Leaving the Nest: Life at the Neoliberal University

by

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PROLOGUE

“There are stakes in what you say and whatever comes of this. This is not just about you testing something out. There are stakes in the kind of care you take. The words you hold; the voices you end up holding.” - Interviewee

This thesis began my first semester at Wesleyan in ANTH 101 when I studied professor and student relationships for my final project. The next year I decided to make the topic my thesis because I understood professor-student relationships to be a persistent source of anxiety and disappointment for students. My affective investment in these relationships led me to consider, first, the erotic possibilities of professor-student relationships. I imagined that I was eroticizing the everyday and boldly discussing topics that were largely off limits. As I continued my research, however, I came to see professor-student relationships within a larger context of desires for intimacy, closeness, and connection. This led me to my focus on the tension between the corporatization of the neoliberal university and the affective dimensions of relationships within the university. Alongside this shifting perspective, my orientation towards my project also evolved: at a certain point I no longer had the same frustrations that I initially brought to the thesis, and I began to understand that my initial isolation was linked to the way class functions at an elite liberal arts college. Ultimately, this thesis investigates class inequality and student life in the neoliberal university.

My own involvement or embeddedness in the topics of my thesis was (and continue to be) an ongoing source of humor among my friends, some of whom were also anthropology majors, who often joked about how the project would become an ethnography of the Wesleyan Anthropology Department. Even now some of these
students recommend that I write a fourth chapter about the various relationships between thesis advisors and advisees. The humor comes from the awkwardness that comes with extreme, even meta-, self-reflexivity that this thesis performs, of writing about writing about writing, of putting the normally unwritten under an academic, anthropological lens. Even as I purposefully directed my research away from the Anthropology Department, there is still some veracity to this joke. Because Wesleyan is a small school, there were moments of strange coincidences and connections, coincidences that were sometimes wonderfully serendipitous: for example, I found insightful scholarship that included discussion of Wesleyan, and I later discovered that a teacher I knew had also taught the author. There were also moments that embodied the politics and power within higher education, where discomforting dynamics surfaced that seemed best left concealed.

In “Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of Neo-liberal Academia” (2009) Rosalind Gill emphasizes the need for careful reflexivity. She writes, “This chapter is the beginning of an attempt to redress our own collective silence, our failure to look critically at ‘our own back yard’” (233). Reflexivity, in the form of speaking the unspoken, surfaces again in the introduction of Imperial University (2014) when editors Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira write, “As scholars who spend long hours sitting in our quiet offices… wondering what acts of violence are not being televised, we began working on this book in order to engage in a conversation that often only happens in university hallways or over cocktails at academic conferences but not enough in public and in print” (8).

In these examples we see the difficulty of turning a critical lens inward, to bring to light something that initially seems small or not worth bringing up in a formal or academic context. In her book Depression: a public feeling (2012) Ann Cvetkovich describes similar anxieties about publishing work that chronicles her own depression in academia; she
worries this will be seen as self-indulgent or “unseemly flaunting” (74). These authors confront the ways in which the introspective dimensions of their projects might appear as simply complaining or navel-gazing, perhaps even obscuring their larger political demands for change. Still, as Gill writes, “I decided to write it and I hope that the ideas …will, ultimately, be seen as part of a wider project to make intelligible contemporary modalities of power, and thus as connected ineluctably to the struggle for a better, more just world” (2009: 243). I have the same hopes for this thesis.

I cannot deny the close link between readers of this thesis and the people in it. I hope that this link will add a layer of meaning to the thesis, but I also know that this means that you might, as you read, try to figure out the identities of the students, faculty, and staff in the thesis. In the hopes of confusing such attempts and protecting anonymity as much as possible, in addition to changing names, I continuously switch the pronouns of interviewees—sometimes in keeping with the interviewee’s actual preferences and sometimes not. There were moments where I hesitated about writing about certain quotes or topics, and sensitivity to the consequences of a project so close to my own relationships has meant that I scrapped whole interviews and other descriptions. Shamus Khan who faced similar issues while writing about students at the elite boarding school at which he worked ultimately concludes: “Anonymity is often a way to protect the researcher rather than the research subjects”; and with this proximity comes a greater “obligation to ‘get it right’” (2011: 203). I hope that this closeness between myself and my research means that I have enough understanding and sensitivity to get it right.

I have felt both concern and anxiety and also pleasure and satisfaction as a result of the closeness and relevance of this project. My thesis has been a frequent topic of conversation among students and I have relished the ways that socializing often turned
into students discussing my thesis and findings. These conversations instilled that even those who do not formally appear in the pages have a stake in what I say—getting it right seems all the more important. The stakes are not uniform: faculty and staff will likely be at Wesleyan longer than students and those that are still struggling for job stability face greater risks. Students who occupy positions of greater precarity, whose experiences are often misread or ignored, also deserve careful representation. Additionally the varying orientations to the university mean that faculty, staff, students, and readers sometimes have competing and contradictory investments in how I represent the university.

I set out thinking that this thesis would help me understand my past four years here, and the project has given me the chance to dwell and reflect. But there are also limitations to this project, to what we can know, to what I can produce. In my moments of greatest doubt I turned to Ann Cvetkovich for encouragement: “Writing is more important than the product and ‘shitty first drafts’ are welcome” (2012: 192). Part of my decision to take up a process-based way of learning and writing means allowing for and embracing those limitations. bell hooks’ wisdom also comes in handy: “sometimes the mountain top is difficult to reach …so we are just there, collectively grasping, feeling the limitations of knowledge, longing together, yearning for a way to reach that highest point. Even this yearning is a way to know” (1994: 92). I have done my best to embrace these words as I grappled with the university and struggled to remain attentive to what I will not know.
INTRODUCTION

“It was a great place to work. And then, you know, things change. And Wesleyan of course changed. And it’s a more bureaucratic university, it’s a more ‘rationalized’ university, it’s a more neoliberal university, it’s a more disappointing and problematic university than the one that I was really, really happy in.” - Interviewee

