

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 minorities².

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.

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 elitism, 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