Conclusion

This study investigated the peculiar position of the elite educational space in the American cultural imagination. Its main trajectory was epistemological: I wanted to find out what we know about elite education in the United States of the twenty-first century, through which channels we gain this knowledge, and how the individual sites of knowledge production navigate the tensions and contradictions invariably involved in these epistemological processes. In this conclusion, I will not reiterate in chronological order the findings of the individual chapters, since I have provided extensive summaries that do so throughout the book. Instead, I want to return to the main questions that have guided my research and informed my readings, and answer them concisely and comprehensively by taking into account and putting in dialogue all four chapters of this study.

My initial point of departure was a fairly simple question: How does America make sense of its own elite educational system, given the obvious tensions that characterize its position in the cultural and socio-political landscape? Specifically, I was interested in how the discourse of elite education responds to what seemed to me the most serious tension, namely that between a set of core values to which most Americans would subscribe—equal opportunity, social mobility, the American Dream—and the existence of a highly stratified educational system in which the power of capital seems ubiquitous. Three categories struck me as particularly potent in navigating this tension, and I conceptualized them as nodal points around which the discourse revolves: merit, class, and eliteness. Which role do these categories play in the various attempts to explain and legitimize the elite educational system? Do they stabilize and solidify or challenge and undermine the discourse? Given that knowledge about elite education is produced through a variety of semiotic channels, another main concern was the role of form in the epistemology of elite education. I began this study with a brief excursus into the world of

fashion, using Tommy Hilfiger's advertising campaign as an example of how the elite educational space is utilized in non-educational contexts. On the one hand, this utilization points to some of the ways in which knowledge about the elite educational space is created implicitly, in contexts where one would not necessarily expect it. On the other hand, the potency of the elite campus in this regard suggests to me that it commands a range of meanings that transcend academic education proper, meanings that are woven into its semiotic fabric and symbolic structure. How, then, do genre, style, imagery, and aesthetics inform the negotiation of elite education in the United States? In line with the conception of discourse as an inherently unstable force of meaning production, a last concern of my inquiry into the discourse of elite education was to identify ruptures, fault lines, and persistent tensions in the materials and their epistemological practices. In the following, I want to address each of these questions by drawing on the findings of all four chapters of this study.

Americans have always had an ambivalent attitude toward eliteness in general, and eliteness in education in particular. As the 2016 presidential campaign has amply illustrated, populist anti-elitism is a widespread and powerful a sentiment in the twenty-first century—the sweeping resentment against 'the' elite in general, as well as the more specific kind, for instance against the 'swamp' of Washington's political elites, are but two examples of this tendency. At the same time, application numbers at elite universities are soaring, and have been for years; the Ivy League and its peers are an extremely successful, globally recognized brand of American exceptionalism. Elite universities moreover receive reliably positive press coverage for their contributions to science and scholarship, their Nobel Prizes and Field Medals, their Pulitzers and other similarly prestigious awards and fellowships. How, then, does America make sense of its own elite educational system, given these tensions and contradictions?

I have argued in this study that the discourse of elite education does so through three primary epistemological modes: critique, affirmation, and imagination. Each mode offers a slightly different overall conceptualization of the elite educational space, along with different responses to the tension between elitism and egalitarianism. The mode of critique offers two main lines of reasoning. On the one hand, progressivist social justice interventions suggest a variety of reformist measures to improve the meritocratic system and thus alleviate the tension between elitist and egalitarian impulses; on the other hand, conservative cultural critiques rewrite this tension as one that centers around the issue of quality, rather than that of inequality, and conse-

quently propose fundamental changes to the campus cultures of elite institutions. The affirmative mode responds to the tension by drawing on the tried and true paradigm of diversity management: If every social-cultural group were represented in the elite educational space, and if elite institutions openly acknowledged their commitment to the celebration of diversity and difference, the problem of elitism would seem much less pronounced. The mode of imagination, by contrast, differs significantly from the two others in this regard. Since it does not have to advertise or find fault, the mode of imagination is able to embrace the various contradictions inspired by the tension between elitism and egalitarianism. Its response, then, is more ambiguous—on the one hand, it presents the elite educational space as a realm of failure and disenchantment, and intensifies and escalates the tension rather than resolving it. On the other hand, the novel is in some ways complicit with the diversity paradigm employed by the institutions themselves, and thus offers some alleviation of the tension by reproducing the illusion of diversity at elite institutions.

