Between Meritocracy and the Old Boy Network: Elite Education in Contemporary American Literature

Sophie Spieler

ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the discourse of elite education in the United States and argues that it generates two dominant topoi—merit and network—in order to make sense of the socio-political implications of a strongly hierarchical education system. Examining Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons* (2004) and Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep* (2005) against the backdrop of different positions within the discursive framework, I interrogate the role of literary texts as counter-discourses that provide spaces of subversion and resistance.

KEYWORDS: Elites; Education; Upper Class; Meritocracy; Network

Introduction

In his debut novel *This Side Of Paradise* (1920), F. Scott Fitzgerald famously dubs Princeton University "the pleasantest country club in America" (33), thus suggesting that the Ivy League institution provides a space that fosters upper-class bonding rather than higher education. Fitzgerald's comment is part of an ongoing debate on the role and function of elite education in American society. Cultural production, public debate, sociological research, and educational institutions themselves are involved in a many-voiced discussion of the implications of the strongly hierarchical American educational system: does the prominence of a few highly selective, highly prestigious schools and universities support or undermine the ideal of equal opportunities? Which standards do the predominantly private institutions have to answer to regarding their policies of admission and exclusion? Is the prestige attributed to elite schools and universities primarily social or academic in nature? This article engages only with a small section of this debate by interrogating the role of fiction in the discourse of elite education.[1] Examining two paradigmatic contemporary

[1] My main interest regarding the distinction between fiction and non-fiction lies not in questions of accuracy, factuality, or authenticity. I examine the role of fictional texts because they exhibit different discursive restraints and opportunities than the other text types that constitute the discourse. To put it simply, literary texts are not necessarily expected to analyze, explain, and introduce solutions (like sociological studies), or expose and criticize (like journalistic accounts), or advertise and propagate (like self-representational texts). Literary texts can, of course, 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

novels—Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons* (2004) and Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep* (2005)—against the backdrop of sociological, socio-political, and institutional positions within the discursive framework, I read literary texts as counter-discourses that provide spaces of subversion and resistance to dominant meanings.

In the overall discourse of elite distinction, the sphere of education assumes a particularly prominent role. Sociological scholarship considers the elite educational system one of the most important institutional frameworks for the legitimization, reproduction, and maintenance of elite status and power. In his classic study of the American power elite, C. Wright Mills points out that "[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" (64). Mills concludes that education is "the characterizing point in the upper-class experience" (65). In the sociology of elite distinction, then, institutionalized education is particularly salient, surfacing frequently in fictional and non-fictional accounts alike, and providing a crucial link between social, political, and economic elites.

Discursively speaking, exclusive schools and universities form one of the more visible and accessible aspects of elite culture. Though a number of arguably significant aspects remain partly hidden or intransparent—admissions policies, funding, secret societies, among others—there is far more material about prestigious educational institutions than about other elite institutions, such as private clubs or philanthropic organizations. With regard to the rules and norms governing the conversation about elite distinction, the field of education moreover assumes a unique role as one of the few areas in which the term 'elite' is used in an affirmative manner. As Elaine Showalter points out in her study of the academic novel, the campus can furthermore be seen as a microcosm that reaches out into other realms of the discourse (3). Many issues that are prevalent in the larger socio-political debate—the role of different forms of capital, the openness of the elite community, or the definition of the much-used and abused criterion of merit—are negotiated paradigmatically in the discourse of elite education.

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fictional/literary texts is of interest precisely because of their ability to embrace and capitalize on ambiguity.

The Chosen and Their Gatekeepers: The Discourse of Elite Education[2]

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault acknowledges the ambiguity of the term 'discourse,' which he treats "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" (90). The discourse of elite education, then, is both a regulated system of knowledge and a practice, and as such it is part of larger discursive structures—relating, for instance, to education as a whole or to social stratification in America. Positions within the discourse are subject to rules and norms that govern their circulation, determine their influence, and strengthen or undermine their power. Like the educational system itself, the discourse of elite education is thus shaped by the dynamics of admission and exclusion as well as the interplay of privileged and suppressed positions.

I conceptualize the discourse of elite education as a multidimensional field informed by four major forces that produce knowledge and opinions: literary and audiovisual narratives, public debate, sociological research, and institutional self-representations of schools and universities. These subfields operate according to their respective discursive restraints and potentials, and together produce large and influential parts of the discourse. 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. However, not all positions in this discourse are created equal. 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. (*History* 100-01)

Thus, the potential for subversion, the instability, and the tendency toward contradiction are inherent in discourse itself. In this article, I first trace dominant positions in the discourse and then examine the role of literature as counter-discourse. With Richard Terdiman I understand counter-discourses as alternative discursive systems that seek to "project an

[2] The title of this section references Jerome Karabel's *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* and Jacques Steinberg's *The Gatekeepers: Inside the Admissions Process of a Premier College.* See Works Cited page for full bibliographical information.

alternative, liberating *newness* against the absorptive capacity of […] established discourses" (13, emphasis in the original). Literature, like other forms of art, is particularly well-suited for generating counter-discourses and has at least the potential of challenging received wisdom and destabilizing dominant structures of meaning and knowledge. Stefan Horlacher furthermore speaks of literature as "an indispensable epistemological medium" because it helps to shed light on socio-cultural configurations and paradigms as "highly artificial, condensed, polysemous symbolic systems" (13). Literary texts thus do not only play an active part in shaping the discourse but also help to understand its mechanisms and politics.

