

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 fiction²—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 archetypal 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.

(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” (Groskopf). *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).