126); she is worried to address her issues with Cross because she does not want to be "the kind of girl who always wanted to talk" (367) and is horrified at the prospect of crying in front of him because "girls who cry […] are so ordinary" (377-8). While the boys seem to need girls only as a backdrop against which to enact their masculinity, girls' behavior seems structured by and dependent on boys: "[T]here would be so many things I'd do for a guy that I wouldn't do in my usual life—jokes I wouldn't normally tell, places I wouldn't normally go, clothes I wouldn't normally wear, drinks I wouldn't normally drink, food I wouldn't normally eat or food I would normally eat but wouldn't eat in front of him" (289).

Lee's observations furthermore show that she herself uses beauty as the first and most important standard against which to measure girls and

11 Examples include: different types of photographs in the yearbooks (sports-related for boys, groups of friends for girls; 20); different ways of greeting (girls hug, boys slap each other on the back; 42); different behavior on the ice rink (girls are gliding around, boys try to knock each other over; 42); girls collectively participating in a prank, boys refraining from joining them; 44).

women, as for instance when she sees Ms. Moray for the first time and delves into an elaborate description of her appearance: "She wasn't exactly pretty—she had an upturned, vaguely piggish nose, and brown eyebrows that looked even thicker and darker than they were because her chin-length hair was blond—but she was pulled together, kind of sporty" (118-9). Her encounter with Angie Varizi, the *New York Times* reporter, is structured very similarly, when Lee expresses her surprise at Angie's youth and outfit—jeans and cowboy boots—and then goes on to describe her: "Her straight hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she had a gap between her front teeth. She definitely wasn't beautiful, but there was something open and intense in her face—she did not seem apologetic about the fact that she wasn't prettier" (356). Lee's internalized sexism becomes even more apparent in her contemptuous descriptions of Sin-Jun's friend (and, later, lover) Clara O'Hallahan, whom she describes as "chubby, annoying" (42), "plump, yappy" (83), and "a heavy girl" (213), and explains her aversion to her as follows: "My real frustration with Clara, I think, was that it seemed that she should be insecure but wasn't" (226).

Given the gendered norms and patterns of behavior Lee encounters at Ault, it is perhaps not surprising that Lee registers the envy she feels toward the boys at her school: "I felt a familiar jealousy of boys. I didn't want what they had, but I wished that I wanted what they wanted; it seemed like happiness was easier for them" (44). She explains that her fascination with some of the boys is not romantic but, in a way, ontological. As a freshman, for instance, watching one of the male seniors give an announcement leaves her with "the sense that I wanted to *be* Adam Rabinovitz. […] What I wanted was to be a cocky high-school boy, so fucking sure of the world" (74, my emphasis). This does not mean, however, that Lee is uncritical of the gender dynamics at Ault, or ignorant of the ways in which boys benefit from these structures. She mentions how "boys mocked you in a way that assumed you could not, just as easily, mock them back; they took for granted their own wit, and your squeamishness and passivity" (53). She describes how she hates to be told to calm down by boys as if they assumed she would "leap from my chair to embrace you [or] shriek with delight" (248). And even if she enjoys occasionally being teased by her male classmates, she "resented the way that boys included me as a prop in their exchanges with one another" (251).

Conclusion: Reproducing the Illusion of Diversity

As we have seen above, Ault is complicit with the contemporary neoliberal climate with regard to the school's collective acceptance of the diversity paradigm as a leading factor in its self-description. Of course, for places as notoriously discriminatory as private educational institutions, it is a big step to accept students with minority backgrounds and to address it openly and frame it in a rhetoric of affirmation. But, as my discussion of the selective silence around class has demonstrated, gender, race, and ethnicity are written into the school's official script, in part, so that socio-economic factors can be written out. The diversity paradigm is an integral part of the merit narrative of elite institutions and thus of their socio-cultural legitimization. As Michaels poignantly argues, affirmative action and related strategies do not undermine the principles of meritocracy; on the contrary, they create the illusion that a meritocracy exists in the first place (2006: 85):

> Affirmative action guarantees that all cultures will be represented on campus, that no one will be penalized unjustly for belonging to a culture, and therefore that the white students on campus can understand themselves to be there on merit because they didn't get there at the expense of any black people. The problem with affirmative action is not (as is often said) that it violates the principles of meritocracy; the problem is that it produces the illusion that we actually *have* a meritocracy. (85)

By collectively embracing and highlighting the diversity paradigm, elite institutions signify their openness to those who are 'smart enough and/or hardworking enough' and, in so doing, mask their student bodies' continuing socio-economic homogeneity. Ault's headmaster, Mr. Byden, wants to communicate the fact that elite boarding schools "are no longer enclaves for the sons of the wealthy" but rather that they are "mirrors of American society" (354). Of course, one could ask whether reflecting a society that is still riddled with inequality and racism is a reasonable goal; and one could argue, with only a touch of cynicism, that precisely by being "enclaves for the sons of the wealthy" elite boarding schools are, in fact, mirroring a society that has grown increasingly unequal in socio-economic terms since the 1970s and where, as countless newspapers and media outlets inform us, "the rich always get richer" (Kotlikoff). In any case, Ault's employment of the diversity paradigm as it is portrayed in *Prep* is perfectly in line with the neoliberal instrumentalization of multiculturalism as a tool to hide class differences.

As my discussion of Lee's taxonomy of privilege has shown, *Prep* does, on the level of content, indeed offer an incisive and compelling, if at times problematic, treatment of the politics of identity and discrimination in the elite educational space. A glance at the narrative's deep structure, however, suggests that *Prep* is, in fact, complicit with the instrumentalization of the diversity paradigm it seemingly aims to expose. On the one hand, this is due to the cast of characters that Lee introduces to the reader: Lee's roommates, introduced in the beginning of the narrative, are Sin-Jun from Korea and Dede, a Jewish girl from New York. The first chapter revolves around Little Washington, a black girl. In the second chapter, Lee talks to her future love interest, Cross Sugarman, who is also Jewish, for the first time. The third chapter foregrounds Conchita Maxwell, a Mexican American girl from Texas, who "mention[s] her Mexicanness […] often" (101). The fourth chapter introduces Ms. Moray, the English teacher, who is from the Midwest and, as some students are fond of pointing out, "LMC" (360). During the fifth chapter, Lee's Midwestern, lower-middle-class parents come to visit and Lee spends some time with Rufina Sanchez and Maria Oldega, "who were the only Latina girls in our class besides Conchita" (167). In the sixth chapter, Lee gets to know Dave, the "townie" (242) who asks Lee out on a date, an offer she ultimately declines because he is not part of the Ault community. Chapter 7 revolves around Lee's academic failure and introduces the character of Aubrey, her math tutor, about whose socio-economic or racial/ethnic background we do not learn anything. The last chapter focuses again on Lee's relationship with Cross, her college plans, and the New York Times interview scandal, during which she is consoled by Darden Pittard, one of only two black boys in her class. Of course, there are also a number of characters who do not fit into the diversity paradigm—Lee's roommate and best friend Martha, who is from a wealthy Vermont family; Aspeth Montgomery, the grade's 'queen bee', hailing from a wealthy Long Island family; or Nick Chaffee, one of the "bank boys" (170). But the overall image *Prep* transports through its cast of characters is certainly one of racial, ethnic, regional, and, to an extent, even socio-economic diversity. Thus, even though the novel seems to criticize the homogeneity of the elite educational space, it simultaneously pays lip service to that space's self-description as 'multicultural' in all possible senses of the word.

In a similar way, *Prep* seems to exonerate the institution of charges of racism, sexism, and classism by demonstrating time and again that it is Lee herself who harbors these resentments, not her surroundings. Despite the fact that Lee delivers her judgments confidently and without qualms, the nar-

rative exposes her misreading of the social order several times. Consider, for instance, Lee's reaction when she learns that Cross is Jewish: "Cross was Jewish? Never once had this occurred to me. But he was so popular, he was senior prefect" (381). According to Lee's taxonomy, Cross's Jewishness should have prevented him from becoming one of the class's most popular boys. As mentioned above, Lee similarly misreads the rules of dating at Ault, when she states that "Ault guys almost never went out with minority girls" (170). She then has to reformulate the rules when she learns that Nick and Rufina are, in fact, dating, and concludes: "Beauty trumped race, apparently" (201). Lee furthermore reveals her own racism when she assumes that Conchita is on scholarship and from a poor family simply because of her ethnicity, or when she is surprised that Sin-Jun, despite her Koreanness and imperfect command of the English language, has a deep and multilayered emotional life. There are a number of additional examples of how the narrative exposes Lee's errors in judgment and, in so doing, to an extent exonerates the institution and the elite community—there is no systemic or collective racism (or sexism, or classism), the novel seems to say, but only the individual prejudices of its marginalized and bigoted protagonist.

The Pervasiveness of the Unarticulable: Class

In the course of the narrative, Lee gives three different reasons for applying to Ault. The first is academic and sounds like she extracted it from a promotional brochure: "The resources here are incredible—the caliber of the faculty and the fact that the classes are so small and you get all this individual attention and your classmates are really motivated" (358). Given Lee's academic failure and her general lack of involvement in intellectual or extracurricular activities, this is the least convincing part of her self-narration. Her second and more compelling reason is primarily aesthetic—a "sort of dumb thirteen-year-old's idea of boarding school" (357): Lee describes browsing through catalogs whose "glossy pages showed photographs of teenagers in wool sweaters singing hymns in the chapel, gripping lacrosse sticks, intently regarding a math equation written across the chalkboard" (15). The appeal, then, is not purely or even primarily academic but lies in some elusive vision of a different, beautiful, privileged life. "I had traded away my family for this glossiness," Lee concludes: "I'd pretended it was about academics, but it never had been" (ibid.). During the interview, however, Lee shares an anecdote with Angie that translates her diffuse yearning for a particular aesthetics into more con-

crete, socio-economic terms: On vacation in Florida, Lee and her family drive by a number of huge, beautiful houses, and when Lee—ten years old at the time—asks her parents why they do not live in such a house, Lee's father explains that "people like us don't live in these houses. These people keep their money in Swiss bank accounts. They eat caviar for dinner. They send their sons to boarding school," to which Lee replies by asking whether "they send their daughters to boarding school" as well (363). This, then, is the anecdote that prompts Angie to conclude that Lee was "ready to trade up" (364)—and while it might be something of a stretch to assume that a ten-year-old would think in such categories, it is perhaps not too unusual for Lee to form connections between the houses in Florida, the "glamorous" (358) depictions of boarding schools on television and in magazines, and her own academic standing, and then finally to formulate the plan of applying to Ault and similar schools.