My argument in this article is twofold: First, I argue that the discourse as a whole produces two contrary topoi in order to make sense of elite education: the topos of meritocracy and the topos of the Old Boy Network. Actualized in a variety of individual narratives across a range of genres and media, these two topoi assume privileged, if contested, positions in the discourse. Their scripts provide repeatable patterns of legitimizing or critiquing elite education. These two topoi, in short, are at the heart of all the narratives that constitute the discourse.[3] Second, I argue that literary narratives complicate this dual structure by integrating the topoi into narratives of disillusionment within the elite setting and the potential of catharsis outside of the elite setting. Circumventing the discursive constraints faced by other knowledge-producing forces, literature thus destabilizes the merit/network duality and generates new ways of negotiating the meanings of elite education.

[3] A number of relatively distinct master plots occur frequently across the four sections of the discourse. Fictional narratives often revolve around an outsider thrown into elite surroundings (e.g. in novels such as Tartt's *The Secret History*, Wolff's *Old School*, Gutcheon's *The New Girls*, and TV series such as *Gossip Girl* or *Gilmore Girls*). Journalistic accounts frequently center on narratives of scandal and exposure (coverage of 'prep school scandals' (e.g. Polkinghorn, "A Brief History of Boarding-School Scandals," published in *Vanity Fair*) or discriminatory admissions processes (e.g. Menand, "The Thin Envelope," published in *The New Yorker*). Sociological studies likewise often focus on narratives of exposure (e.g. Levy's *Elite Education and the Private School: Excellence and Arrogance at Phillips Exeter Academy*; Karabel's *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*) or on stories of collective elite identity formation (e.g. Gaztambide-Fernández's *The Best of the Best: Becoming Elite at an American Boarding School* or Khan's *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*). See Works Cited page for full bibliographical information.

Merit versus Network: The Two Topoi of Elite Education

Only in rare cases does the merit/network antagonism occur as a clear-cut dichotomy. Most texts include both topoi, but almost all privilege one over the other. The topoi refer to dominant positions in the discourse and provide convincing and productive narrative frames—master plots, so to speak—for the rendition of stories related to elite education. The paradigms of merit and network, then, constitute the fundamental architecture of the discourse.

Drawing on the concept of merit to legitimize and maintain power and privilege is a well-established and successful strategy. Oft-quoted American thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams believed in and advocated a "natural aristocracy among men [based on] virtue and talents" (quoted in Lerner 95), while Ralph Waldo Emerson argued that "[t]he existence of an upper class is not injurious, so long as it is dependent on merit" (38). Perhaps the most telling indicator of America's infatuation with the notion of merit, however, is the enthusiastic appropriation of the term 'meritocracy' as a mark of excellence. This is significant because Michael Young originally coined the term in his satire *The Rise of Meritocracy* (1958) to refer to a hellish dystopia rather than a desirable social structure. Young's *Meritocracy* references a system in which social advancement is based solely on intelligence testing, and the text outlines its fairly catastrophic consequences—rampant social inequality and an utter lack of solidarity, among others. Though the satire was intended as a warning rather than an instruction manual, the term was adopted widely and uncritically as a synonym for 'fairness,' adding an aura of legitimacy to all kinds of selection processes.

During the twentieth century wealth and lineage grew increasingly untenable as the sole prerequisites for social and economic success, and schools, universities, and even corporations adopted the framework of meritocracy to explain, legitimize, and maintain their communities' superior standing. The advantage of basing the politics of admission and exclusion on merit lies in the term's overwhelmingly positive associations—alluding, as it does, to intelligence, fairness, and hard work. Thus, the concept of merit is entirely consistent with one of America's favorite myths about America: the tale of the self-made man, who (re-)creates himself regardless of his background, purely on the basis of his mental

and physical faculties. Though in many respects convenient in its vagueness, the semantic flexibility of the concept of merit can become problematic as well. In his groundbreaking study of the policies of admission and exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, sociologist Jerome Karabel discusses the inherent instability of the term:

> Given the high stakes involved, it is not surprising that the criteria governing selection to our leading colleges and universities have time and time again become the object of bitter conflict. At the center of these struggles has been the definition of "merit"—the quality that most Americans agree should determine college admissions. But while, at least in public, there has been something approaching a consensus that in America "merit"—and not inherited privilege—should determine the distribution of educational opportunity, there has been no consensus on what "merit" is. In truth, there is no neutral definition of "merit"; however it is defined, it will benefit some groups while disadvantaging others. (3)

Even the most cursory of glances at some of the texts that constitute the discourse of elite education demonstrates that while almost all of them use the category, there are considerable differences in meaning. The terminological elusiveness of the concept notwithstanding, it is a convenient catchphrase in order to legitimize the discrepancies in terms of educational or career opportunity between graduates of elite prep schools or universities and those with degrees from non-elite institutions.