Critical university studies took shape in the 1990’s to protest the increasing corporatization of universities—what many refer to as the neoliberalization of higher education. Bill Readings’ *The University in Ruins* (1996) shows us that in the decades prior, universities had undergone enormous transformation with the passing of the 1944 GI Bill, the dawn of feminism, and a growing interest in admitting women and people of color to traditionally White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) male schools. Christopher Newfield’s *Ivy and Industry* (2003) and *Unmaking the Public University* (2008) contextualizes a new emphasis on the sciences and disinvestment in soft subjects such as the humanities and ethnic studies in terms of the university increasingly operating as a profiteering business, a shift evident considering universities previously depended heavily on government funding to survive (2003: 25). Joe Berry’s *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower* (2005) stresses the ever dwindling tenure-track positions and increasingly more low-paying, short-term, and part-time adjunct positions that allow universities to save money and exchange faculty with the whims of changing fields. Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie’s *Academic Capitalism* (1997) argues that there is more emphasis on research and that protocols have become increasingly more regimented. Marc Bousquet, Miranda Joseph, and Curtis Marez have also contributed to the field, writing about today’s students who have mountains of debt, need to take outside jobs, and are still unable to pay their way through school (Bousquet 2008; Joseph 2014;
Marez 2014). Work such as Sarah Ahmed’s *On Being Included* (2012) and Roderick Ferguson’s *The Reorder of Things* (2012) highlight institutional rhetoric around “excellence” and “diversity” to interrogate the ways universities now brand themselves and understand students as consumers. Many recent articles, books, opinion essays, and films take up the way teaching evaluations have become customer satisfaction surveys and the way schools highlight their athletic facilities, cafeterias, bookstores, and social scene to prospective students rather than their academics. The documentary *The Ivory Tower* (2014) features Wesleyan in its discussion of universities’ increasing experimentation with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). In response to these changes, critical university studies aims to critique the corporatization within higher education and to offer space for interventions and activism.

These more structural changes have transformed what it means to teach or work at today’s university. Within these changes is an imperative for quantitatively measured institutional growth: more students, more research, more facilities (Newfield 2003: 30). Isaac Kamola argues that in the past, university administrations were exclusively comprised of professors. Now the administration is generally a far larger group of people with PhDs who are solely administrators and do not teach.ii Carry Nelson, former president of the American Association of University Professors, decries the diminishing influence of faculty governance in university decision-making and the importance of academic freedom in supporting faculty job stability.iii One Wesleyan professor explained to me that with these institutional changes, Wesleyan faculty started supporting faculty merit raises, something the administration had consistently pushed for, instead of across-the-board pay raises. Another, as in the epigraph, described Wesleyan as becoming “depersonalized.” Countless faculty, alumni, staff, and students remarked upon “growing campus apathy,”
and “a dying activist culture.” Sayings among faculty such as “publish or perish” or among the Board of Trustees “give [money], get [money], or get off [the Board]” for fundraising perhaps sum up the operative ideologies at universities across the United States.

Yet a student could spend four years at Wesleyan and remain oblivious to these changes—and most do. The branches of the institution remain largely opaque and disconnected from one another, and the underlying rationale and motivations frustratingly obscure to those who are not privy. This thesis aims to shed light on some of this opacity.

In this project, I study a structure within which I am located, but I also strive to move beyond my student vantage point and expand my perspective. Still, through researching and writing this senior thesis, I reposition myself, again, as a student. This project exemplifies an irony that Laurel George, a Wesleyan alumna, describes in a footnote of her essay “Like Family To Me” (2001): “Indeed, an ironic dimension of my experience at Wesleyan was that my education there furnished me with the tools with which to critique my precarious place and my position within the elite institution” (233). Through critique, one simultaneously undermines and reinvests in the academy. This circularity is part an epistemological problem, “where what we know and how we know it is simultaneously obscured and revealed in our texts themselves” –in other words, where an author’s own reflexive positionality meets the limit of her knowledge (Weiss 2011: 663).

This thesis also draws on and contributes to anthropological literature on college through offering a student perspective that is missing from most of these studies. Rebekah Nathan’s My Freshman Year (2005) is an exploration of student life with a particular focus on student academic experiences in relation to the rest of campus life at Northern Arizona University, while Michael Moffat’s Coming of Age in New Jersey (1989) explores the social structure of student college life at Rutgers. While both ethnographies strive to capture
student life, they are still ultimately from the perspective of a professor and this fact, of course, shapes the questions that they ask. By writing from the perspective of a student and centering student voices, I aim to capture a richness of student experience that the other ethnographies struggled to convey. As a result of ethical concerns that accompanied her project Rebekah Nathan writes: “I have in my notes and my memory much richer and more intimate knowledge than I sometimes share directly in this book” (2005: 165).

Additionally I draw on Steven Mitchell’s ethnography Creating A Class (2009), which offers insights on the admissions of an elite liberal arts college in the northeast and Elizabeth Arie’s two-part ethnography Race and Class Matters at an Elite University (2008) and Speaking of Race and Class (2013), which focuses on student experiences at Amherst College. I have been perhaps most influenced by Shamus Khan’s ethnography Privilege (2011), an ethnography that explores the reproduction of elites at St. Paul’s, a boarding school in Concord, New Hampshire. His text has proven to be pivotal throughout my analysis, and I draw on his concept of “ease” and also his emphasis on class and its reproduction in elite educational institutions. Khan’s Bourdieu-inspired analysis shows the ways class reproduction does not rely so much on exclusive knowledge (like which salad fork to use at a dinner party) but rather on corporeal, learned knowledge.

I have also found psychoanalytic theory helpful for analyzing classroom dynamics and student-professor relationships. Sigmund Freud’s concept of transference and D. W. Winnicott’s complication of “the good enough mother” both offer key frameworks for understanding student desires and demands. Diana Fuss’ Identification Papers (1995) offers a useful analysis of the relationship between identity and desire. Work that aims to draw conceptual parallels between psychoanalysis and pedagogy has been especially helpful,

Finally, for inspiration, my thesis draws on texts such as Cvetkovich’s *Depression: a public feeling* (2012), Deborah Gould’s *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (2009) and Gill’s “Breaking the Silence: the Hidden Injuries of Neoliberal Academia” (2009) as examples of affect-based explorations. I hope that this thesis, like theirs, offers the reader a chance to dwell with their feelings and to glimpse the texture of university life for students. All three texts craft and affective archive that builds an argument through a chorus of rich voices. The authors also strive to link disparate fields that might not immediately fit together, whether they are depression and colonization for Cvetkovich; affect and social change for Gould; or theories on labor, universities, and affect for Gill. Like them, I see this thesis as an affective archive of voices that bridges disparate fields of knowledge such as psychoanalysis, critical university studies, and affect in order to evoke and analyze contemporary student life in the elite university.