In their conceptualizations of the elite educational space, all three epistemological modes are presented with a range of representational issues that are rooted in their own discursive conventions and the communicative demands they are expected to meet. The mode of critique falls prey to what I have called the 'merit fallacy', namely the attempt to fixate the meanings of merit, despite its inherent and systemic contingency, as the stable opposite of privilege. The merit fallacy is part and parcel of the critical mode's immersion in the jeremiadic tradition, which causes it to fall into a pattern of celebration-through-lament that seriously limits its genuine critical potential. The affirmative mode, by contrast, faces a fundamental representational dilemma caused by the American ambivalence toward elite distinction: The eliteness of elite institutions is one of their primary assets, but they have to communicate it without seeming elitist. For an elite college such as Princeton, moreover, the tension between elitism and egalitarianism is not the only communicative hurdle—Princeton has to be different things to different people, and wants to communicate different types of eliteness in different contexts. The mode of imagination, finally, struggles with another kind of representational dilemma, which I have called the 'paradox of elite campus fiction'. The appeal of elite campus narratives rests in large parts on their promise to offer a glimpse behind the walls of exclusive institutions and thus teach the reader something about the elite. Since eliteness is a phenomenon that is constituted by distance, however, elite campus narratives tend to employ an

outsider as protagonist and focalizer, whose voyeuristic gaze the reader can adopt. The result of this, then, is that we learn much more about the anxieties and dreams of these outsiders—mostly lower-middle class scholarship students—than we do about the elite.

When we turn to the categories this study focused on—merit, class, and eliteness—we can trace how the three epistemological frames manage each other: They contradict, correct, and complement one another in their creation of meaning. In the case of merit, the three modes contradict each other. The critical mode conceptualizes merit as a measurable, primarily academic category that is opposed to privilege in all of its forms. The affirmative mode, by contrast, wants to see merit as a much larger category. In this context, after all, merit is primarily used as a tool in the management of institutional self-interest, and, given the marketization of the neoliberal age, is increasingly commodified. The imaginative mode complicates both of these accounts by demonstrating how, in practice, the meritocracy overburdens the failing individual; lack of merit, as *Prep* indicates, is an individual problem rather than a systemic concern in the discourse of elite education.

In the context of class, the three modes demonstrate more agreement—in all of them, socio-economic stratification plays a central role, even though there is no consensus on how to theorize it. If we put the three modes in dialogue, it becomes clear that they correct each other in interesting ways. The critical-analytical studies conceptualize class primarily along the lines of family income. Their main line of argumentation is that class exerts an undue influence on elite college admissions and on campus cultures, and the studies make a number of suggestions on how to improve the system so as to lessen this influence. The institutions themselves likewise frame class as a function of family income, but respond to the problem posed by class by trying to include it in the diversity paradigm, proposing to celebrate socio-economic difference alongside racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender difference. Both modes thus follow a limited understanding of class that reduces it to one of its several indicators, and both conceptualize it in the framework of mobility. The imaginative mode corrects the two by insisting on the complexity of class as a multidimensional category that includes economic as well as cultural, psychological, and bodily factors. This mode, however, betrays its own blind spots and is corrected by the critical mode with regard to the issue of class diversity: While the former reproduces the illusion of socio-economic diversity at elite educational institutions, the latter debunks this myth, as the Equality of Opportunity Project, to name but one example, demonstrates.