It is not surprising, then, that the topos of meritocracy is as popular as it is pervasive. An example of a typical narrative inspired by the topos can be found in David Brooks's *Bobos in Paradise* (2000), where he discusses the changing values of the upper class as reflected in the *New York Times* wedding pages:

> 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 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. (15)

Perennially popular with the American audience, the topos of merit is narrated frequently and enthusiastically in a variety of contexts. Sociologist Shamus Rahman Khan calls it the

"language of hard work" (55) and describes it as the "the linchpin to validating contemporary elite life: [the students'] abilities explain their achievements and their achievements thus justify their elite position" (178). Schools and universities utilize the topos of meritocracy when they describe their student body as exceptionally ambitious, gifted, driven, and passionate. Student profiles on institutional websites often include short narratives of hardships overcome or professional successes celebrated. The majority of fictional accounts of the elite educational experience likewise center around the topos of merit—the classic point of departure of the elite campus novel, for instance, is the arrival of the scholarship student at the gates of the elite institution to which he or she gained access on the basis of hard work and ambition.

Parallel to the framework of merit, however, the discourse also produces a noticeably different model of explaining the intricacies of elite education: the topos of the Old Boy Network. This topos refers to the access to different forms of capital—social, cultural, and economic (cf. Bourdieu)—that allow an individual to form and maintain social and professional networks. *The Official Preppy Handbook* (1980), despite its tongue-in-cheek approach, offers an apt account of the mechanisms of the Old Boy Network:

> Henderson Cram lives in Greenwich, Conn., and summers on Nantucket. He is on the Art Museum Board of Trustees and the Orphan's Home Board of Directors. He went to St. Grottlesex School and to college at Old Ivy, and he is a member of the Racquet Club and the Windy Brae Country Club. Cram's daughter Mary Bundy Cram (known as Bundy) wants very much to come out at the Debutante Cotillion. So Cram calls his friend, Morgan Hack, whom he knows from St. Grottlesex, Old Ivy, the Art Museum Board of Trustees, and Nantucket. Hack's ex-wife, Bitsy Hack Hicks, was the roommate (at Miss Havisham's School) of Mittens Crumb, who is the director of the Debutante Cotillion. Cram, through Hack, through Hicks, through Crumb arranges to have Bundy put on the deb list. (194)

Similar patterns are ubiquitous in the discourse of elite education, where the issue of discriminatory admissions policies and the power of alumni associations have been the subject of heated debate for decades. In the framework of the topos of network, elite educational institutions are described as powerhouses of the upper class's reproduction of itself and its privileges. Connections and economic prowess, rather than merit, are offered as explanations for why students are admitted and what they gain from attending elite

institutions. Journalist Daniel Golden offers a narrative actualization of this topos in his Pulitzer-Prize-winning book *The Price of Admission* (2006):

> Even without primogeniture, the firstborn sons of former Senate majority leader Bill Frist and former vice president Al Gore could count on a valuable inheritance: easy entry to America's foremost universities. (…) Both were middling students who preferred partying to homework and the company of jocks to scholars. Their academic records – and, in the teenage Albert Gore III's case, brushes with authority – would ordinarily have destined them for second-tier colleges. Yet both of them were admitted ahead of thousands of stellar candidates to their first and only choices, two of the nation's best and most selective universities, Frist to Princeton and Gore to Harvard, where their fathers had gone before them. The two Tennesseans waltzed into the Ivy League less on their own merit than on the basis of their paternal pedigrees. (1-2)

The topos of network has established itself to such a degree that the 'legacy' has become a stock character featured in almost all narratives set in elite educational surroundings. Legacy preference, however, is only one possible form the topos can take. Among other manifestations, Golden also discusses the privileged position of donors, graduates from certain feeder schools, or athletes. The defining characteristic of the network is its subtlety and invisibility—rendering it difficult to study, yet all the more effective in practice. In any case, allusions to merit often seem to obscure the mechanisms of the network.

Since the two topoi offer such contradictory models of making sense of elite education, theirs is invariably an uneasy balance. While published material is overwhelmingly critical of the meritocratic framework adopted and propagated by schools, universities, and graduates, and often challenges its assumptions, the topos of meritocracy ultimately proves stronger and more pervasive than the topos of network—demonstrated not least in the continued prestige and capital appointed to degrees awarded by elite schools and colleges. I argue that this is due to its narrative potential—the topos of merit, which often includes an 'against all odds' story arc that revolves around individuals overcoming all kinds of obstacles through hard work and dedication, lends itself to narrativization much more readily than the topos of network—and due to its kinship with some of the most powerful grand narratives of capitalism in America, including the self-made man and the American dream.

Elite Spaces and Narratives of Disillusionment: *I am Charlotte Simmons* and *Prep*

In my discussion of the discourse of elite education and the topoi of merit and network I have not differentiated between fictional and non-fictional accounts. However, despite the obvious differences between, say, a sociological study of St. Paul's School and that school's online "Welcome to SPS" section, most non-fictional actualizations of the two topoi have one feature in common that distinguishes them from fictional articulations: They are stories of success. Whether they are set in frameworks of merit or of network, they are almost exclusively stories of individuals who succeed in and through elite educational institutions, and therein lies the central difference to fictional accounts of the elite educational experience. Most elite campus novels—from Owen Johnson's *Stover at Yale* (1911) to Tobias Wolff's *Old School* (2003)—tell complicated stories of disillusionment and failure within the elite setting. *I am Charlotte Simmons* and *Prep* can be seen as paradigmatic in this regard. After a brief introduction of the elite educational space as it is constructed in the narratives, I examine each novel's negotiation of the topoi individually, focusing on institutional and social aspects of the elite environment as well as on the identity markers—primarily class and gender—that inform the protagonists' position in the elite community.