**Methods**

My primary method of research was formal interviews, which ranged in length from twenty minutes to two hours but generally lasted for about an hour. I interviewed a total of thirty-nine people: twenty-one students, twelve professors, and six staff members—though some of the people I interviewed occupied more than one of these positions (for example student workers or alumni who now work at Wesleyan). I began by interviewing students and prioritizing a range of perspectives: straight and queer, cis and trans*, wealthy and low-income, white and of color, and with a range of majors. However, in the end, the majority of the student voices in this thesis are queer and decidedly not in
the sciences. Almost all of the professors I interviewed were faculty with whom I had never taken a class, and so I was often meeting them for the first time in the interview. I chose them because they were faculty that I had heard many different students talk about, and perhaps also precisely because I had not taken classes with them. I went into these interviews at times self-conscious about my project and feeling guilty for taking up their time. This anxiety around interviewing professors while still hoping for validation made me acutely aware of how the questions I asked shaped their (and my own) perceptions of my research. Professors may have also brought their own anxieties to the interviews. One professor expressed concern that I was referring to “romantic relationships” when I said that my topic was about “professor-student relationships.” Indeed during interviews faculty were faced with the dilemma of how to respond as they needed to maintain their position in relation to me as a student, and as a result perhaps not wanting to share too much. The majority of the faculty I interviewed were women and/or queer and/or of color and they were primarily in the social sciences and humanities. They ranged in rank from visiting, to tenure-track, tenured, and full professors. I also interviewed three retired faculty, who were able to offer personal insights on historical changes at Wesleyan.

In addition to faculty and students, I formally interviewed Class Deans, staff from the Office of Admissions, and staff from University Relations. I have over 170 pages of transcribed material from these formal interviews.

In addition to formal interviews, I also conducted countless informal interviews and conversations, and I conducted a range of participant observation research. I signed up for the Wesleyan parents’ list serve and, during particularly heated debates, read upwards of ten emails a day. Additionally I read many articles in the student newspaper, *The Wesleyan Argus*, and the student blog, Wesleying.org. With the support of the
Anthropology Department, I was able to spend time during the summer combing through various files in Wesleyan’s Special Collections and Archives to get a sense of shifts in Wesleyan’s admission practices, branding, student experiences relating to race and gender, and fundraising. While I do not directly cite documents from the archives, reading Wesleyan’s history deepened my sense of the school’s transformation. In addition to interviews and text-based research, I also attended myriad campus events. Some, like lectures and parties, were extensions of my regular behavior that I tried to approach with a new awareness. Other were unfamiliar: I attended sessions throughout first year orientation, I went on an Admissions tour, I attended Admissions information sessions, hung out at the Daniel Family Commons (the faculty dining area), I sat in on group advising sessions, and I attended relevant panels and lectures throughout the school year. All of these methods gave me fresh insights into how Wesleyan works and feels to students, faculty, and staff.

Additionally, my work as a student caterer clued me into banquets and dinners (with Trustees, the administration, athletic teams, and alumni) that enriched my knowledge of campus life. Finally, last semester I taught a student forum on Critical University Studies (a student forum is a for-credit student-taught class). The class offered space for students to autonomously educate ourselves on the university, and I was also able to engage with scholarship through discussion, reading, and crafting the course. Leading the class also offered embodied insights on the experience of teaching a class. My classroom method was a process-based learning; one in which I (to use Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s language) “studied” with material (2013: 109). All of these provided opportunities for informal conversations and participant observation that greatly enriched the material I gathered from more formal interviews.
I have been studying with this material for more than two years, during which I have reframed and reworked my assumptions and understandings of the university. Over the two years that I worked on this project, I read and reread my interviews many times, and I excerpted interviews in draft papers, projects, and weekly journal entries experimenting with different ways of capturing the distinct voices of each interlocutor. But in a way, I have been doing the research since I arrived at Wesleyan and began experiencing and thinking about the university in ANTH 101. I found myself returning to texts such as Nathan’s *My Freshman Year* (2005) or Chatterjee and Maira’s *Imperial University* (2014) to find that I was able to grasp them in ways I had not during my initial read a few years or even a few months prior. There were many aspects of the university that I could not grasp when I first began. As my understanding of the issues deepened and changed, my writing evolved from an initially giddy and boisterous exploration to what I hope is now a more thoughtful study of university life. My own process of learning is not one I hope to overcome—instead, that process is not only central to what the thesis has become, but it is a process that is ongoing.

A note: All of the direct quotations in the thesis are anonymous aside from people who are speaking publicly at formal events. I chose to only include identifying information that is directly relevant to what the interviewee is saying. This serves as a method both to protect interviewees’ anonymity and also to create a text that is not focused too narrowly on any one character or comment. Rather, I am hoping that it is a chorus of voices and perspectives that ultimately builds my argument.

*Thesis Outline*
The thesis has three chapters. The first considers university language around “community” and the way the various uses of “community” shape student experiences and performances of belonging. The language of “community” carries with it a sense of lifetime, almost familial, belonging—an invitation that often leads to disappointment. My analysis in this chapter reflects on how community sits alongside the reproduction of class and race inequality, by obscuring more structural problems at the university.

The second chapter considers the university mission of education and learning as it intersects with the reproduction of class inequality. I explore “critical thinking” and “academic excellence” as sites where classed expectations forge both student culture and dynamics in the classroom. By contextualizing Wesleyan within a larger institutional landscape, I reflect on the ways in which learning, critical thinking, and oppositional knowledge fields are both reintegrated into the corporate university and offer transformative possibilities.