When Lee arrives at Ault and encounters her new classmates for the first time, she immediately senses her own otherness. Even though she has gotten only as far as the school's parking lot, she knows that hers will not be an easy transition: "I realized then how much work Ault would be for me" (16). As I have shown in the last section, Lee's social taxonomy marks race, ethnicity, regional background, and gender, all of which matter in one way or another to Lee's experience of the elite educational space because they inform her behavior and thoughts—toward others as well as toward herself. These categories have in common that they are all, to varying degrees, part of an official discourse of diversity that is embraced and cultivated by the institution and the people who populate it. The discursive blind spot in this enticing vision of a school that paradoxically wants to be both elitist and egalitarian—a "mirror of American society" (ibid.) and yet, somehow, also the production site of its cultural and socio-political leadership—is the category Mr. Byden does not name: class.

The 'Peculiar Dialectics' of Class

The basic idea behind the notion of diversity is to respect and celebrate different identities and cultures, but class, as we have seen, does not easily fit this paradigm. Poverty, for instance, is not something that readily lends itself to celebration, as Michaels points out: "[W]hat poor people want is not to contribute to diversity but to minimize their contribution to it—they want to stop being poor" (2006: 7). The lower middle class—Lee's class of origin—likewise does not fit the pattern of accentuation and affirmation. Rita Felski describes it as a "nonidentity" (34) and argues convincingly that "the lower middle class

is no one's fantasy and no one's desire; it has no exchange value in the cultural marketplace" (38). The uneasy position of class as an identity category is rooted in what Gavin Jones, writing about poverty in his book *American Hungers*, calls a "peculiar dialectics": an oscillation "between material and nonmaterial, objective and subjective criteria" (3). Located at the intersection of discourse, practice, and the body, class thus includes both "the materiality of need"—and, one might add, that of excess and abundance—and "the nonmaterial areas of psychology, emotion, and culture, […] moving away from the absolute and objective toward the relative, the ideological, and the ethical" (ibid.). *Prep*, as I will show below, takes a very specific stance on class (and the related notions of merit and eliteness), one that deviates to some extent from the established concepts and narratives in the discourse of elite education. In the novel, class is framed in decidedly individualizing terms, as a category that is located, inescapably, in the body—an ontological category that marks a difference not only of having, but of being.

Articulating Class: Lack, Contrast, and Silence

To Lee, class manifests itself primarily through lack. On the one hand, this is a lack of material things that signify wealth, as Lee explains to the reporter: "You can tell by people's rooms—whether or not they have stereos, or if the girls have flowered bedspreads, or if they have silver picture frames. Just the quality of their stuff" (361-2). Lee, for instance, owns only generic, beige JCPenney bras (20); her comforter is not flowered but "reversible, red on one side, blue on the other" (35); she does not own a stereo (45); her sweaters are acrylic, not cashmere (235); and she cannot afford to use the school's laundry service. In addition to these material factors, Lee's class also becomes apparent via certain behaviors that signal a lack of money, for instance calling her mother "on Sundays, when the rates were lower" (77), or the fact that she would have to admit that her parents are "driving, not flying, from South Bend" for financial reasons, even though it takes eighteen hours to do so (169).

Perhaps even more important in terms of aggravating her sense of unease, however, is her lack of cultural capital—of specific knowledge and experiences that are regarded as 'normal' in the elite environment she finds herself in: "At Ault, there was so much I didn't know. Most of it had to do with money (what a debutante was, how you pronounced Greenwich, Connecticut) or with sex (that a pearl necklace wasn't always a piece of jewelry), but sometimes it had to do with more general information about clothing, food, or geography" (68).

For instance, Lee has "never had Thai food before" (46); does not have a middle name (60); has "never ridden a limousine" (100), and only once been in a taxi (60); has "never seen Chanel in real life" (150); has never been to Europe (181), nor even to California (218). Not surprisingly, Lee feels like she does not fulfill the "idea of an Ault student" (218).

This lack is not alleviated by any possible compensatory abundance—of warmth, of fun, of belonging—at home. While Lee initially "sometimes pretended I was in my bed in South Bend and that the sounds of the dorm were the sounds of my family" (10), her growing alienation from her parents and brothers turns her home into a place she is "overwhelmingly relieved to be leaving" (349). Thus, the way her class background becomes meaningful to Lee prevents her from claiming it affirmatively as a source of identity. This, again, fits established narratives of the unattractiveness of the lower middle class. As Helen Chappell points out, "[t]he one class you do not belong to, and are not proud of at all, is the lower middle class. No one ever describes himself as belonging to the lower middle classes" (quoted in Felski 34).

Prep employs a number of strategies to invoke or create class in the narrative. On the one hand, rather straightforwardly, class is articulated through explicit references to money. For instance, after Lee and some other students have spent the surprise holiday at the local mall, somebody suggests taking a taxi back to school, and Lee thinks that she has "less than five dollars left in my pocket, […]. But no one else seemed concerned about money, and I said nothing" (60). When Conchita's mother invites Martha and Lee for lunch to an upscale restaurant, Lee tells us that it was "oddly liberating to realize I had only fifteen dollars in my pocket—I wouldn't be paying. I wouldn't even try, because I couldn't" (104). These examples illustrate not only how class is articulated in the narrative, but also demonstrate that it is visible and present to Lee at all times. In stark contrast to her own lack of it, money is omnipresent at Ault, but in subtle ways: "Money was everywhere on campus," Lee informs us, "but it was usually invisible" (12):

> You caught a glimpse of it sometimes in things that were shiny, like the hood of the headmaster's Mercedes, or the gold dome of the schoolhouse, or a girl's long straight blond hair. But nobody carried wallets. When you had to pay for a notebook or a pair of sweatpants at the campus store, you wrote your student ID number on a form and, later on, your parents got the bill. (ibid.)

While the ubiquity of money accentuates Lee's lack, its elusiveness and invisibility—"[y]ou caught a glimpse of it sometimes in things that were shiny"—furthers its aestheticization and mythification. To Lee, having money is not merely a neutral fact but inextricably tied to an aestheticized vision of a beautiful life—for instance when she imagines Cross's family Christmas: "[H]is family was probably the kind that had a tree with only white lights and glass ornaments—and how all of them probably drank scotch together and gave one another not tube socks and plastic key chains but leather wallets and silk ties" (332). Or when she reflects about Aspeth: "I thought of Aspeth's long pale hair, the clothes she wore—now that it was spring, pastel button-down shirts and khaki skirts and white or navy espadrilles—and her tan, shapely legs and the light sprinkling of freckles across her nose, which always made her look as if she had spent the afternoon playing tennis in the sun (83)." In these instances, Lee romanticizes the moneyed life in a manner that leaves no room for an equally satisfying existence on more modest means. This life of "leather wallets and silk ties" coupled with "afternoon[s of] playing tennis in the sun" is further put into focus by recurring references to its opposite—the dinginess of "a bowling alley in Raymond" (241), "tube socks and plastic key chains" (332), or Lee's mother's "ratty robe" (331). Lee is utterly unable to counter her image of the beautiful life of the upper class with a halfway decent vision of her own class of origin—a class that, according to John Hartley, "attracts no love, support, advocacy or self-conscious organization" (quoted in Felski 41).

Prep furthermore frequently uses direct or indirect contrasts to actualize class and, in so doing, creates a stark binary opposition of two class positions: On the one hand, Lee's background, in which money (and the lack thereof) matters and which is associated with ugliness, scarcity, pragmatism, and crudeness, and on the other hand Ault's "universe of privilege" (175), in which sophistication, abundance, and insouciance reign. While money and possessions have meaning to Lee, most of her peers exhibit utter disregard for their expensive belongings. For instance, when a classmate cuts a pillowcase in the course of a prank, Lee describes the "casual sacrifice of a pillowcase in the service of a joke" and the fact that there was "so little attention paid to the fact that pillowcases, like everything else, cost money" as "distinctly Aultish" (93-4). Similarly, she finds herself dumbfounded by the way others treat their expensive possessions: While she is waiting in Aspeth's room, Lee notes that "on the floor in front of the door there was a gray peacoat with satin lining,

which Aspeth stepped on—stepped on, with her shoe—as we exited the room" (150).

In a similar way, Ault is juxtaposed with the specter of the public high school Lee would have attended in South Bend. While the former is characterized by beautiful buildings with "enormous room[s] with twenty-foot-high Palladian windows […] and mahogany panels on the walls" (3), the latter looms large in Lee's imagination as a place with "hallways of pale green linoleum and grimy lockers and stringy-haired boys who wrote the names of heavy metal bands across the backs of their denim jackets in black marker" (15). Marvin Thompson High is introduced as Ault's polar opposite in every way, and thus works as a means of further contouring the elite educational space. While Ault is distinguished by beauty, taste, and distinction in aesthetic and other terms, the public high school has a cafeteria with floors of "mustard-colored linoleum with black and gray flecks; the sports teams were called the Vikings and the lady Vikings; there was an ongoing debate about whether to let the pregnant girls attend classes after they started to show" (265).