Tom Wolfe's novel *I am Charlotte Simmons* is the story of the eponymous protagonist, a hard-working and exceptionally smart student from rural North Carolina, who has been awarded a scholarship to the elite Dupont University—a thinly veiled caricature of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, with a hint of Duke. The school's name evokes the Du Pont family, who call "[o]ne of the longest-running fortunes in American history" (Greenberg and Thibault) their own. The novel follows Charlotte's experiences during her tumultuous freshman year, during which she reexamines and drastically changes her priorities as she gradually realizes that "for the upper-crust coeds of Dupont, sex, Cool, and kegs trump academic achievement every time" (Wolfe, back cover). Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep* tells the story of Lee Fiora, who receives a scholarship to the prestigious Ault School, a private preparatory school in New England. A first-person narrator, Lee chronicles her four years at Ault and her attempts at making sense of herself and her boarding-school surroundings. Both narratives unfold into a panorama of failure in the pristine neo-gothic surroundings of the elite campus: Lee, in her own estimation, reveals herself "to be strange and stupid" (5), fails academically and

socially, and ends up unhappily betwixt and between—alienated not only from her Ault environment but also from her parents and brothers. Charlotte likewise fails academically and socially, becomes estranged from her family, and suffers from severe depression. The novels' settings and basic plot structures are strikingly similar, though the protagonists' failures are attributed differently. Both dramatize the failure of the topos of meritocracy and an at least partial triumph of the topos of network, but the rules of the networks and the role of the protagonists differ.

The conceptualization of the elite educational space can be described in terms of a multidimensional framework that includes institutional, social, and personal aspects. Both novels deal with the institutional dimensions of elite education and dramatize the conflicts surrounding the mission and meaning of an elite university: is its primary task social or academic? Is it supposed to be an ivory tower of higher learning or an eclectic space supporting a variety of endeavors, including sports, art, or social activities? What role does the institution play in the process of the individual's identity formation? However, the institution is not only important as an abstraction that signifies a certain social or cultural capital. Its very materiality plays an important role as well. No elite campus novel omits the lavish descriptions of the school's grounds and buildings as architectural visualizations of the school's extraordinariness. In addition to inspiring awe and envy, these outward manifestations of elite status may also increase feelings of not belonging, as Lee explains with regard to the Ault School: "As I headed around the circle, the air smelled like burning leaves and the campus was shot with that amber light you see only in the fall, and I felt, as I often did at Ault, both as if I were undeserving and as if the beauty around me was not really mine" (300-01). In addition to the institution's materiality, the student body forms an integral part of the conceptualization of the elite educational space. *Charlotte Simmons* in particular offers a character cast that resembles a microcosm of elite distinction—the meritocratic elite embodied by Charlotte herself, the radical intellectual elite represented by Adam and his Millennial Mutants, the social and economic network elite epitomized by frat boy Hoyt Thorpe and Charlotte's roommate Beverly, and the athletic elite embodied by Jojo Johansson. *Prep* likewise shows the prestigious Ault School to be far from homogeneous: the student body includes many different racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. While both narratives thus complicate any straightforward definition of 'merit'—as, for

instance, a purely academic category—they also seem to imply that elite educational institutions foster diversity and heterogeneity. At the same time, however, both narratives contradict this reading by dramatizing the chasms and miscommunications between the representatives of the different groups. Neither of the texts positions itself clearly with regard to the institution's exact role in negotiating these tensions.

The social aspects of the elite educational space, described by Charlotte as "figuring out Dupont's tribal idiosyncrasies" (149), form another defining dimension. The protagonists' experiences can be described through the lens of class and, to a lesser extent, gender. The narratives describe the feelings of disorientation and not belonging experienced by Charlotte and Lee due to their lack of social and cultural capital and the differences between their habitus and that of their upper-class peers. By virtue of their regional and class background, their behavior, and their accents, they are positioned as the 'other' of the upper-class elite. Economic capital naturally also plays a role, as both protagonists experience difficulties due to their lack of it. Lee points out that "[m]oney was everywhere on campus, but it was usually invisible. 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" (12). Charlotte likewise finds it difficult to keep up financially with her new upper-class peers, particularly in her attempts to conform to the imperatives of femininity that govern the campus. Charlotte's experience of Dupont University is thus not only informed by her socio-economic status but also by her gender.

Both texts also foreground the personal dimensions of the elite educational experience, namely the position of the individual in regard to the institution, the peer group, and her own personal history. *Charlotte Simmons* and *Prep*, like most campus novels, are coming-of-age stories and follow the character development and growth of their protagonists. Both situate their characters in an elite environment, however, and thus add an important layer of meaning to the basic set-up of a coming-of-age narrative set in campus surroundings—as Lee phrases it: "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, my emphasis). The elite institution asks the individual to identify with it, to situate herself within its tradition, its history, and its future. For both Charlotte and Lee, this is a difficult, if not impossible task. While Charlotte tries to

find out whether she is "an intellectual snob" (17), "a prodigy miraculously arisen from the rocky soil of Sparta" (18), a "country bumpkin" (618), or "Jojo Johanssen's girlfriend" (676), Lee is permanently stuck in a liminal space between belonging and not-belonging—betwixt and between hating and loving the Ault School, her personal development is in equal parts initiated and stunted by the elite educational environment. Both Charlotte and Lee experience and suffer from the alienation from their families that results from their attempts to acculturate themselves to their new surroundings.