The third chapter explores questions relating to the emotional labor faculty provide to students. I take up a psychoanalytic lens to discuss parallels between teacher-student, analyst-analysand, and server-customer relationships, and I consider how student desires shape the university landscape. Additionally, I reflect on how the conditions of faculty labor feed into the opacity of the Wesleyan workplace.

Overall this thesis is an exploration of the university from where I stand as a student. Listening to experiences and tensions that often remain concealed, I use these narratives as a map to better understand the neoliberal, corporate university today. These stories reveal the pressures and failures of the university, alongside the hopes and dreams invested in transformative knowledge.
Chapter 1

THE WESLEYAN COMMUNITY: Belonging at an Elite Institution

The Wesleyan Mission Statement defines Wesleyan as “seeking to build a diverse, energetic community of students, faculty, and staff.” The University brands “Community” to attract students, and it is a brand that remains compelling once students arrive. Community is a persuasive brand despite the lack of definition; as Michael Moffatt points out, “‘community,’ like ‘diversity’ and the other key phrases of modern American individuals, is almost empty of specific content” (1989: 73). Still, “the Wesleyan community” is a phrase that often rhetorically takes on familial components: membership for life, unconditional love and support, inclusivity and belonging. However, because Wesleyan is an elite institution—that is, a competitive institution that is founded on race and class inequality—the form of belonging that this vision of community offers is predicated on certain classed and raced ways of being.

I start this chapter by highlighting the feeling of belonging so central to the idea of community, along with some of the ways in which students must perform this belonging in the forms of academic ease and excellence (e.g., getting good grades without seeming to do too much work). I next show that when students notice that structures of dominance shape the campus, they often critique the “exclusivity” of Wesleyan and organize activism around the idea of “community.” In this way, students often end up critiquing the
“communalness” of the community rather than the structures of oppression, class, and power at the institution itself. Understanding the university as an institution and a workplace, especially at this moment of increased corporatization, is essential to making more substantive and powerful interventions. Still, these experiences where students fail to belong offer possibility: students can draw on these disjunctures and diverge from the narrative of community in order to craft a more structural critique that exposes the failure of “Community.”

ARE YOU (NOT) WESLEYAN? PERFORMING BELONGING

“Wesleyan is for a certain kind of student: academic engagement, creativity, challenge, and joy of friendship.” –M. Roth

As a first year in my first weeks of classes, the professors may as well have spoken in Finnish. I could not understand the lectures, the paper prompts, or the questions they posed to the class. My eyes glazed over, and I would spend the remainder of class concentrating on not falling asleep. I could barely figure out what the homework was let alone complete and understand it, and I was getting back papers that told me things like, “Sophie, Sophie, … this needed some serious rethinking- you needed an argument that you never made” and, “You have included a lot of information that is not relevant to the assignment.”

I distinctly remember the first time I went to a professor’s office hours—more specifically, Sharon Kim’s office hours. I expected that it would be much like the office hours for my high school physics class: students would sit in the classroom, practicing problems and the teacher, Mr. Pujara, would answer questions, and explain concepts as many times as a student needed. And since these were the only office hours with which I
had prior experience, I did not know what was to come. I sat waiting with another student, Justin Martinez, on a couch and we playfully joked and laughed about what we would say once we got in. But my meeting with Professor Kim was not funny; it was sad. Well, perhaps now it’s comical. Though I cannot remember exactly what I said, I know I asked Professor Kim to clarify some of the reading. She gazed at me and asked, “Did you even do the reading?” She proceeded to suggest that I go back and look at the book for the answers to my questions. I left befuddled and insulted because of course I had done the reading.

My notable absence of grace persisted when I was supposed to meet with my advisor and found her door was closed. Unsure of what to do, I turned the knob to see if the door was locked, but inadvertently fully opened the door. She looked up at me surprised, and I quickly re-closed the door and ran away. Such awkward events continued: after I received a low C on my English paper, Professor Castelli wrote, “You need to work a bit on the structure of your writing. I’m sure a writing tutor could help.” But Professor Castelli did not know that I had gone to the writing workshop—twice. As these comments and interactions accumulated, so did my feelings of inadequacy and shame.

I bashfully began to tell other students about my experiences, to see if, as my mom had suggested, I was just being over sensitive. Their jaws would drop or they would raise their eyebrows in pity. Students would tell me about how when they met with Professor Kim or Professor Castelli or some other professor, she had been really helpful. Or that the English class is a breeze; everyone gets at least a B+—never mind that I was straining for C’s and B-‘s on papers. Sometimes this disconnect felt so strong I could not help but wonder if I was interacting with a completely different professor than my peers.
Despite my ongoing difficulties, other students repeatedly told me that if I wanted
to do well, I needed to go to office hours before papers were due. I dreaded attending
office hours and the possibility that I would leave with a scolding, but I still went. Just the
thought of writing a paper made me anxious. If I had not formed connections with other
low-income students who felt similarly, I might never have realized that these academic
stresses were connected to my financial class background and that there are other students
struggling, too. In his ethnography, Privilege (2011), Khan explores how class operates in
elite settings where class performance becomes a form of bodily knowledge. Central to his
analysis is “ease,” the quality that eluded me. He writes:

What appears a natural, simple quality is actually learned through repeated
experiences in elite institutions. The result is a near invisible barrier. The
apparent easiness of these characteristics implies that if someone doesn’t
know how to embody ease, it is somehow their own fault—they do not
naturally have what it takes. This allows for inequitable outcomes to be
understood not as the result of the odds being stacked in the favor of
some but as something that simply “happens.” (2011: 84)

Many of the visible material distinctions in my high school evaporated at Wesleyan: we all
eat the same food, live in the same housing units, and wealthy students walk around with
bare, muddy feet and torn pants, as well as expensive clothing. This is something Elizabeth
Aries terms the “unreliability of class markers” at elite colleges (2013: 127). Ease is a mark
of privilege that goes beyond material taste: ease is effective precisely because those who
do not have it are made to feel incompetent. The thing those without ease lack appears to
be so simple and natural that the individual must be lacking in some way for not already
embodies it.