Perhaps the most painful contrast for Lee is that which involves her parents. After they have driven to Massachusetts to visit Ault for Parents Weekend, Lee meets them at the gate to guide them to a less-frequented parking space because she does not want anyone to see "their—our—dusty Datsun" (177). When she gets in the car, she notes that "it smelled like car trip, stuffy and sour. An empty Burger King bag rested on the seat, and several soda cans rolled on the floor. I could not suppress a comparison between this and the kind of food Martha's parents brought on their drives from Vermont: vegetable soup in thermoses and cracked-wheat bread and cut-up fruit that they ate with their real silverware from home" (178). On the same weekend, Lee's parents meet a classmate's family and, again, the Lee emphasizes the contrast with regard to style and status. Moreover, the differing regional backgrounds add to the overall disparity, as does the marked speech pattern of Lee's father:

> "Where are you folks from?" my father asked. "Princeton," said Nancy's mother. She was wearing a silky maroon skirt with a swirling paisley pattern and a maroon sweater set, and Mr. Daley was wearing a suit. My own parents dressed more nicely than they usually were on a Saturday, my father in khaki pants and a khaki blazer (surely, since they were not part of the same suit, that was some sort of faux pas) and my mother in a red turtleneck and a gray corduroy jumper. Over the phone, I had haltingly explained to my mother that most parents dressed up; I had felt unable to request that they should,

> but she had understood. "We're from South Bend, Indiana," my father said. "Just got in about an hour ago, and we're damn glad to be here." (184)

The articulation of class in *Prep* is thus mainly achieved through the use of contrast. It is important to note that the two poles employed in these contrasts refer to the upper middle class on the one hand and the lower middle class on the other. More extreme class positions—the lower classes or working poor and the extremely rich—are largely eclipsed. This is symptomatic of much of the fictional and discursive treatment of class in the US.

While Lee thinks a lot about class and uses it as her primary category of structuration, the novel also illustrates the silence around issues of socio-economic stratification. Class, as mentioned above, is not an established category in the paradigm of diversity, and, since it is not a marker that can be claimed affirmatively—Michaels points out that "your ethnicity is something that you can be proud of in a way that your poverty or even your wealth […] is not" (84)—the silence surrounding it is all the more pervasive. The lack of openness and communication surrounding issues of class is part and parcel of Lee's troubled relationship to her own socio-economic background. She does not, for instance, talk to anyone about being a scholarship student: "In four years, the only people I'd ever talked to about this were Mrs. Barinsky, who worked in the admissions and financial aid office, and Mrs. Stanchak. I'd never even discussed it with Martha" (359). During graduation week, Dede tells Lee "in a strangely beneficent way" (401) that she could have helped her out financially had she known that she was on scholarship. This is interesting in particular because it suggests that Lee's otherness was less visible than she thought.

Lee's status as a scholarship student, unlike her status as a member of the lower middle class, might conceivably be thought of as a source of pride due to its association with merit and achievement. Lee, however, is ashamed, as she explains after the *New York Times* article made her status public: "Being on scholarship was bad, being unhappy was worse, and admitting to either one was worst of all" (370). Martha and Lee also never discuss the fact that Lee frequently borrows Martha's clothes, but never the other way around (252). Much of the class-related silence is rooted in the shame Lee feels about her background, her difference, her need. According to Felski, shame is "a relevant concept for analyzing a range of experiences of dislocation, including those of class" (39). Shame is an other-directed emotion that is triggered by a fear of infracting "social codes and a consequent fear of exposure, embar-

rassment, and humiliation" (ibid.). To Lee, shame is the "largest and truest" of her emotions: "[I]t was a rock in my gut and would remain with me" (242).

Lee's own unwillingness to talk about class is mirrored by a refusal to acknowledge class in the Ault community. As Lee soon realizes, however, this refusal extends only to some positions in the class hierarchy and not to others: After being picked up by a limousine, Lee finally realizes that her friend Conchita is not a scholarship student from a family of poor Mexican immigrants, but in fact the daughter of an extremely wealthy oil tycoon. After their visit to Boston, Martha and Lee talk about Conchita's position at Ault and Lee asks why the school lets Conchita have a single room and a telephone—privileges denied the other students. Martha "held out one hand and rubbed her thumb up and down against the other fingers. 'Ault is probably salivating at the thought of all the science wings and art studios the Maxwells can build'" (106). Initially, Lee is surprised at the openness with which Martha discusses the Maxwell's financial standing. But after she visits Martha's family's house and realizes "that they, too, clearly were wealthy" (106), Lee learns an important lesson about class and the norms governing the discourse of class in the United States, namely that there are "different kinds of rich" (107): "There was normal rich, dignified rich, which you didn't talk about, and then there was extreme, comical, unsubtle rich—like having your dorm room professionally decorated, or riding a limousine to Boston to meet your mother—and that was permissible to discuss" (ibid.).

In fact, one could argue that in order for the system to work, it is not merely "permissible" but necessary to talk about—in the manner of gossip, complaint, or envy—the very rich. Michaels, for instance, explains what the fact that he is "confronted on a daily basis by the spectacle of people who are much richer than he is" (2006: 192) does to his own class-consciousness: It makes him "feel poorer" (ibid.). Thus, when he reads stories about extremely wealthy people and their lifestyles, it does not only make him feel predictably envious and resentful, but it creates what he calls a "deeply legitimating disidentification" (2006: 193):

> He could never afford to do that! […] Why is this disidentification legitimating? Because it leads Walter Benn Michaels to think of himself as not rich; it leads him to think that when he talks about the problem of economic inequality, he is not the problem, the superrich are. And, of course, the superrich are part of the problem. But, unfortunately, he is too. Compared to the superrich, he may feel poor, but feeling poor doesn't make you poor. (ibid.)

On a smaller scale, students like Conchita—the "extreme, comical, unsubtle rich"—make students like Martha—"the normal […], dignified rich"—feel less privileged and so create a sense of normalcy with regard to a certain degree of wealth and privilege, effectively masking its remoteness from the overwhelming majority of Americans.

Being Different: Class and Affect

Prep begins with Lee's interpretation of her own story: "I think that everything, or at least the part of everything that happened to me, started with the Roman architecture mix-up" (4). This first sentence is instructive in several ways. First, it portends the passivity that characterizes Lee's position in the novel—"everything that happened *to* me" (my emphasis)—she does not see herself as an active agent in her own narrative. Second, it suggests a degree of randomness in the progression of events unfolding in *Prep*—the misunderstanding between Lee and her teacher is a "mix-up," after all, and as such incidental, unexpected, seemingly not systemic; it could just as easily not have happened. Third, the incident referred to—"the Roman architecture mix-up"—is the first scene in which Lee's socio-economic background assumes a meaningful role in her story, thus pointing to the importance of class in the overall scheme of the novel. The incident takes place four weeks into Lee's freshman year in her Ancient history class. Students are doing presentations on different subjects, and it turns out that Lee has accidentally prepared the wrong topic: She was supposed to present on athletics, but focused on architecture instead. Her teacher then asks her to give the presentation anyway, but because one of her classmates had already done so, Lee feels unable to continue: "I paused. Ever since childhood, I have felt the onset of tears in my chin, and, at this moment, it was shaking. But I was not going to cry in front of strangers. 'Excuse me,' I said, and I left the classroom" (6). Lee's anxiety, manifesting itself bodily and in her inability to communicate properly and convincingly the misunderstanding, is rooted in the feeling of not belonging, of being fundamentally 'other' than her peers.

The solution Lee envisions for the problem of class difference is class passing. Passing is a form of identity negotiation and impression management in which individuals proactively or reactively employ certain presentational strategies to "transgress social boundaries" and be regarded as a member of a different social group (Renfrow 486). The concept is most frequently discussed with regard to race and, perhaps to a lesser extent, gender, and in both con-

texts it is often stigmatized, seen as either traitorous or deviant behavior. In the context of class, passing is framed differently—it is "not often not noticed or examined," as Gwendolyn Audrey Foster points out, and "essentially viewed as normative behavior" (2003: 102). A society that encourages everyone to conceive of themselves as part of the middle class naturally also encourages class passing in order to ensure the success of this collective fiction.

Normative and normalized, even "celebrated" (Foster 2005: 4), class passing is an integral part of everyday American socio-cultural practices. As Daniel G. Renfrow points out, however—and as *Prep* poignantly illustrates—"identity negotiations may be emotionally costly" (488). For Lee, they are costly not only because her desire to be different threatens her sense of self and produces anxiety and alienation, but also because she is ultimately unsuccessful and feels her insufficiency acutely and permanently. Beginning with the "Roman architecture mix-up" during which Lee is "uncovered" (6) as different, her failure ends with the catastrophic *New York Times* article that makes her into "the precise opposite of the person I had, for the last four years, tried to be" (370). Thus the entire narrative is framed by Lee's attempts to negotiate her class identity and come to terms with the markers of her difference: a present absence, denied discursively but actualized bodily, materially, and emotionally.

Michaels laments what he sees as a fundamental conceptual misunderstanding of the category of class on the part of almost everyone who talks about it, exemplified by the *Class Matters* series of *The New York Times*:

> Indeed, at one point in the series, the *Times* started treating class not as an issue to be addressed in addition to (much less instead of) race but as itself a version of race, as if the rich and the poor really were, as Fitzgerald thought, different races, and so as if the occasional marriage between them were a kind of interracial marriage. Indeed, the only thing missing was an account of the children of mixed (wealth) marriages, half rich, half poor, confronting a world in which they can't quite find a place. And, actually, the *Times* even provided a version of that in its profile of one of the (rare) people who has moved up in class, treating her predicament with all the pathos of the torn-between-two-worlds "not fully at ease"-in-either stories that have been a staple of American literature since the first tragic mulatta found herself at home nowhere. Americans like stories in which the big problem is whether or not you fit in. (2006: 9)

Prep engages in exactly the kind of practice Michaels criticizes so vehemently: a 'racialization' of class. When Lee arrives at Ault, she immediately senses her difference—a difference not only resulting from material factors (or the lack thereof), but from her very being, her body, her mind. Class, to her, is not just a material category, measured by one's relationship to the means of production, one's income or wealth. Lee experiences her upper-(middle-)class peers as categorically different—she feels "wracked at the impossible gaping space between" her and them (162). Lee thus perceives her own otherness not merely as a difference of having (things, experiences, access), but one of *being*. Class is turned into an ontological category; it is inscribed into her body.