I am Charlotte Simmons and *Prep* center around failed attempts at belonging. Charlotte and Lee are faced with the task of making the elite campus their home, of integrating themselves into its institutional, academic, and social structures. Both fail to live up to their own and their environment's expectations, fail to become part of their elite surroundings—fail to belong. The novels offer a number of possible explanations for their protagonists' failure, which are negotiated within the framework of the two topoi: Charlotte and Lee are inhibited by certain internalized restraints and imperatives that they attribute to their gender and class. Their expectations and their actual experiences are contingent upon how they themselves, their peers, and the institution interprets these identity markers.

Meritocracy meets the 'Elite Playground': Disillusionment and Failure in Tom Wolfe's *I am Charlotte Simmons*

Charlotte Simmons is first introduced to the reader through the glowing laudation of her high school principal, who goes to considerable lengths to address her various achievements comprehensively. Thus, from the very beginning, the entire narrative rests upon the topos of merit. The first chapter introduces the reader to Charlotte's humble origins, her kind but simple parents, her unambitious and irresponsible peers, and the town of Sparta—in many ways a dead end for its inhabitants, most of all the meritless. Charlotte's ascension to the pantheon of elite education, the prestigious Dupont University, is fueled by her hard work and dedication alone—Charlotte seems to be the only 'Spartan' at Alleghany High School. When she finally arrives at Dupont, Charlotte thus quite literally and unequivocally embodies the topos of meritocracy. She is positioned as the upper class's 'other': she comes from a working-class family, has a rural background and a Southern accent, her father has a

mermaid tattoo—and, most importantly, she gets into Dupont solely on the basis of her academic prowess. It is not surprising, then, that she also wholeheartedly subscribes to the promises of the topos of meritocracy: "At Dupont she will find people like herself, people who actually have a life of the mind, people whose concept of the future is actually something beyond Saturday night" (19). In Charlotte's view, 'merit' is a purely academic category—athletics, political activism, or social ambitions have no room in her understanding of the term.

However, Charlotte's first encounter with her new roommate Beverly instantly confronts her with the topos of network. Beverly is a so-called 'legacy'—her father is an alumnus—she is from a wealthy Boston Brahmin family, and attended the prestigious Groton School, a classic 'feeder school' to elite universities. From the very beginning, Beverly is constructed as Charlotte's opposite: shallow, materialistic, and considerably more interested in socializing with Dupont's male lacrosse players than in any academic pursuits. If Charlotte and Beverly can be read as fairly 'pure' representatives of the two topoi, the rest of the characters are hybrids that share aspects of both categories. Some of them—Hoyt Thorpe and Adam Gellin, for instance—moreover illustrate the elusiveness and fluidity of the notion of merit by demonstrating the ease with which it can be faked or otherwise circumvented.

In marked contrast to the vast majority of stories told in sociological research or institutional texts, *I am Charlotte Simmons* is a narrative of failure. The longer she stays at Dupont, the more Charlotte grows disillusioned with her elite environment, as she gradually realizes that her hopes and dreams do not correspond in the least to the reality she experiences on campus—Dupont fails to deliver. The topoi and the characters are integrated into this narrative of disillusionment, a narrative that spans social, institutional, and personal dimensions. Charlotte's hope of meeting likeminded people is disappointed first. Within a few weeks of living in a coed dorm, Charlotte realizes that her classmates bear a striking resemblance to those she left behind in Sparta, North Carolina. Needless to say, she feels beyond disenchanted: "The vulgarity, the *rudeness*, the *impudence*, the virtual nudity—people parading around in towels—and *drinking*—(…) Now Charlotte was more than appalled. (…) How could this be real? This was *Dupont*…" (86, emphasis in the original).

It is not only her peers, however, who fail to meet Charlotte's expectations. The institution itself proves to be similarly disappointing. One of the most poignant experiences in this context is the Advanced French class Charlotte attends in the beginning of her first semester. Surprised to see the students reading the English translation of *Madame Bovary* instead of the French original, Charlotte learns that the class—affectionately called "Frère Jocko" (180)—is specifically designed for athletes who have to pass their language requirements. The teacher resignedly concludes that he "tries to think of it as community service" (104) and leaves Charlotte aghast.

However, the most formative process of disillusionment Charlotte undergoes is the disillusionment with herself, a process that is decidedly gendered. Charlotte abandons her intellectual ambitions in favor of chasing the ideal of femininity that seems to govern Dupont University. Instead of focusing on her studies, she is preoccupied with her outward appearance: "Wearing shorts at night this late in October was pushing it, but she was determined to show off her legs" (195). She gradually succumbs to the social pressures she perceives, spends her small allowance on hip designer jeans, drinks alcohol, and eventually loses her virginity to frat boy Hoyt Thorpe. The social ostracism she is subjected to afterward likewise demonstrates the pervasiveness and rigidity of heteronormative conceptions of gender: after her 'walk of shame' she is mocked and shunned by her peers who offer neither support nor solidarity. Failing academically, she subsequently slips into a deep depression that prompts her to lie to her parents and eventually ruins her transcript.