One student, Gwen I spoke to said:

Yeah, I’m from an upper-middle class background and it has given me the
skills to interact with professors in a way they would find satisfying. I’m
articulate. I know how to engage appropriately; I come from a functional
family that’s taught me how to do that. I’ve had a lot of benefits, but then
also I have this weird sort of racial “everything and nothing” --people can put whatever ethnicity they want on my face because I’m kind of ambiguous. Which people seem to find appealing cause they can make me into whatever they are.

Gwen’s ease shapes the way in which she interacts and speaks “appropriately”; she even describes her features as aiding in her naturally strong relationships. She has learned how to embody tastefulness and palatability both physically and interpersonally so as to seem somehow innately pleasing to people.

Kahn describes this bodily knowledge as something that initially eludes students, but eventually something clicks, and they get it: “Practice is the key. And only with experience can you achieve ease, the true mark of the privilege that is essential to being an elite. Thus we have the great trick of ease: ease requires hard, systematic work, yet the result should be ‘natural’ and effortless” (2011: 112). Learning how to navigate office hours effectively, how to show that you have done the reading, and how to professionally engage are essential skills that students must learn in order to be successful at Wesleyan. For me, acquiring such ease took years of sustained efforts of meeting with professors and floundering until I figured out how to interact.

Crys, a student who was not wealthy but described attending a high school designed to help her be upwardly mobile said: “Even when I was in high school my mother was like, ‘you gotta go and meet the teacher, shake their hand, introduce yourself.’ Very specific ways of training yourself, and it begins to develop over the years.” Crys recognizes the way years of training accrue, of extended practice that taught her this embodied knowledge. Another student, Phil, shared how his class background shaped his interactions with professors: “I’ve worked with students who have a very different educational context than me and those experiences have made me palpably aware that my abilities to interact with professors are very much a result of the kinds of schools that I
went to that encouraged me to talk to my teachers and see them as people—not as terrifying authority figures.” Ease is not just about knowing how to academically interact; it is also about performing socially with ease. As I will discuss, it leads to believing that you belong, and that you can perform this belonging.

Social ease surfaced when the new “Are you Wesleyan?” website came out in November of 2009. In response, students wrote many, often humorous articles and memes mocking and critiquing the inquisitive slogan. Initially, “Are you Wesleyan?” was the first thing that appeared on the Wesleyan homepage, however since then, the slogan is now only on the Office of Admissions homepage. The slogan consists of a series of shifting images of students, and queries that intend to capture the dynamic, playful, intellectually curious student body. The following image is a great example of the campaign, and this is possibly the most frequently referenced and mocked example of “Are you Wesleyan?” among students.

However garish the slogan is, it worked to draw me to the school. As I made my application choices, I distinctly remember reading the questions and thinking, “Yes, I am Wesleyan.” And I remember feeling great pride during the fall of my first year when my friend stopped to tell me that I was so Wesleyan. The question “Are you Wesleyan?”
creates an almost Hogwarts like sorting experience: it’s in your blood, you either are Wesleyan or you are not. For many, “being Wesleyan” starts to mean something more intimate than a certain GPA and extracurricular activities; it means possessing specific characteristics and being worthy of the opportunity to have a Wesleyan education. As William Deresiewicz writes, “The message is implicit in every tone of voice and tilt of the head, every article in the student paper, every one of those old-school traditions. The message is, you have arrived. Welcome to the club” (2014: 214). “Being Wesleyan” is belonging to the club, and feeling like one belongs (or is worthy) hinges on a performance of ease, on subtle ways of being: head tilts, tone of voice, academic excellence without trying too hard. These ways of becoming a club member depend on specific raced and classed performances, but appear to be simply about building a strong Wesleyan community.

When the slogan was first released, current students posted YouTube videos, Twitter memes, and Wesleying and Argus articles parodying, critiquing, and expressing embarrassment. One article posting feedback about the slogan even asked, “Are We Wesleyan?” The article quoted a student who wrote: “Worse is the front page, where it says ‘the liberal arts university’ (with ‘the’ in italics) next to a picture of kids in a science class laughing and using the latex safety gloves like balloons. It might as well say, ‘don’t respect us’” (Zach 2009). A subsequent article offered students the chance to creatively respond saying, “If you think the new admissions site is totally fucking stupid, condescending, and more than a bit disingenuous, you can create your own alternative!” (Sheek 2009). Student reactions continued to spark the hashtag “#iamwesleyan” on Twitter.
The parodic #iamwesleyan tweets demonstrate what Wesleyan really is to these students:

These tweets challenge the slogan’s trite, elitist depictions with more accurate experiences of Wesleyan. Students are characterized as drug users, procrastinators, hedonistic, and apathetic (but liberal). Notably, the parodies, much like the initial slogan, leave Wesleyan students unmarked in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The question format of the official slogan is effective in getting prospective and current students to interpolate themselves—to answer “yes, I am Wesleyan.” And ironically, in order to critique the slogan students must first position themselves as members of the community, members who occupy a stable enough position to believe that they embody the school and know what Wesleyan really is. The students are invested in how the school portrays itself because these decisions are a reflection on them: they are Wesleyan. They are worthy.

THE WESLEYAN COMMUNITY CHANGES THE WORLD

“The Wesleyan Community” is a recurring phrase in Wesleyan communication, perhaps especially in emails. It is used by: President Roth, other North College administrators, University Relations staff, Physical Plant staff, student activist list serves, professors, and Board of Trustees to alert us that a pipe has burst in the library, that a
student was robbed, or to give guidelines for attending Spring Fling. In all cases, “the
Wesleyan community,” references an imagined community that includes faculty, staff, and
students (sometimes as in fundraising emails, this community also includes parents, and
alumni). The phrase “The Wesleyan Community” links people who at some point in their
lives attended, donated to, or worked at Wesleyan, and while the word “community” might
imply a close-knit group, this is a massive population including thousands of people.
However, as a result of the role the school has had in each community member’s life, we
are intimately linked. This is something President Roth states in an interview with the
Wesleyan magazine:

Q: Is that [characteristic of lifelong learning] true across generations of
alumni?