She does not, initially, see this as a fixed and immutable difference, however, but envisions her own transformation: "I'd imagined that I could lie low for a while, getting a sense of them, then reinvent myself in their image" (6). As we learn over the course of the following four hundred pages, she fails in this endeavor. During brief moments her otherness seems less pronounced; shortly before Parents Weekend, for instance, Lee describes her "sense of belonging" as "acute" (175), attributing this change of perception to her parents' impending visit and her conviction that they, in turn, would not belong. But these moments are fleeting. When Lee is in the transitional space of the airport, on her way home, she feels "more aware of myself as a prep school student that I did at any other time," but, as she points out in the same breath, she is referring to a "subculture I felt I belonged to only when I was away from it" (234).

If Lee thus feels "all the pathos of the torn-between-two-worlds 'not fully at ease'-in-either stories" that Michaels so cavalierly dismisses, one of the main reasons seems to be that she is incapable of imagining and embracing a hybrid identity. Her project of self-making at Ault relies on an attempt at self-erasure: Lee feels as if she can only belong if she denies her pre-Ault self completely. But because her class identity is inscribed into her body, erasing her old self is problematic, if not impossible. The physical dimension—the embodiment of class—becomes obvious in the way Lee's body rebels against her attempted self-negation. Whenever she finds herself in a situation in which she would have to perform her reimagined self, her body fails her: "My unease was rising around me like smoke. By the time I reached the dining hall, I was choking on it; I couldn't go inside" (293). When she tries to initiate a conversation, her heart rate increases (41; 96); she feels "a swelling in my chest" (25), heat spreading over her face (133). Over the course of the narrative, whenever Lee feels challenged academically or socially—whenever she

feels that her pre-Ault self is addressed, she responds physically, affectively, lacking control or agency: Her heart "lurched" (4; 341), "pounded" (25; 42; 184), "jumped" (27), "seized" (131), "pinch[ed]" (222), "quicken[ed]" (285), "stopped" (287), "hammered" (369), "thicken[ed]" (400). In social situations, she tries to tell herself to "just be calm […] to concentrate only on the immediate task in front of me and not give in to the sense that this moment was a monstrous pulsating flower, a purple and green geometrical blossom like you might see in a kaleidoscope." But, again, she is unable to even speak because "my anxiety was exploding, the flower was swirling outward infinitely" (236-7). Similarly, in academic contexts her body makes it impossible for her to act appropriately: In one situation, she is supposed to read her homework to the rest of the class, but finds herself unable to: "I found that I could not. I just couldn't. I knew that my voice would come out quivery and breathless and that my consciousness of this fact would only exacerbate it until, ultimately, my own agitation would make it physically impossible to endure another second" (134).

Unable to integrate the two facets of her personality into a hybrid whole, she blames her surroundings. She feels resentment toward her parents because they anchor her to her pre-Ault self: "I hated them because they thought I was the same as they were, because if they were right, it would mean I'd failed myself, and because if they were wrong, it would mean I had betrayed them" (336). But she also resents the Ault community: "I hated them all at this moment, the indifferent students and faculty and the inconsiderate parents and my own family, for being somehow reliant on kindness that wasn't extended" (193). This duality again illustrates her inability to conceive of a hybrid identity.

Conclusion: The Paradox of Elite Campus Fiction

Michaels reads *Prep* as a literary symptom of the neoliberal desire to keep class structures intact, arguing that this desire becomes manifest either in "pretending [class] doesn't exist" or, more often, in "pretending it *does* exist" (my emphasis), particularly in socio-economically homogeneous places like elite universities. Most importantly, Michaels concludes, this desire invariably finds expression in insisting "that class doesn't matter, or [in redefining] class so that it looks like culture" (2006: 109-10). In this context, then, he regards *Prep* as an expression of the neoliberal imagination. Can we fault the novel for reinforcing the myth of class diversity at elite institutions through its very structure as a scholarship novel? Certainly; it is surely no coincidence that

the overwhelming majority of narratives (both literary and audiovisual) that are set in elite educational surroundings follow this blueprint, thus offering cultural visibility to a phenomenon that is statistically still exceedingly rare. As I hope to have shown in my discussion of the fault-lines of class in *Prep*, however, the novel insists that class does matter, and that it matters quite a bit. Lee's entire experience of the elite educational space is informed by her class background and its socio-cultural and economic ramifications. Furthermore, while *Prep*'s framing of class might seem more cultural than economic, the text does not decouple the two dimensions, and it certainly does not make the claim that classism, or class discrimination, is the dominant issue for Lee.

Michaels is right in arguing that it is theoretically flawed and politically problematic to strip class of its material dimensions by reducing it to cultural and psychological factors, and conceptualizing it analogously to race and gender. And yet, denying or trivializing these factors, as Michaels seems to do, is similarly unsound. After all, the cultural repercussions of class amount to more than condescension and intolerance, as sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu have pointed out in a variety of contexts. Lee's problem is not only that her otherness is painful and isolating; her problem is that it is debilitating. Her lack of social and cultural capital arrests her development and nullifies her every chance of mobility. By portraying class as a form of embodiment, *Prep* demonstrates the complexity of social stratification and the various non-economic channels through which elites reproduce themselves. It is somewhat disconcerting that Michaels—who, quite tellingly, does not mention Bourdieu even once in *The Trouble with Diversity*—completely ignores these processes and, instead, belittles the very real cultural reverberations of socio-economic stratification as neoliberal window dressing.

In this context, *Prep* also illustrates the central paradox of elite campus fiction. Even though one of the main attractions of the elite campus novel arguably lies in its promise of providing the reader with a glimpse behind the ivy-covered walls of elite institutions and some insight into the privileged lives of the wealthy few, *Prep* illustrates that this kind of imaginary class transcendence is not easily achieved. This is due to the very nature of the notion of eliteness: as a concept, eliteness fully unfolds only from a distance—it is relational, not absolute. Elite campus novels promise to cover that distance and tell us what it is really like in the "mythological hinterland" (Bradbury 1990: 50) of the elite community. The attempt to approach the elite through narrative, however, demonstrates the necessity of distance: without it, there is no elite. Of course it is still possible to pinpoint and describe certain cri-

teria that belong to the narrative of eliteness—academic or extracurricular achievement, for instance—but the aura of eliteness vanishes through proximity. This is why most of the more recent elite campus novels employ a non-elite focalizer-protagonist, like Lee, who creates the necessary distance and whose voyeuristic gaze we can adopt. The paradox, then, is that because of this, these stories ultimately fail to deliver on their initial promise: We learn much more about middle-class desires and anxieties than we do about the elite, which remains intact but out of reach.

'Smart, Disciplined, Driven': Merit/Mobility

Another productive lens through which we can examine the negotiation of class in *Prep* is the notion of mobility. Mobility—upward and downward—is one of the central paradigms framing the conceptualization of class in the United States, and recent analyses, as Jones points out, have increasingly focused on "the relational and contingent aspects of class as a category" and on "its capacity to be transcended" (12). In *Prep*, mobility as the vertical movement of potential class transcendence is linked to actual movement through the land, particularly the journey from the Midwest to the Northeast, as Lee's retelling of her arrival at Ault demonstrates:

> In mid-September, weeks after school had started in South Bend for my brothers and my former classmates, my father drove me from Indiana to Massachusetts. When we turned in the wrought-iron gates of the campus, I recognized the buildings from photographs—eight brick structures plus a Gothic chapel surrounding a circle of grass which I already knew was fifty yards in diameter and which I also knew you were not supposed to walk on. Everywhere there were cars with the trunks open, kids greeting each other, fathers carrying boxes. I was wearing a long dress with peach and lavender flowers and a lace collar, and I noticed immediately that most of the students had on faded T-shirts and loose khaki shorts and flip-flops. I realized then how much work Ault would be for me. After we found my dorm, my father started talking to Dede's father, who said, "South Bend, eh? I take it you teach at Notre Dame?" and my father cheerfully said, "No, sir, I'm in the mattress business." I was embarrassed that my father called Dede's father sir, embarrassed by his job, embarrassed by our rusty white Datsun. I wanted my father gone from campus as soon as possible, so I could try to miss him. (16)

The scene is structured by a movement through a number of marked spaces, beginning with the journey from west to east: "[M]y father drove me from Indiana to Massachusetts." Indiana here represents Middle America, in both geographical and socio-economic terms, while Massachusetts evokes associations of old New England, Boston Brahmins, and the Protestant establishment. As before, class differences are coded in spatial, regional language. The fact that they are driving, not flying, carries meaning as well, and is commented on later in the novel, when Lee is afraid that her peers will learn about her parents' means of transportation. There is a strikingly similar scene in Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), in which Charlotte and her parents likewise drive rather than fly to Charlotte's university—in a pick-up truck, no less—and Charlotte is mortified when her father talks about the journey with her roommate's wealthy parents, who, of course, took a private jet. Lee and her father then "turned in the wrought-iron gates of the campus" and encounter "eight brick structures plus a Gothic chapel surrounding a circle of grass"—a description evoking classic New England collegiate imagery, the buildings and grounds of the school serving as visual instantiations of its wealth and tradition. The movement through the gates furthermore signifies the entry into a space that is different, distinct, and removed from the world Lee inhabited before. They meet her roommate Dede's father, who, upon hearing that they came from South Bend, Indiana, assumes that Lee's father teaches at Notre Dame. When her father corrects him by pointing out that he is a mattress salesman, Lee is embarrassed. Her understanding of her own class background includes not only material dimensions—"our rusty white Datsun"—but also forms of cultural capital: her father's occupation, his polite deference, his entire demeanor. Class thus immediately becomes the dominant category Lee uses to make sense of herself and her surroundings, and, as she realizes immediately, it is articulated through a number of different channels.

