

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

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

## 5. Concluding Remarks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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