A: I was in France this winter because Kari was giving a lecture at the
Sorbonne, and we had a reception for alumni. I met an alumnus from
1948, now a playwright, who came to Wesleyan from France and then
returned. I thought to myself: What could he have in common with the
experience of other alumni like myself? He said to me: “Wesleyan changed
my life,” which is a phrase that I hear a lot. He said: “It gave me the
courage to be a writer.” I’ve heard this phrase “It gave me the courage to
be (fill in the blank)” so many times over the years, and it always makes me
so happy to hear it. At the same reception there were alumni from 2008
who were saying much the same thing: It gave me the courage to start my
own business; it gave me the courage to think for myself; it gave me the
tools to pursue a music education. So many alumni, whatever they’re
doing, are united in their gratitude and respect for Wesleyan because it’s an
institution that prepares students to act on their best selves. (Holder 2014: 43)

Wesleyan as an intellectual institution is essential to Roth’s understanding of the alumni
community: Wesleyan alumni are unique individuals interlinked through their formative
experiences at Wesleyan. Each alumnus has chosen to pursue something different, but all
“generations of alumni” act courageously. The continuity of courage links alums across
time, expanding The Wesleyan Community into the past and future, and making “the
community” timeless. The Wesleyan Community also spans across the country and even across the globe, as is evident by President Roth’s mention of the class of 1948 playwright returning to France: transformed alums travel and act courageously no matter where they land. The impact of Wesleyan on the rest of the alums’ lives intimately link them with a massive Wesleyan Community that crosses boundaries of time and space through the power of intellectual engagement.

Underlying the logic of Wesleyan as a global community is an understanding that the school transforms students and once these students graduate, they transform the world. This is evident during Dean of Admissions Nancy Hargrave Meislahn’s speech on arrival day to the many anxious parents who crowded into the Memorial Chapel. “We think we’ve assembled a remarkable, engaged group of students, and this is the next generation that will change the world. That’s the way we think about this at Wesleyan” bellowed Meislahn from behind the wooden podium on the stage. Meislahn’s image of Wesleyan students as future leaders of the world positions the Wesleyan community as a global entity, and it certainly boosts parents’ faith in the school. New students gather from all over the world to learn, and they leave transformed and ready to continue transforming themselves and the world. We are building a community of global public citizens.

The notion of a global community also surfaces when President Roth describes Wesleyan online classes at a 50th year Reunion dinner during Reunion and Commencement. He talks about striving to “build recognition of Wesleyan as a great institution” by spotlighting the successes of students and faculty and by using the online Coursera classes (MOOCs, which at the time had reached 600,000 students internationally, but they have now reached over a million) as “a platform for making [students’ and faculty’s] achievements known around the country and around the world.” In his final
remarks, President Roth links Coursera classes to the global impact Wesleyan students have on the world:

It’s by creatively using our resources to promote a culture of inquiry to take with you after college, that Wesleyan will have an impact, a positive impact on the world far disproportionate to our numbers, far beyond. We will remain a small college, really in New England. But we hope to have an impact not just on the 120 countries, from which the people in our Coursera classes come. We hope to have an impact on the entire world …whatever your education is grounded in, it’s something that is a gift to you to take away from the university to use to engage in the world… It is our job to shine the light on your achievements and on the achievements of our faculty and students, and by doing that we will have a very healthy Wesleyan University for generations to come. Thank you.

President Roth’s emphasis on the global community stems from a desire to build the school’s reputation. The school’s growing recognition through massive online courses demonstrates a hope that The Wesleyan Community might produce not just global presence but also global recognition—“a platform for making achievements known around the world.” Tensions surface in the President’s words: the online classes expand the community through connecting 600,000 students to the school while also building prestige: the school is both elite and expansive, massive yet intimately linked, competitive and communal. And we see again emphasis that students at Wesleyan transform not only into achievers but also people who will go out after they graduate and “change the world.” Here “changing the world” helps to build Wesleyan’s reputation.

Shamus Khan explains that this institutional emphasis on social good is actually part of a historical shift in the emphasis throughout elite schools away from serving as “a facilitator of class reproduction”: “The school positioned itself not to reproduce the world but often to transform it… [this] marks an enormous shift from the class-based model of the old elite” (2011: 34). Elite institutions like Wesleyan must position themselves at the forefront of social change or else they risk appearing backward. Similarly, in Excellent Sheep
(2014), William Deresiewicz explores how universities communicate the concept of social responsibility through the idea of leadership. Deresiewicz understands “leadership” as a term that points away from actual change; one must be more of a follower in order to get that leadership position (2014: 131). In both cases, acting socially responsibly and leading translates into maintaining the status quo.

During the Q&A after the speech President Roth answers a question about serving the public good with a fraternal chuckle: “I don’t want students protesting on campus. I want them changing the world. That’s not self serving.” The room bellows with raucous laughter. “But it also serves the students,” he justifies, and continues with a statement so brash it leaves the student workers who are catering the dinner fuming: “You don’t get credit for occupying the President’s Office.” The alumni respond with chuckles. But Roth claims that such a statement is not self-serving; he truly believes that changing the world rather than Wesleyan is in the best interest of students, too. He wants to see students engage in social entrepreneurship (which is something you could put on your resume), not some rag-tag guerilla activism (see also Deresiewicz 2014: 16). This vision for the social good is contained—something that should not be too bold or confrontational and something one does for credit and their own personal and institutional advancement.

Some students resist this vision of activism and the Wesleyan community; Tory and I sit in the 24/7 study-space on a warm, Thursday afternoon when she casually offers some analysis on student activism and the administration:

I don’t go anywhere else to school, but at Wesleyan in particular I notice that given that Activism with a capital “A” is marketed so aggressively to people, and obviously people are interested in doing good work, but they always seem to run into a wall, right? And I think it has to do with the question of: to what extent can you change an institution when you’re working through it? …Universities are by definition conservative with a lower case “c.” Because you’re conserving something, you’re preserving the status quo. …Ironically universities are premised on racist, sexist,
homophobic [structures] just like this society. Universities are products of this society, and yet universities all have the ability to create the space where antithetical discussions can take place. So I think that’s the wall a lot of academics, a lot of students keep running into. So they realize that within the University there’s space for conversations, but being able to have those conversations does not necessarily mean that the institution is changing or is bound to change.