Geographical mobility here holds the promise of class mobility, but Lee is unable to translate this potential into reality. In the negotiation of her own class identity, Lee is stuck in a liminal place: a foot each in both worlds, at home in neither. Her liminality arrests her possible mobility. Thus, even though the prospect of leaving her class of origin seems to have been at least part of her motivation to apply to Ault in the first place, she fails in attaining the necessary credentials. She realizes, however, that there are other kids at the school who manage this process more successfully:

> There were other kids at Ault I had a feeling about, kids who came from poorer families than I did and would probably grow to make a lot more than I would—they'd be surgeons, or investment bankers. But making a lot of money didn't seem like something I'd be able to control; I'd gotten as far as Ault, but I wasn't sure I'd get any further. I wasn't smart or disciplined the way those kids were, I wasn't driven. (322)

Lee's social mobility ends with her physical arrival at Ault; she remains static after she has entered the elite educational space.

The criteria Lee names—intelligence, discipline, ambition—are part of Ault's official narrative of merit. The imperatives that fuel this narrative are written into the school's official incentive structure, supported by teachers, encouraged through grades, prizes, privileges, and rewarded with positions in the school hierarchy. In addition to the academic and extracurricular distinction expected from the students, the school's official master narrative also includes a set of values meant to legitimize the advantages guaranteed by an Ault education: "In chapel, the headmaster and the chaplain spoke of citizenship and integrity and the price we had to pay for the privileges we enjoyed. At Ault, it wasn't just that we weren't supposed to be bad or unethical; we weren't even supposed to be ordinary" (13). In this scenario, merit becomes the motor that drives mobility and turns kids from poor families into surgeons and investment bankers. We learn that Lee fully conformed to the ideal of the deserving student before she arrived at Ault: "Back in my junior high in South Bend, Indiana, many classes had felt like one-on-one discussions between the teacher and me, while the rest of the students daydreamed or doodled" (5). The contrast between the personality the reader experiences during Lee's time at Ault and the one she claims to have had before could not be starker: "Back in South Bend, both in class and at home with my family, I had been curious and noisy and opinionated. I had talked like a normal person, more than a normal person" (53). At Ault, however, Lee tells us that she is living her life "sideways. I did not act on what I wanted, I did not say the things I thought, and being so stifled and clamped all the time left me exhausted; no matter what I was doing, I was always imagining something else. Grades felt peripheral, but the real problem was, everything felt peripheral" (40).

With regard to the official narrative of merit, Lee fails quite spectacularly. From the beginning, she is overwhelmed by the competition and feels unable to participate in her classmates' struggle for distinction: "Here, the fact that I did the reading didn't distinguish me. In fact, nothing distinguished me.

And now, in my most lengthy discourse to date, I was revealing myself to be strange and stupid" (5). Even though she does the work, her grades continue to slip and she rarely participates in class discussions because "someone always expressed my ideas, usually in a smarter way than I could have, and as time went on, the less I spoke the less it seemed I had to say" (123). Lee realizes that this development is, in part, due to the change of environment and her inability of coping with it:

> It was not clear to me how I'd arrived at this juncture gradewise, because before entering Ault, I'd never received lower than a B plus in any class. Either Ault was a lot harder than my junior high had been, or I was getting dumber—I suspected both. If I wasn't literally getting dumber, I knew at least that I'd lost the glow that surrounds you when the teachers think you're one of the smart, responsible ones, that glow that shines brighter every time you raise your hand in class to say the perfect thing, or you run out of room in a blue book during an exam and have to ask for a second one. At Ault, I doubted that I would ever need a second blue book because even my handwriting had changed—once my letters had been bubbly and messy, and now they were thin and small. (37)

Lee's failure to live up to the standards set by the merit narrative not only includes her academic performance, however, but also her lack of extracurricular achievements and, as the discourse of distinction has it, 'leadership qualities': "I literally wasn't anything, not a chapel prefect or yearbook editor or sports captain […]. The summer after our junior year, I had gone through a class list to try to find anyone similarly undistinguished and had come up with only two other people" (304).

The official narrative of merit—favoring hard work, dedication, and self-discipline—is complemented by an unofficial narrative, an elusive set of imperatives that fascinate Lee because they are hard to grasp, and harder yet to emulate. This set of imperatives relates less to actual, quantifiable achievements, but rather describes a certain attitude that is projected outward, a pose, a performance of being. Lee has difficulties finding the words to describe this phenomenon; she variously refers to "unself-consciousness" (18), "breeziness," "ease," and being "casual" (162) and "adored" (297). An additional important ingredient—and "an Aultish thing" (228), according to Lee—is a sense of self-control and mastery, a sense of being a little "distant" (ibid.) from one's surroundings. The closest Lee comes to articulating this unofficial code is when she reflects on the cultural meaning of sports:

> Sports contained the truth, I decided, the unspoken truth […] and it seemed hard to believe that I had never understood this before. They rewarded effortlessness and unself-consciousness; they confirmed that yes, there are rankings of skill and value and that everyone knows what they are […]; they showed that the best thing in the world was to be young and strong and fast. (320-1)

By mentioning the ineffability of this 'truth,' Lee points to a central fault line in the narrative of merit, namely that it rewards not only behaviors and achievements that are measurable and can be attained via hard work, but also these other unnamable things—practices and postures that, as Lee's examples shows, are difficult to mimic and make one's own. Of course, contrary to Lee's observation, sports do not actually reward effortlessness, but rather an attitude or projection of effortlessness. This is reminiscent of the notion of *sprezzatura*, a concept developed by the Italian Renaissance author Baldassare Castiglione in his 1528 courtesy book *Il Cortegiano*. In the book, a number of members of the court of the Duke of Urbino discuss the qualities an ideal courtier must possess. One of them, Count Ludovico, claims to have found the "universal rule:"

> I have found quite a universal rule which in this matter seems to me valid above all others, and in all human affairs whether in word or deed: and that is to avoid affectation in every way possible as though it were some very rough and dangerous reef; and (to pronounce a new word perhaps) to practice in all things a certain *sprezzatura* [nonchalance, disdain, or carelessness], so as to conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it. (quoted in Nikulin 165)

This combination of seeming effortlessness and unself-consciousness is exactly what fascinates Lee about some of her classmates, and it is exactly the kind of quality rewarded by the elite educational system. It is crucial to note, however, as Victoria Kahn does, that sprezzatura is "not a quality but an ability"—thus, it cannot simply be described or claimed, but "it must be enacted," performed (156).

This again points to the importance of the body. *Sprezzatura* is located in the individual's body; it is a sense of "ease of manner, studied carelessness" ("sprezzatura") that is actualized physically. Shamus Rahman Khan, in his book *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School* (2011), describes a very similar phenomenon, which he calls "embodied ease" (2011: 121).

Khan argues that students at elite schools "cultivate […] a sense of how to carry themselves, and at its core this practice of privilege is ease: feeling comfortable in just about any social situation" (2011: 15). In *Prep*, Lee observes "with a kind of awe" her classmates' versatility, "the many sets of behavior in their repertoire" (326). She herself lacks this fluidity: "I was always me" (ibid.). Khan calls this "corporeal knowledge" (2011: 121) and argues that it becomes "inscribed upon the bodies of students" (2011: 16). Unlike cognitive knowledge, which is relatively easy to transmit or get access to, corporeal knowledge is built through years of individual experience and thus "hard to embody or mimic" (2011: 121). If Jones argues that "poverty is ultimately marked on the body, as hunger or as physical suffering" (3), then the opposite is true for wealth and privilege; they, too, are marked on the body—in the form of *sprezzatura* or embodied ease, for instance—but they are marked not as lack but as abundance, not as suffering, but as pleasure and ease, as a freedom to move and claim space.

The ambiguity of this form of embodiment lies in the oscillation between concealment and perception, as Victoria Kahn points out: "This […] necessarily introduces the question of the audience, for to be successful the courtier must conceal his artfulness, but for it to be appreciated as *sprezzatura*, his concealment must be perceived" (156). In Khan's account of the students at the elite St. Paul's school, this ambiguity is navigated through a distinction between discursive and bodily work: "Hard work was a frame […] that students mobilized to code their advancement within hierarchies, but this frame did not involve an attendant corporeal display of effort. Their displays were meant to be just the opposite: full of ease" (2011: 120). It is in this ambiguity between discourse and body, hard work and ease, where 'eliteness' resides. Lee herself does not master this dual effort, but she recognizes and admires it in others.

Subverting the 'Normalcy of Mobility'

In her reflection on the seemingly "singularly boring identity" (34) of the lower middle class, Rita Felski addresses some of the peculiarities that distinguish class from other identity categories. Like Michaels, she points to "an important and inevitable tension between class analysis and the logic of identity politics, because class is essentially, rather than contingently, a *hierarchical* concept. Any form of class politics is ultimately concerned with overcoming or at least lessening class differences, not with affirming and celebrating them" (9, my emphasis). While race and gender "often mark identity inescapably"

(Felski 38), class seems more contingent a signifier, more readily amenable to influence either via strategies of class-passing or actual changes in one's class position. Class, according to Felski, however, is more than just "the sum of its material manifestations" (ibid.), and her approach of "focusing on the psychic as well as the social, semiotics as much as economics" (34) seems to me particularly productive, demonstrating that it is, in fact, possible to account for the specific singularities of class as an economic-material category without completely negating its cultural and psychological ramifications.