In the context of eliteness, finally, the three epistemological modes complement each other. In the whole discourse, eliteness remains an elusive category that is rarely addressed or defined explicitly, but nevertheless informs the production of knowledge in crucial ways. The critical mode presents us with two related visions of a classless eliteness, one that stresses the social justice aspect of it—the classlessness—and one that emphasizes the quality of the eliteness. The conservative studies, in particular, produce two competing cultural scripts: the neoliberal eliteness of mindless credentialism, which they set out to criticize, and a humanistic eliteness of substantial engagement, which they propagate. The affirmative mode merges both scripts into what I have called the 'meritocracy of affect', a modulation of the traditional meritocracy of effort that is situated within and stabilized by the three epistemological frames of diversity, the good life, and community. The less pleasurable, but nonetheless vital, aspects of eliteness—exclusion and competition, for instance—are communicated not by the institutions themselves, but by the media discourse that revolves around them. Important aspects of elite status production are thus outsourced, allowing the affirmative mode to concentrate on producing its more attractive 'marketable illusions'. The imaginative mode at first glance seems to critique eliteness, but as I have shown in my discussion of *Prep*, the novel's use of a protagonist who refuses the common narrative of eliteness and mobility qua merit ultimately affirms this narrative by producing a neoliberal reader, one who wants her to conform to these imperatives, and is offended by her refusal. None of the epistemological modes thus genuinely critiques the notion of eliteness, or produces a viable alternative; they all seem to agree that eliteness itself, as long as it is the right kind, is not the problem.

The elite campus, as my readings have shown time and again, is an iconic place in the American cultural imagination. As such, it communicates more than just academic superiority—as I have argued in the beginning of this study, a number of meanings have become associated with the elite educational space in the course of the twentieth century, and are now bound up with the collegiate aesthetics as it is employed, for instance, by Tommy Hilfiger: a sort of "rhizomorphous" (Boltanski and Chiapello 97) excellence that spans academic as well as extracurricular endeavors, a sense of ease and pleasure, the notion of a legitimately good and beautiful life, and the insinuation of national relevance. These meanings are carried by a number of recurring motifs and images that together further mythologize the elite campus: The symbolism found on the covers of the critical-analytical studies (ivy, keys,

and iron gates), the images of the campus space published by the institutions themselves, and the lavish descriptions of the mise-en-scène we find in every elite campus novel. Form thus plays an important role in the epistemology of elite education; the iconicity of the elite educational space is not only rooted in the meanings this space commands, but bolstered by its semiotics—the widespread images of beautiful campus landscapes, Gothic architecture, and fall foliage.

To conclude: If there is one central result of my foray into the discourse of elite education in twenty-first-century America, it is the tenacity and adaptability of meritocratic ideology. Despite important ruptures—the spectacle of wealth at Princeton, for instance—the vision of the meritocracy as the ultimate expression of American exceptionalism is strengthened in each epistemological mode. In the critical mode, it is the jeremiadic tendencies that eventually result in an affirmation of meritocratic structures; in the affirmative mode, it is the enticing vision of a meritocracy of affect that is able to embrace both liberal and neoliberal tenets; and in the imaginative mode, affirmation happens through the creation of a neoliberal reader and the text's deep structure, which reproduces the illusions of the meritocracy. With the exception of William Deresiewicz, who briefly raises the possibility of a complete overhaul of the educational system, my research has not come across any genuine critiques of the meritocratic ideology. Those that sound like they could be—Lani Guinier's *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America* comes to mind—likewise operate firmly within its ideological constraints. The discourse of elite education, then, is largely indifferent toward the political economy of the meritocracy, and instead settles for a critique of individual factors within the system—the conception of merit, for instance, or the problem of access.

To insist that there is no alternative to the meritocracy is striking in particular when one takes into account that for all intents and purposes, the meritocracy is fundamentally at odds with the American educational system. All other implications aside, the meritocracy can function correctly only in an educational system characterized by homogeneity and genuine equality of opportunity—the category of 'merit' can only unfold its full potential if each individual student goes through the same stages in her educational development and is put to the same tests. The American educational landscape, however, is far too heterogeneous, and far too dependent on capital, to ever produce a 'genuine meritocracy'. Since the meritocracy is by design blind to its own economic underpinnings, it will remain flawed as long as it is situated within

an educational system that is so strongly informed, if not determined, by the resources of individual families. No matter how many changes the concept of 'merit' undergoes—whether it be conceptualized as purely academic, or extracurricular, or related to the students' diversity factor, or to some democratic commitment, as Guinier would have it—affluence will always distort the meritocratic structures. This, then, is the central blind spot of the discourse of elite education in twenty-first century America.