Activism, perhaps especially the form that is marketed to students as part of the Wesleyan brand is less about making institutional change as it is a source of “pride that students express their concerns and advocate for change” as they “learn to become full citizens” (Roth 2014).

President’s Roth’s insulting statements about on-campus activism seem to place him in direct opposition to most on-campus student activism. One particularly telling example of the tensions around student activism happened during the spring of 2014, when eleven activist students published a critical Wespeak (a student editorial) in the Argus called “To The Admitted Students.” It aimed to challenge images of Wesleyan as a “perfect place,” especially prevalent during WesFest. The article challenged the idea that Wesleyan is a somehow better, more progressive bubble (or club) that is separate from the rest of the world, and strove to expose the ways in which The Wesleyan Community is, instead an elite, exclusive institution founded on racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism. They write, “this is a far from perfect place… This is a place where cultural norms permit violence against …women, trans* students, students of color, queer students, and many others marginalized groups.”

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, the student authors of the Wespeak build on Dean Meislahn’s and President Roth’s description of admitted students as “the next generation that will change the world”: “There's a constant turnover of students on any campus, which presents a threat to the continuity and vitality of the movements for reform and
revolution that go on here: the most knowledgeable and experienced rabble-rousers, strategists, and philosophers of liberation are always graduating and going off to change the world.” We see the students echo a trajectory rather similar to the one Meislahn described to parents: students arrive to campus, become Student-Activists, and when they leave, they are ready to change the world. Even as the article confronts and clashes with Roth’s perspective and questions the very need for universities, it fuels an understanding of Wesleyan students as part of a larger, global Wesleyan community of activists. And, ironically, things like this article are perhaps the very reason some students choose to attend Wesleyan.

The controversy over this article is evidenced by the sixty comments underneath that defend, attack and analyze the piece. One anonymous commenter, Prof, wrote:

What you've really written is "Hey guys, we have an incredible privilege being able to attend one of the best liberal arts colleges in America and right now we're using Wesleyan internet and eating a Wesleyan veggie burger sitting on a beautiful lawn and using words I learned in a Wesleyan English class - but WAIT YOU WANNA GO HERE?? YOU KNOW HOW MANY PROBLEMS WE GOT?? Stay away unless you wanna put in some HARD WORK." The writers are screaming from inside a Wesleyan bubble.

The invocation of “The Wesleyan Bubble” often undermines activist demands by positioning the students as naïve and sheltered within an unrealistically progressive fantasy world. But this comment also calls out their entitlement. Tory, expressed a similar complaint with activists at Wesleyan:

Activist communities are really good about raising awareness and having shows of energy, but there’s a significant lacking in terms of creating larger, more consistent, more long lasting initiatives that produce tangible, everyday changes. I’ll give you an example: …I was here when the chalking campaign was going on, and people were writing politically charged messages all over campus and denouncing President Roth in particular. And not to say that I disagreed with a lot of what was being said. However, I am an early riser, and I’d be walking to gym in the morning coming back around 8 o’clock, and usually what I would see at 8 o’clock I would see Sun Service Workers power hosing this stuff off of the ground and the
walls. And so I think to myself and to whoever it is that did that, the people who scribbled on the ground, what did you do today? What did you actually do? Well, you may have shouted something at President Roth which he probably didn’t read, but what you definitely did is you created more work for certain people. Ironically enough the certain people who allegedly are represented by the so-called “Activist Community.”

These activist attempts to undermine the school are simultaneously steeped in the social power that the students have and fuel a narrative of Wesleyan that is centered on communal inclusion. As Tory points out, even if she agrees with the chalking messages, she finds such actions frustrating because there is a lack of awareness of how chalking adds work to people for whom Wesleyan is a workplace, not a community.

Similarly, the Wesfest Wespeak points to a range of structural problems (e.g. the inaccessibility of campus for disabled people, widespread anxiety among students, poor working conditions for janitorial staff) but offers an analysis that is centered on the logic of community. This is evident when the Wespeak concludes with an uplifting note describing the school’s “saving grace”: “This is a place where students are willing to take the administration, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, and our fellow students to task for transgressions against the community and to challenge anyone who says Wes can’t be better than it is.” These selfless students, the very authors of the piece, who are willing to hold “the community” to a higher standard position themselves as the school’s saving grace. They locate the problem as people “transgressing against the community.” By couching structural problems in a language of building a better, more inclusive community, the authors unknowingly participate in the framework of the Wesleyan brand where Wesleyan is a community, not a workplace. As Miranda Joseph (2002) has argued, the language of “the community” can obscure the ways communities themselves are sites of various modes of oppression.
Surprisingly, the article makes no mention of amazing professors who have taught them or the challenges faculty or non-custodial staff face with regard to race, class, gender, ability, or sexuality. In their attempt to offer a more complete picture of the school, the experiences of whole groups of people remain omitted and peripheral to “the community.” This narrative sets up a binary of activists and the rest of the students, faculty, and staff who act oppressively. If the authors understood Wesleyan as a workplace, perhaps their analysis would include discussion of faculty and other staff—perhaps the students would see the problems faculty, staff, and students face as connected to the corporatization of higher education. As Joseph writes, “Fetishizing community only makes us blind to the ways we might intervene in the enactment of domination and exploitation” (2002: ix). Students are able to recognize some of the structural problems at the university, but when they see these problems as flaws in the community, they unknowingly participate in the larger discourse of belonging to and caring about the community that re-entrenches, rather than contests, the growing corporatization of higher education.