Felski's piece echoes the dominance of the motif of mobility in the conceptualization and study of class. In the American context, particularly, class is often conceptualized as a dynamic category, and the belief in (upward) mobility is widespread and persistent—all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. Michaels refers to "[m]any polls [that] show that Americans characteristically think of themselves either as already having moved up in class […] or as being about to move up in class" and points out that roughly 64 percent of Americans between eighteen and twenty-nine "thought it was either very likely or somewhat likely that they would become rich" (2006: 193). Felski herself mentions the "permeability of class boundaries" and the "possibility of moving up or down the class hierarchy" (38). She also problematizes this dominant mode of theorizing class, and, by discussing Carolyn Steedman's *Landscapes for a Good Woman* (1987), demonstrates that while mobility might be possible in economic terms, the "psychic markings" of one's class background can prove much more tenacious, sometimes even paralyzing (39). To frame discussions of class in the rhetoric of vertical movement, flexibility, and contingency and to conceive of one's own class position as transitional, ephemeral, and subject to change is such a widespread discursive practice that Jones calls it the "normalcy of mobility" (12). Lee herself offers an estimation of her situation in the fall of her junior year:

> I wondered if I had also changed since our freshman year. Certainly not as successfully—I was less naïve, a little less anxious, but I was fatter, too, I'd gained ten pounds in the last two years, and also my identity felt sealed. Early on, I'd imagined I might seem strange and dreamy, as if I spent time alone by choice, but now I was just another ordinary-looking girl who hung out most of the time with her roommate (similarly ordinary looking), who did not date boys, did not excel in either sports or academics, did not participate in forbidden activities like smoking or sneaking out of the dorm at night. Now I was average and Rufina was happy. (173)

Her identity, she tells us, feels "sealed." There is no room for movement or transformation; the "permeability of class boundaries" (Felski 38) has proven to be either non-existent or unattainable for Lee. Our assessment as readers resembles Lee's. We have experienced her academic and social failures, and her inability to conform to the narrative of merit that dominates the school. In part, this might be due to Lee's lack of familiarity with the ideal of *sprezzatura*—she does not seem to understand that the notion of 'studied effortlessness' does not mean actual effortlessness, but a careful and controlled performance thereof. In any case, Lee's anxieties and her passivity together lead to a condition that could be called dissociation. She feels apart from her surroundings—"no matter what I was doing, I was always imagining something else" (40); refusal becomes a habit for her (93); she is never fully in the moment but always observes herself from a distance—"everything felt peripheral" (40). Lee is increasingly dissociated not only from her environment, but also from her own emotions; even her depression feels "ephemeral; it was possible to be distracted from it by hanging out with Martha, or by listening to a chapel talk, or even—this had to mean it wasn't serious—by watching television" (232).

Reading *Prep* through the lens of mobility—and as a comment on the discursive dominance and 'normalcy of mobility'—further complicates the novel's position in the neoliberal imagination. The ambivalence of the narrative's engagement with the diversity paradigm is aggravated further by its conflicted treatment of the supposed contingency of class. Both the genre markers of the coming-of-age story and the spatiotemporal structure of the campus novel let the reader expect a number of different 'mobilities': developmental (from adolescence to young adulthood); intellectual (via the superior educational environment Lee finds herself in); identitarian (particularly with regard to class); and socio-economical (upward mobility). The novel, however, belies these expectations almost without exception. While the reader is waiting for that one decisive moment that will inevitably jumpstart Lee's transformation, she goes through the motions—reflecting, commenting, judging herself and her peers, but not undergoing any of the above-mentioned changes.

5. Concluding Remarks

This chapter offered a comprehensive reading of Curtis Sittenfeld's novel *Prep* in order to explore the ways in which the imaginative mode contributes to the epistemology of elite education in twenty-first century America. I decided to

examine a novel set at a prep school rather than a college because exclusive high schools form an important part of the system of elite education in the United States, and because *Prep* offers a particularly nuanced and productive negotiation of the three issues that interest me most in this study: class, eliteness, and merit. In this conclusion, I want to briefly recapitulate the chapter's main insights as to *Prep*'s various epistemological potentials, and then share some thoughts on the role of the imaginative mode in the production of knowledge about elite education.

In the expository section of this chapter, I discussed the role of fiction in the overall discourse of elite education. Even though they are not always taken seriously in the critical landscape, campus novels are a crucial component of the epistemology of elite education in the United States, for a number of reasons: First, novels such as *Prep* constitute a contact zone between the elite educational space and those who are interested in it, providing a blue print of sorts of how to interpret and experience this space. In fact, for many readers campus novels are the first, and often only, access to the exclusive world of elite educational institutions. As my discussion has shown, elite campus novels moreover generate meanings well beyond the realm of fiction: A number of tropes and topoi—the arrival scene, for instance—travel from the literary field to other positions in the discourse, thus solidifying certain aesthetic or rhetorical paradigms associated with the elite educational experience. Well-known campus novels also serve as common points of reference in the discourse and are used to accentuate or contextualize issues such as gender or race. The fictional explorations themselves, as the example of *Prep* has demonstrated, likewise often exhibit an awareness of the citational system of which they are part, and comment on or reformulate dominant paradigms of representing the elite educational experience. Despite its singularity, the elite campus in its various fictional instantiations is often regarded as a microcosm representing society as a whole, and it is thus used as a setting to explore and negotiate issues that bear relevance outside of the elite space as well. *Prep*, for instance, is read as an examination of adolescence and class in the United States in general, not just at an American prep school. This has to be seen as somewhat problematic, however, since the image of the elite campus as microcosm deflects from the very real socio-cultural and economic specificities of these institutions, and thus runs the risk of unduly generalizing the elite experience.

In the second section of this chapter, I zoomed in on Curtis Sittenfeld's novel *Prep* and discussed in detail its discursive position. The marketing cam-

paign accompanying its publication capitalized on the novel's prep school setting and positioned it in a tradition of writings about 'preppiness' that include, for instance, Erich Segal's 1970 novel *Love Story* and Lisa Birnbach's 1980 *The Official Preppy Handbook*. These and similar publications initiated a trajectory that can be traced all the way to an array of twenty-first century blogs dedicated to the preppy way of life. What all of these discursive positions have in common is the depoliticization of their subject matter: Being 'preppy' is presented as a lifestyle choice, manifesting itself in consumption patterns of varying degrees of quaintness and eccentricity, and unrelated to structures of power and oppression. The actual role of prep schools and their attendant cultures and networks in processes of social reproduction in the United States remains largely unexamined in this context.

The reviews of *Prep* at first glance seemed to follow a markedly different trajectory by emphasizing the novel's exploration of class and status as one of its central concerns. None of the reviews, however, used the novel to actually think through class as category of cultural and socio-economic structuration and stratification. Even more importantly, by blaming Lee herself for her failure to adjust and succeed in the elite educational space, many reviewers completely disregarded the novel's complex exploration of class. It is thus her personal inadequacy rather than systemic factors that cause her misfortune. Here, one of the great advantages of fiction—namely its capacity to individualize experience, to offer nuance and detail, and to encourage readers to empathize—simultaneously limits its critical potential because it diverts attention from the system that frames and, to an extent, determines the individual experience.

Despite its popular success, *Prep* received comparatively little academic attention. A notable exception is an essay (and, later, book chapter) by Walter Benn Michaels, in which he reads the novel alongside Tom Wolfe's 2004 *I am Charlotte Simmons* and criticizes both for (re)producing the illusion of class diversity at elite institutions while simultaneously rephrasing the problem of economic inequality in the language and ideology of identity politics. In their insistence on misrepresenting class, Michaels argues, both novels are expressions of the neoliberal imagination, which he describes as driven by a desire either not to acknowledge the reality of inequality at all or to create a false sense of equality without actually redistributing any money. Much of my discussion of the text itself responds to or takes its point of departure from Michaels's critique, which is in part convincing, but also, I argue, reductive

and does not do justice to *Prep*'s complex engagement with its neoliberal frame of reference.

In the last section of this chapter, I moved from *Prep*'s position in the discourse to a close reading of the text itself. Drawing on Jane Tompkins's concept of 'cultural work', I discussed the ways in which the novel negotiates three topics that (de)stabilize the discourse of elite education: the diversity paradigm and its limitations, the ramifications of class, and the cultural script of mobility qua merit. Contrary to Michaels's assertion, I argue that in all of these contexts, *Prep* has to be read as both an expression and a subversion of the neoliberal imagination.

The support and celebration of diversity is a common feature of the discourse of elite education. Critical and self-representational materials alike stress its importance as a guiding principle in admissions procedures and campus politics. *Prep* uses the diversity paradigm in two ways: On the one hand, the school itself references diversity as a major directive, as for instance when the headmaster insists that his school is diverse in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity. On the other hand, Lee's own experience of the elite educational space is framed by a perverted version of this diversity paradigm that is shaped by her own racism, classism, and sexism. Lee uses the same categories the school does, but comes up with an inverted taxonomy of privilege that marks non-white, lower-middle-class, Jewish, and female students as less worthy. In Lee's conversation with the headmaster, moreover, the most important blind spot in the diversity paradigm becomes apparent: By virtue of its categorical specificity, class remains unarticulable in this official framework, leaving Lee feeling permanently displaced, ashamed, and unsure of her position at the school.

Prep's negotiation of the diversity paradigm thus exposes its limitations—an official commitment to diversity does not end discrimination and prejudice on campus. At the same time, however, Michaels is right in pointing out the novel's complicity with the very structures it seems to criticize: The narrative's deep structure does indeed reproduce the illusion of racial, ethnic, regional, and socio-economic diversity at elite institutions. Even though *Prep* ostensibly finds fault with the homogeneity of the elite educational space, the novel thus simultaneously echoes the self-descriptions of elite institutions as 'multicultural' in the broadest possible sense. The narrative moreover seems to exonerate the institution and the system of elite education by insisting that Lee's racism and prejudices are not rooted in systemic structures but entirely her own.