Charlotte's position as the meritocratic exception to the rule of mediocrity at Dupont and her ultimate failure seem to expose the topos of meritocracy as fraudulent. In the process, Dupont University is shown to be an "elite playground" (126) rather than "one of the world's greatest institutions of learning" (515). On the other hand, the two characters that represent the topos of network, Hoyt and Beverly, do not succeed either. Even though it is critical in many ways, Tom Wolfe's novel thus does not offer a straightforward indictment of elite education. While the narrative does articulate the many difficulties faced by its protagonist in the new upper-class setting—manners, money, priorities, among others—it also encourages the reader to view Charlotte's behavior and attitude critically. Acknowledging

agency in her own narrative of decline, she experiences a disillusionment rooted not only in the failure of the elite institution or her upper-class peers, but also in herself.

'Everything Felt Peripheral': Angst and Isolation in Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*

Like many novels set on elite campuses, *Prep* opens with a reference to the school's imposing architecture, as protagonist and narrator Lee Fiora describes the daily morning role call:

> [It] took place in an enormous room with twenty-foot-high Palladian windows, rows and rows of desks with hinged tops that you lifted to store your books inside, and mahogany panels on the walls—one for each class since Ault's founding in 1882—engraved with the name of every person who had graduated from the school. (3)

An metonymic embodiment of the elite institution's most prominent characteristics—wealth, grandeur, a sense of tradition and power—the description sets the tone for the first and arguably defining Ault experience Lee shares with the reader: a misunderstanding occurring in her Ancient History class, during which Lee finds herself unable to state her case coherently and ultimately leaves the class crying. This encounter proves to be paradigmatic for Lee's experience at the Ault School. Her social inhibitions and anxieties leave her unable to integrate herself into her new environment; the better part of her four years is characterized by angst and isolation. The dissonances between Lee's perception of herself and her elite surroundings are never fully resolved and she finds contentment only after she has left the Ault School behind.

As the novel's protagonist, narrator, and focalizer, it is Lee who controls the portrayal of the elite educational environment, and her observations are implicitly and explicitly informed by her regional and class background and her gender. As an outsider to the elite community, she offers a unique perspective that is both liberated and restricted by the parameters of her identity. Lee openly discusses issues pertaining to socio-economic status and demonstrates that money is often the prerequisite for the successful actualizations of both topoi. *Prep* furthermore addresses the role of race and ethnicity in the—predominantly white—microcosm of the school. In addressing these issues, the narrative places particular emphasis

on the importance and pervasiveness of a certain habitus of privilege as well as on cultural, economic, and social capital.

At the onset of the narrative, Lee seems to embody the topos of meritocracy much like Charlotte Simmons does. She, too, comes from a lower-middle-class family, grew up in a rural and non-New England environment, and gained access to the elite Ault School by virtue of a merit-based scholarship. However, the narrative soon complicates this reading. Lee admits that when she applied to Ault, she was primarily concerned not with academic qualities, but with what she calls the school's "glossiness": "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" (15). Lee's yearning for the picturesque speaks to the cultural meanings attached to elite education—meanings that go above and beyond the academic sphere. However, her actual experiences at Ault fail to transform the picturesque ideal into a lived reality. Instead, Lee remains confined to the realm of the spectator. Cut off from her elite surroundings, she fails socially and academically; a voyeur rather than an active participant in Ault's elite microcosm, she never feels quite as if she belonged. Her failure thus calls the validity of the topos of meritocracy into question. Does Lee fail because of her lack of drive and ambition? Is the master narrative of merit a cultural fantasy, or worse, an ideological front, rather than an actual possibility? Is Lee's failure rooted in herself, her peers, or the institution?

Like *Charlotte Simmons*, *Prep* actualizes the topos of merit in a narrative of disillusionment. But while Charlotte's disillusionment is directed outward, provoked by the various antagonistic and malicious forces she encounters at Dupont University, Lee focuses inward, on her own shortcomings. Socially, Lee's various inhibitions and anxieties prevent her from approaching her classmates and making friends: "all I ever did was watch the other students and feel curious about them and feel dazzled by their breeziness and wracked by the impossible gaping space between us, my horrible lack of ease, my inability to be casual" (162). Academically, she does not fare much better: "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). After a number of discouraging experiences during the first few months of her freshman year, Lee resignedly

accepts her failure to become part of Ault's 'glossiness.' The fiction she constructed from the school catalog's images proves to be elusive and impenetrable for her. As a result of this dissonance between fact and fiction, Lee is ultimately reduced to "living my 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; […] everything felt peripheral" (40).

Lee's reference to the peripheral is telling—not only because it signals her dissociation from her peers and the school, but also because it signifies her own position as an outsider: her environment feels peripheral because she is situated at the periphery. Lee perceives herself to be at the margins of Ault's "universe of privilege" (175), and the disillusionment she experiences is directly linked to her failure to gain access to the network she encounters at Ault. *Prep* introduces the topos of network on two distinct, if interconnected, levels: the network that connects Ault with the outside world and the network that exists within the walls of the school.

