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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. A Meritocracy of Affect

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