One of *Prep*'s most important contributions to the discourse of elite education lies in the novel's complex and nuanced treatment of the ramifications of class. Socio-economic difference, *Prep* demonstrates, is not easily included in the framework of diversity and is thus largely silenced or ignored. Lee experiences class in a variety of ways—mainly through lack (of material things as well as cultural capital) and contrast (between her own background, which is associated with ugliness and scarcity, and an almost mythological vision of affluence). She also learns quickly that the silence surrounding socio-economic stratification is selective: It is possible, at times even desirable to talk about some class positions (e.g. the extreme wealth of some of her peers' families) while others remain unarticulable (e.g. her own class background or her status as a scholarship student). In a discourse that all too often reduces matters of class to family income or statistical representation, *Prep*'s insistence on class as multidimensional category with economic, cultural, social, and bodily ramifications is a crucial intervention. Contrary to Michaels's assertion, the novel neither pretends class does not exist nor unduly likens it to race or gender. Instead, *Prep* urges us to accept the complexity of class, demonstrating its categorical singularity in convincing and poignant ways.

A final important discursive contribution *Prep* makes—and one that complicates its position in the neoliberal imagination considerably—is to challenge, and perhaps even subvert, what Gavin Jones calls the 'normalcy of mobility'. Whenever class figures in any meaningful way in the American imagination, it is situated in the framework of upward or downward mobility. In the neoliberal imagination, in particular, the notion of mobility qua merit is widespread and powerful, whereas immobility is conceptualized as abject and deplorable, immoral even. *Prep* presents the reader with an interesting interplay between traditional liberal conceptions of merit—hard work, self-discipline, serious engagement—and what I think of as the neoliberal modulation thereof: an unofficial, elusive set of imperatives that govern the very mode of being expected from the meritorious individual, a sense of ease, unself-consciousness, and insouciance. By way of its genre markers (coming-of-age and campus novel), *Prep* encourages the reader to expect Lee to exhibit a range of different 'mobilities' through merit: developmental (from adolescence to adulthood); intellectual (due to the exceptional educational environment); psychological (coming to terms with her socio-economic otherness); and, finally, socio-economic (utilizing her education to gain upward mobility). Lee fails to comply with these expectations, however, and resists both the liberal merit narrative of success through hard work and its neoliberal modu-

lation of performing the meritocracy of ease and affect. Instead, she comes to represent everything the neoliberal imagination abhors; she is passive, timid, sloppy, and static. At the same time, the reader is asked to identify with her. Through this conflict, the novel creates a neoliberal reader: We want Lee to follow the script of mobility qua merit; we want to witness her montage moment; we want to shake her out of her passivity and have her discipline and control herself so as to ultimately embody the ease of success through education. In so doing, *Prep* subverts the "normalcy of mobility" (Jones 12) that so often characterizes the negotiation of class in the United States, and thus forces us to rethink the cultural scripts that dominate the neoliberal imagination.

Compared with the other two epistemological modes discussed in the previous chapters of this study—the critical-analytical and the self-representative—the imaginative mode is much more flexible and unrestricted in its conceptualization of the elite educational space. Fiction does not have to criticize, find fault, or offer suggestions for improvement, and neither does it have to promote, advertise, or celebrate; fictional texts can risk contradiction and ambiguity in ways that sociological, journalistic, and self-representational materials cannot. And yet, the imaginative mode has different conventions to follow: to tell a compelling story, to create believable characters and plausible plot lines, to allow the reader to enter the fictional world and empathize with its inhabitants. In the context of the elite campus novel, then, it is imperative that the text utilize the campus as setting effectively, using its dramatic potentials to the fullest extent. The elite campus is a relatively closed space that can serve as a stage for encounters and conflicts between different types of eliteness, a space that allows the reader to trace the dispersal and commerce of different forms of capital, and that encourages the negotiation of many of the values and myths that constitute the American cultural imagination.

The mode of imagination takes up many of the topics addressed in the critical-analytical studies and the self-representational materials, for instance the issue of diversity, access, and representation, the conflicting (neo)liberal conceptions of merit, and the importance of affect and embodiment in performing eliteness. As my discussion of *Prep* has shown, however, it does so in a decidedly more pessimistic way. The fictional elite campus—not only in *Prep*, but in a number of similar narratives—is a space of disappointment, failure, disenchantment; it does not live up to the expectations formulated by sociologists and journalists, nor does it reflect the glamorous images produced by the institutions themselves. To call it dystopian would go too far, but it

certainly demonstrates the problematic, dysfunctional, and rotten underbelly of the American Dream. At the same time, however, the imaginative mode is not without its affirmative or celebratory subtext. A novel such as *Prep*, both in terms of its structure and its mise-en-scène, contributes in subtle ways to the popular image of the elite campus as an arcadian realm, offering a beautiful life to those who gain access. In part, this seeming contradiction is due to what I have called the paradox of elite campus fiction. Among the main attractions of these kinds of narratives is arguably their promise to satisfy their readers' voyeuristic desire to know what goes on behind the ivy-covered walls of elite institutions, to allow them to catch a glimpse of the privileged lives of the affluent few. As *Prep* demonstrates, however, this kind of imaginary class transcendence is not easily achieved. Eliteness, it turns out upon closer inspection, fully unfolds only from a distance and the aura of eliteness vanishes through proximity. This is why most elite campus novels employ an outsider protagonist, like Lee Fiora, whose position creates the necessary distance and whose gaze the reader can adopt. And yet, the stories ultimately fail to deliver on their initial promise: In *Prep,* as in similar novels, we learn much more about the obsessions, desires, and anxieties of the (lower) middle classes than about the elite, which remains intact but ultimately unexamined.

Conclusion

This study investigated the peculiar position of the elite educational space in the American cultural imagination. Its main trajectory was epistemological: I wanted to find out what we know about elite education in the United States of the twenty-first century, through which channels we gain this knowledge, and how the individual sites of knowledge production navigate the tensions and contradictions invariably involved in these epistemological processes. In this conclusion, I will not reiterate in chronological order the findings of the individual chapters, since I have provided extensive summaries that do so throughout the book. Instead, I want to return to the main questions that have guided my research and informed my readings, and answer them concisely and comprehensively by taking into account and putting in dialogue all four chapters of this study.

My initial point of departure was a fairly simple question: How does America make sense of its own elite educational system, given the obvious tensions that characterize its position in the cultural and socio-political landscape? Specifically, I was interested in how the discourse of elite education responds to what seemed to me the most serious tension, namely that between a set of core values to which most Americans would subscribe—equal opportunity, social mobility, the American Dream—and the existence of a highly stratified educational system in which the power of capital seems ubiquitous. Three categories struck me as particularly potent in navigating this tension, and I conceptualized them as nodal points around which the discourse revolves: merit, class, and eliteness. Which role do these categories play in the various attempts to explain and legitimize the elite educational system? Do they stabilize and solidify or challenge and undermine the discourse? Given that knowledge about elite education is produced through a variety of semiotic channels, another main concern was the role of form in the epistemology of elite education. I began this study with a brief excursus into the world of

fashion, using Tommy Hilfiger's advertising campaign as an example of how the elite educational space is utilized in non-educational contexts. On the one hand, this utilization points to some of the ways in which knowledge about the elite educational space is created implicitly, in contexts where one would not necessarily expect it. On the other hand, the potency of the elite campus in this regard suggests to me that it commands a range of meanings that transcend academic education proper, meanings that are woven into its semiotic fabric and symbolic structure. How, then, do genre, style, imagery, and aesthetics inform the negotiation of elite education in the United States? In line with the conception of discourse as an inherently unstable force of meaning production, a last concern of my inquiry into the discourse of elite education was to identify ruptures, fault lines, and persistent tensions in the materials and their epistemological practices. In the following, I want to address each of these questions by drawing on the findings of all four chapters of this study.

Americans have always had an ambivalent attitude toward eliteness in general, and eliteness in education in particular. As the 2016 presidential campaign has amply illustrated, populist anti-elitism is a widespread and powerful a sentiment in the twenty-first century—the sweeping resentment against 'the' elite in general, as well as the more specific kind, for instance against the 'swamp' of Washington's political elites, are but two examples of this tendency. At the same time, application numbers at elite universities are soaring, and have been for years; the Ivy League and its peers are an extremely successful, globally recognized brand of American exceptionalism. Elite universities moreover receive reliably positive press coverage for their contributions to science and scholarship, their Nobel Prizes and Field Medals, their Pulitzers and other similarly prestigious awards and fellowships. How, then, does America make sense of its own elite educational system, given these tensions and contradictions?

I have argued in this study that the discourse of elite education does so through three primary epistemological modes: critique, affirmation, and imagination. Each mode offers a slightly different overall conceptualization of the elite educational space, along with different responses to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism. The mode of critique offers two main lines of reasoning. On the one hand, progressivist social justice interventions suggest a variety of reformist measures to improve the meritocratic system and thus alleviate the tension between elitist and egalitarian impulses; on the other hand, conservative cultural critiques rewrite this tension as one that centers around the issue of quality, rather than that of inequality, and conse-

quently propose fundamental changes to the campus cultures of elite institutions. The affirmative mode responds to the tension by drawing on the tried and true paradigm of diversity management: If every social-cultural group were represented in the elite educational space, and if elite institutions openly acknowledged their commitment to the celebration of diversity and difference, the problem of elitism would seem much less pronounced. The mode of imagination, by contrast, differs significantly from the two others in this regard. Since it does not have to advertise or find fault, the mode of imagination is able to embrace the various contradictions inspired by the tension between elitism and egalitarianism. Its response, then, is more ambiguous—on the one hand, it presents the elite educational space as a realm of failure and disenchantment, and intensifies and escalates the tension rather than resolving it. On the other hand, the novel is in some ways complicit with the diversity paradigm employed by the institutions themselves, and thus offers some alleviation of the tension by reproducing the illusion of diversity at elite institutions.