The link between Ault and the external world is bidirectional. The outside world influences the school, for instance through admission privilege for legacy students (cf. 255, 288). The novel also addresses the practice of parents donating money to the school in order to ensure certain privileges for their children, for instance when Lee realizes why her friend Conchita Maxwell receives special treatment: "Ault is probably salivating at the thought of all the science wings and art studios the Maxwells can build" (106). At the same time, the school's influence reaches beyond its gates into the outside world, for instance by keeping close ties with Ivy League universities or providing connections to the world of finance and business (cf. 81). Ault students thus become part of a larger network that transcends campus boundaries.

However, as Lee soon realizes, not every Ault student has the same degree of access to the social capital provided by the school. The topos of network is actualized also within the school, and Ault's internal network is strongly hierarchical. In Lee's perception, students are positioned according to a number of characteristics usually not of their choosing: class and status, race and ethnicity, regional background, and gender. It is interesting to note, in this context, that Lee does not only feel involuntarily positioned by her surroundings, but in turn actively engages in the same kind of positioning herself. She, too, has internalized the

parameters of Ault's network. Thus, she claims with some authority about a classmate that her "blackness made her exist outside of Ault's social strata" (14) or comments on Ault's dating habits: "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 girl, never a black or Latina girl from the city and definitely never with one of the bank boys" (170). Lee is also convinced that "beautiful and popular people rarely spent time alone" (133) and that her classmates are fond of Darden Pittard, one of the few African American kids in her class, because "they liked the fact that they genuinely liked a big black guy from the Bronx" (119).

With regard to her own position in the network, Lee emphasizes her class and regional background, which she experiences as stigmatizing, as it were. Socio-economic status, more than any other identity marker, occupies Lee's mind. As she ponders the importance of money, she concludes that "[i]f [someone] was rich, she belonged at Ault. The equation was that simple. Being rich, in the end, counted for the most" (101). Of course, Lee feels that the opposite is true as well: her own socio-economic background and lack of money are crucial to her outsider status and her inability to fit in. Lee also develops a keen eye for the subtleties of status and wealth, realizing that

> there were different kinds of rich […]. 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 into Boston to meet your mother—and that was permissible to discuss. (106-07)

Lee constantly reflects on her own and her classmates' financial background and comes to find her peers' wastefulness and casual disregard for the worth of money "distinctly Aultish" (94). Oscillating between envy, admiration, and resentment, her own stance toward her upper-class peers remains ambivalent. The novel thus quite clearly demonstrates the importance of wealth in order to become part of a network, learn its rules and habits, and ultimately profit from belonging. Social capital, *Prep* shows, is difficult to generate without the necessary economic capital.

While class is also an issue for Lee with regard to her parents, their regional background further increases Lee's unease and shame. Lee is very aware of her non-New England origins and frequently ponders the differences between her native Midwest, where "fall would be pretty, but not overly pretty" and the Northeast, "where they call the leaves *foliage*" (7,

emphasis in the original). She is mortified on her parents' behalf and feels ashamed for them and their 'Midwesterness': "Her questions, her little efforts – didn't she know that Easterners didn't really care? Niceness for its own sake wasn't a virtue to them" (186). The same occurs with her English teacher, Ms. Moray, in whom Lee recognizes "a certain Midwesternness" (122) that she finds off-putting and that keeps her from accepting Ms. Moray's offer of support.

In addition to class and regional background, gender also plays a role in Lee's experience of the elite space, though her treatment of the issue is less explicit. Lee experiences Ault in many ways as a 'post-feminist' environment. Relics of male privilege abound, but they appear for the most part to belong to the past. There are several references to the changes introduced by feminism and the women's movement. When Lee is in her freshman year, for instance, the school introduces its first female senior prefect, and the entire student body and faculty are aware of the significance of this innovation. One of Lee's tasks in her math class is to make a timeline of women mathematicians, and there is no indication that girls are treated differently from boys in terms of academic work. Despite this seemingly egalitarian environment, Lee attributes some of her social anxiety and insecurity to her gender, for instance when she contends that she wants to be "a cocky high school boy, so fucking sure of my place in the world" (74), or admits to a "familiar jealous 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). However, Lee is not as intensely preoccupied with her gender performance as Charlotte Simmons is. *Prep* conspicuously foregrounds other identity markers—class and regional background. Lee's experience of the elite educational space is thus not primarily determined by her gender.

Another difference between *Prep* and *I am Charlotte Simmons* is the role of the institution. The Ault School literally and metaphorically towers over Lee's experiences and emotions. Unlike Charlotte's Dupont University, which remains an abstraction, Ault becomes an active agent in Lee's story and seems to her "like a person who always gets what he wanted" (175)—here, again, an indirect reference to the role of gender, as schools and universities are generally conceptualized as female. Lee's ambivalent feelings about the opposite sex are mirrored by her ambivalent feelings toward the school: On the one hand, she feels as if "I

were undeserving and as if the beauty around me was not really mine" (301), but on the other hand, she "felt grateful to be a citizen of […] Ault's universe of privilege" (175). Lee needs the institution to make sense of herself and root her identity, as becomes clear when she explains why she wants to apply to Brown University: "I wanted to go to Brown because if I went to Brown, it would mean that I was a person who deserved to be there" (300). For Lee, much more than for Charlotte, the elite institution thus constitutes a crucial source of identity.