In their conceptualizations of the elite educational space, all three epistemological modes are presented with a range of representational issues that are rooted in their own discursive conventions and the communicative demands they are expected to meet. The mode of critique falls prey to what I have called the 'merit fallacy', namely the attempt to fixate the meanings of merit, despite its inherent and systemic contingency, as the stable opposite of privilege. The merit fallacy is part and parcel of the critical mode's immersion in the jeremiadic tradition, which causes it to fall into a pattern of celebration-through-lament that seriously limits its genuine critical potential. The affirmative mode, by contrast, faces a fundamental representational dilemma caused by the American ambivalence toward elite distinction: The eliteness of elite institutions is one of their primary assets, but they have to communicate it without seeming elitist. For an elite college such as Princeton, moreover, the tension between elitism and egalitarianism is not the only communicative hurdle—Princeton has to be different things to different people, and wants to communicate different types of eliteness in different contexts. The mode of imagination, finally, struggles with another kind of representational dilemma, which I have called the 'paradox of elite campus fiction'. The appeal of elite campus narratives rests in large parts on their promise to offer a glimpse behind the walls of exclusive institutions and thus teach the reader something about the elite. Since eliteness is a phenomenon that is constituted by distance, however, elite campus narratives tend to employ an

outsider as protagonist and focalizer, whose voyeuristic gaze the reader can adopt. The result of this, then, is that we learn much more about the anxieties and dreams of these outsiders—mostly lower-middle class scholarship students—than we do about the elite.

When we turn to the categories this study focused on—merit, class, and eliteness—we can trace how the three epistemological frames manage each other: They contradict, correct, and complement one another in their creation of meaning. In the case of merit, the three modes contradict each other. The critical mode conceptualizes merit as a measurable, primarily academic category that is opposed to privilege in all of its forms. The affirmative mode, by contrast, wants to see merit as a much larger category. In this context, after all, merit is primarily used as a tool in the management of institutional self-interest, and, given the marketization of the neoliberal age, is increasingly commodified. The imaginative mode complicates both of these accounts by demonstrating how, in practice, the meritocracy overburdens the failing individual; lack of merit, as *Prep* indicates, is an individual problem rather than a systemic concern in the discourse of elite education.

In the context of class, the three modes demonstrate more agreement—in all of them, socio-economic stratification plays a central role, even though there is no consensus on how to theorize it. If we put the three modes in dialogue, it becomes clear that they correct each other in interesting ways. The critical-analytical studies conceptualize class primarily along the lines of family income. Their main line of argumentation is that class exerts an undue influence on elite college admissions and on campus cultures, and the studies make a number of suggestions on how to improve the system so as to lessen this influence. The institutions themselves likewise frame class as a function of family income, but respond to the problem posed by class by trying to include it in the diversity paradigm, proposing to celebrate socio-economic difference alongside racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender difference. Both modes thus follow a limited understanding of class that reduces it to one of its several indicators, and both conceptualize it in the framework of mobility. The imaginative mode corrects the two by insisting on the complexity of class as a multidimensional category that includes economic as well as cultural, psychological, and bodily factors. This mode, however, betrays its own blind spots and is corrected by the critical mode with regard to the issue of class diversity: While the former reproduces the illusion of socio-economic diversity at elite educational institutions, the latter debunks this myth, as the Equality of Opportunity Project, to name but one example, demonstrates.

In the context of eliteness, finally, the three epistemological modes complement each other. In the whole discourse, eliteness remains an elusive category that is rarely addressed or defined explicitly, but nevertheless informs the production of knowledge in crucial ways. The critical mode presents us with two related visions of a classless eliteness, one that stresses the social justice aspect of it—the classlessness—and one that emphasizes the quality of the eliteness. The conservative studies, in particular, produce two competing cultural scripts: the neoliberal eliteness of mindless credentialism, which they set out to criticize, and a humanistic eliteness of substantial engagement, which they propagate. The affirmative mode merges both scripts into what I have called the 'meritocracy of affect', a modulation of the traditional meritocracy of effort that is situated within and stabilized by the three epistemological frames of diversity, the good life, and community. The less pleasurable, but nonetheless vital, aspects of eliteness—exclusion and competition, for instance—are communicated not by the institutions themselves, but by the media discourse that revolves around them. Important aspects of elite status production are thus outsourced, allowing the affirmative mode to concentrate on producing its more attractive 'marketable illusions'. The imaginative mode at first glance seems to critique eliteness, but as I have shown in my discussion of *Prep*, the novel's use of a protagonist who refuses the common narrative of eliteness and mobility qua merit ultimately affirms this narrative by producing a neoliberal reader, one who wants her to conform to these imperatives, and is offended by her refusal. None of the epistemological modes thus genuinely critiques the notion of eliteness, or produces a viable alternative; they all seem to agree that eliteness itself, as long as it is the right kind, is not the problem.

The elite campus, as my readings have shown time and again, is an iconic place in the American cultural imagination. As such, it communicates more than just academic superiority—as I have argued in the beginning of this study, a number of meanings have become associated with the elite educational space in the course of the twentieth century, and are now bound up with the collegiate aesthetics as it is employed, for instance, by Tommy Hilfiger: a sort of "rhizomorphous" (Boltanski and Chiapello 97) excellence that spans academic as well as extracurricular endeavors, a sense of ease and pleasure, the notion of a legitimately good and beautiful life, and the insinuation of national relevance. These meanings are carried by a number of recurring motifs and images that together further mythologize the elite campus: The symbolism found on the covers of the critical-analytical studies (ivy, keys,

and iron gates), the images of the campus space published by the institutions themselves, and the lavish descriptions of the mise-en-scène we find in every elite campus novel. Form thus plays an important role in the epistemology of elite education; the iconicity of the elite educational space is not only rooted in the meanings this space commands, but bolstered by its semiotics—the widespread images of beautiful campus landscapes, Gothic architecture, and fall foliage.

To conclude: If there is one central result of my foray into the discourse of elite education in twenty-first-century America, it is the tenacity and adaptability of meritocratic ideology. Despite important ruptures—the spectacle of wealth at Princeton, for instance—the vision of the meritocracy as the ultimate expression of American exceptionalism is strengthened in each epistemological mode. In the critical mode, it is the jeremiadic tendencies that eventually result in an affirmation of meritocratic structures; in the affirmative mode, it is the enticing vision of a meritocracy of affect that is able to embrace both liberal and neoliberal tenets; and in the imaginative mode, affirmation happens through the creation of a neoliberal reader and the text's deep structure, which reproduces the illusions of the meritocracy. With the exception of William Deresiewicz, who briefly raises the possibility of a complete overhaul of the educational system, my research has not come across any genuine critiques of the meritocratic ideology. Those that sound like they could be—Lani Guinier's *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America* comes to mind—likewise operate firmly within its ideological constraints. The discourse of elite education, then, is largely indifferent toward the political economy of the meritocracy, and instead settles for a critique of individual factors within the system—the conception of merit, for instance, or the problem of access.

To insist that there is no alternative to the meritocracy is striking in particular when one takes into account that for all intents and purposes, the meritocracy is fundamentally at odds with the American educational system. All other implications aside, the meritocracy can function correctly only in an educational system characterized by homogeneity and genuine equality of opportunity—the category of 'merit' can only unfold its full potential if each individual student goes through the same stages in her educational development and is put to the same tests. The American educational landscape, however, is far too heterogeneous, and far too dependent on capital, to ever produce a 'genuine meritocracy'. Since the meritocracy is by design blind to its own economic underpinnings, it will remain flawed as long as it is situated within

an educational system that is so strongly informed, if not determined, by the resources of individual families. No matter how many changes the concept of 'merit' undergoes—whether it be conceptualized as purely academic, or extracurricular, or related to the students' diversity factor, or to some democratic commitment, as Guinier would have it—affluence will always distort the meritocratic structures. This, then, is the central blind spot of the discourse of elite education in twenty-first century America.

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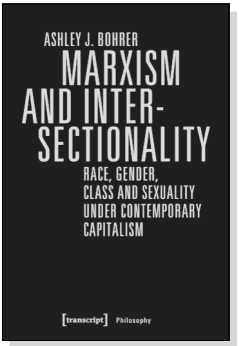

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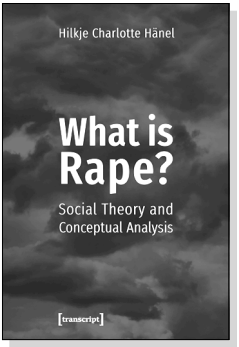

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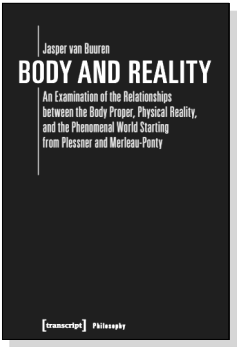

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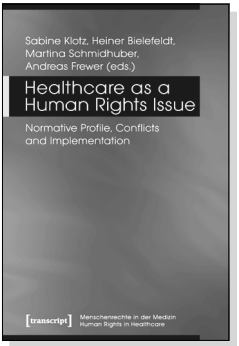

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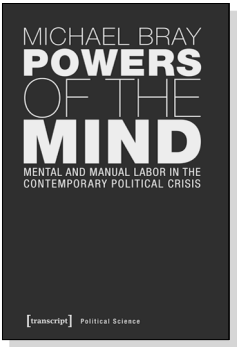

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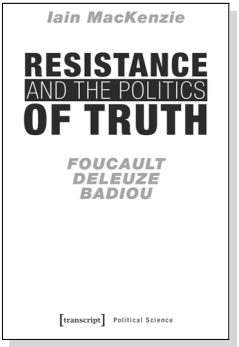

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