Ambivalence and The Possibility of Catharsis

While both narratives articulate the social and structural difficulties faced by their protagonists in the new upper-class setting, they also encourage the reader to view the protagonists' behavior and attitude critically. The disillusionment is rooted not only in the failure of the elite institution or their upper-class peers, but also in the protagonists themselves. Lee and Charlotte are not merely victims of the elite environment. They are active agents in their narratives of decline and, at times, exhibit the same attitudes and behaviors they criticize in their upper-class peers: pride, arrogance, and a sense of entitlement and superiority. Both refuse help and support from those they consider beneath them and, in so doing, allow the readers to distance themselves and view their actions critically. Blame is assigned in complex ways and multiple directions; both novels conclude with an ambivalent image of the institution and its representatives. Though critical, the narratives thus do not offer a straightforward indictment of elite education.

The narratives' endings support this ambivalent reading. Lee Fiora's relationship to Ault is largely characterized by discomfort and anxiety, but also by a persistent fascination:

> I actually didn't—I don't—particularly like talking about Ault. I don't even really like reading the quarterly, though I always at least page through it. But if I give it real attention, my mood plummets; I remember my life there, all the people and the way I felt. […] But sometimes, if I talked for too long [about Ault], I'd be yanked beneath, into cold and weedy water. Down there, I could not see or breathe; I was dragged backward, and it wasn't even the submersion that was the worst part, it was that I had to come up again. My present world was always, in its mildness, a little disappointing. (400)

Lee explains that she found academic and social contentment only in the time after Ault, outside of its elite setting. Charlotte Simmons's rehabilitation at Dupont University is achieved not through her academic abilities or her ambition but through her relationship with Dupont basketball player Jojo Johanssen. As the narrative concludes we witness Charlotte reveling in the attention bestowed upon her by virtue of her status as Jojo's girlfriend and musing about the "feat" of rising from "social death to the eminence she now enjoyed as girlfriend of the superstar Jojo Johanssen" (672). It is, of course, not a coincidence that a novel that in many ways deals with the self-affirmation of its protagonist—"I *am* Charlotte Simmons" (613, emphasis in the original)—ends on a quite different note. Noticing the crowd's cheering and applause a little belatedly, Charlotte chimes in: "It obviously behooved *Jojo Johanssen's girlfriend* to join in" (676, my emphasis). The fact that the novel's last sentence reduces its protagonist to a merely relational existence speaks for itself. Catharsis, the novels suggest, is possible only outside of the elite space—as in Lee Fiora's case—or outside the framework of merit, as Charlotte's 'rebirth' as a star athlete's girlfriend demonstrates.

Conclusion: Literature as Counter-Discourse?

In *Teaching to Transgress*, author and educator bell hooks argues that "[n]owhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class difference than in educational settings" (177). With regard to large parts of the discourse of elite education, hooks's statement holds true—there is a conspicuous silence with regard to class. Many of the texts that constitute the discourse fail to address the issue of socio-economic stratification and instead emphasize individualism and competition or focus exclusively on cultural diversity. In most sociological or socio-political texts and in self-representational accounts, the notion of 'diversity' refers only to race, ethnicity, and gender. However, one section of the discourse does address the issue of social stratification fairly openly, as this article has shown: fictional narratives.

The aim of this article was to interrogate the role of fictional texts in the discourse of elite education. I have discussed a number of dominant positions within the heterogeneous

discursive framework and argued that the discourse generates two dominant topoi—merit and network—that provide patterns of explaining and evaluating the socio-political implications of elite education. In order to understand the role of literary narratives in this discursive dynamic, I examined two contemporary novels with regard to their use of and engagement with the two topoi. Reading *I am Charlotte Simmons* and *Prep* through the lens of their protagonists' class and gender, I argued that the novels integrate the topoi into narratives of disillusionment and failure, and thus distinguish themselves from the success narratives that constitute the majority of the non-fictional texts of the discourse.

Though they attribute their protagonists' disillusionment in slightly different ways—*Charlotte Simmons* foregrounds gender, while *Prep* emphasizes class—the axes of failure betray striking similarities. The topos of merit, embodied by Charlotte and Lee, collides with the topos of network, and the protagonists, ill-equipped to deal with the seemingly impenetrable social structures they encounter, fail. However, neither of the two novels blames the institution or the upper-class peers exclusively. Charlotte and Lee are not merely victims of a hostile elite environment; they are active agents in their own narratives—though not always for the better. Thus, the novels neither offer a straightforward indictment nor an uncritical celebration of elite education. Instead, they embrace and capitalize on the ambivalence that pervades the elite educational experience.

The question remains: can fiction work as counter-discourse in the context of elite education? I argue that it can and does. Due to its specific discursive possibilities as a form of art, fiction does not have to pick sides. It can simultaneously affirm and critique; it can debunk old myths while creating new ones. Literary texts complicate issues that might be presented as unambiguous in other contexts and thus force us to think about elite education in new and different ways. With regard to the discourse as a whole, fiction thus inhabits a liminal space, one that is betwixt and between categories and categorizations. In this liminality lies one of the most significant discursive contributions of literary texts.

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