Further, the Wespeak’s limited focus on students and cleaning staff highlights the special attention students dedicate to the plight of custodial workers. One of many articles on Wesleying about custodial worker treatment on campus states: “You won’t find any of their names anywhere on the Wesleyan website. Why? Because they don’t work for the University; they work for Sun Services…They don’t have Wesleyan emails. For all intents and purposes, they are not part of the Wesleyan community” (BZOD 2013). Again, we see that the writer understands the poor working conditions as a problem, but returns to the community language: the problem is that the janitorial staff are “not part of the Wesleyan community.” The desire to include custodial workers in the community is a recurring sentiment among self-proclaimed Student-Activists, and is connected to the desire for
Wesleyan to be inclusive. For example WSA resolution 4.35: Supporting the Fair Treatment of Janitorial Staff reads, in part:

- Highlighting that our living space is their workplace,
- Affirming Wesleyan workers, including custodial staff, as members of the Wesleyan community alongside students and faculty,
- Asserting that Wesleyan students have a responsibility to fight for the just treatment of Wesleyan community members

Strikingly, the resolution positions faculty as definite member of the community alongside students and separate from the category of Wesleyan workers. This omission of any discussion about staff beyond cleaning workers points to a student imaginary that sees the problem in terms of students who care about the community versus an imagined cruel and careless Administrative Other that does not. In this logic, faculty frequently (but not always) are positioned alongside administrators. As a result of the idea of “community” students do not understand poor working conditions in terms of cost managements, privatization, and other economic polities at the university—instead, it becomes a problem of belonging to the community.

The emphasis on community points to a belief that Wesleyan is a space that should care for students rather than a place for education, a transformation that I will discuss further in the next two chapters. These shifts in the university structure and values demonstrate the way potentially radical desires for belonging, inclusion, and social transformation are contained by community discourses in ways that further the more conservative aims of University Relations (see also Young 1986). We see here that although “community” often appears in radical discourses, it, like “ease,” relies on a notion of universalism or sameness: it relies on differences being subsumed into the community.

THE PROBLEM OF “MERIT”
Not every student responds to the call, “Are you Wesleyan?” with a yes. One student literally said, “I am not Wesleyan” to President Roth at the open discussion that followed the AFAMiswhy march organized in spring 2014. Over one hundred students attended the march to protest the shrinking African American Studies Program, which would have just two professors in the program the following semester. At the open discussion Aida, just weeks before her graduation day, told President Roth:

I wanted to point out that the last couple of years we’ve been talking about diversity and Wesleyan being Diversity University, but there is a pattern, again, of not only students of color not feeling supported on this campus, but staff of color and staff who are working in ethnic studies … What is Wesleyan doing to keep students of color on this campus and ethnic studies here? Because I don’t see it. I’ve been here for four years and quite honestly there has been a racial problem every year that I have been here, which I think is a problem. And there has been student outreach, and we have gotten almost nothing. … What are we going to do to make it different—no, what are you going to do? Because I’m not Wesleyan; I pay to go here.

The student’s statement “Because I’m not Wesleyan,” serves to distance herself from “the community” while she also points out institutional problems. This student’s refusal of false community reorients the conversation and links the student protest to problems faculty and staff of color face. We also see that her focus is to get an education (“I pay to go here”), not to belong or to hold the community to a higher standard. Her link to Wesleyan isn’t her use of Adderall, passion for the Simpsons, or some other characteristic that might make one worthy. Despite her refusal to “be Wesleyan,” she has however ironically done so through the context of these very statements. She, like the satirizing students, still replies to the question, “Are you Wesleyan?”

But there are students with similar sentiments who do not respond to university advertising even to say, “I am not Wesleyan.” The students pay to go here, get a degree, and get out. They wonder to themselves, like Aida, “What is Wesleyan doing to keep
students of color on this campus and ethnic studies here?” One student of color, Deja, explained how common it is to see students of color leave: “For myself, as a student of color, it’s just the reality. You just know somebody is going to get sent home or somebody is not going to make it. They’re going to start with you and not finish with you, and you see that because the student of color community is so tight and we all know each other.”

Deja’s use of “community” to discuss students of color demonstrates that she sees herself as part a different, racial community rather than the universalized “Wesleyan community.” As students of color leave, many of the remaining students of color bind together through this fracturing. This experience separates students of color from the experiences of white students, many of whom do not expect that the friends who they start with might not graduate with them. In this way, the “student of color community” marks a particular experience at Wesleyan—in contrast to a more generalize or universalized “Wesleyan community.”

Deja continued:

It’s really your reality. I would say that, that experience [of seeing students of color leave Wesleyan] might’ve effected how involved with certain issues I’ve been on campus because I just want to get my piece of paper and leave. I want to get my degree and get the fuck out of here. Not that I don’t care about the people or friends that I’ve met at Wesleyan, but I don’t care about fixing Wesleyan as much anymore.

The theme of racial problems surfaces in both Deja’s and Aida’s statements. As Elizabeth Aries writes, students of color at Amherst live in a white environment: “Black students live in an environment in which, even if only on occasion, they hear racist joking, racist epithets, and racial insults; in which they are told they do not merit their place at the college; and in which they do not receive full respect” (2008: 77). This exhausting reality leads both students to focus on their own survival and graduation at Wesleyan rather than dedicating hours to activism to improve “the community.” Deja’s statement, “Not that I
don’t care about the friends I’ve met, but I don’t care about fixing Wesleyan as much anymore” highlights the way much student activism aims to change the Wesleyan Community rather than Wesleyan: the institution. The insidious inequality that pervades Deja’s experience leads to her feelings of distance and to her desire to “just get my piece of paper and leave.” These shared feelings of isolation positions the student of color community as something almost outside of “the Wesleyan community.”

In the spring of 2013 I attended an event called Bridge the Gap, an event open to all students that was organized by Residential Life and Ujamaa, a student of color group that organizes around the African diaspora. The description of the event asks the student: “Have you ever felt underrepresented on an academic or social subject but did not think it was easily accessible? Do you feel underrepresented in decisions that have been made on campus or in your personal life? Do you believe that you do not have a strong relationship with the administration?” Many of the students in the room shared their own experiences with academic probation and academic leave. The event confirmed that academic leaves are a structural problem that aid in perpetuating race and class inequality. Only later did I realize the rarity of such open conversation about these student experiences.

The Academic Handbook defines academic leave, or “Required Resignation,” as: “The category of discipline used when the student's academic performance is so deficient as to warrant the student's departure from the University for the purpose of correcting the deficiencies.” Students on academic leave are forbidden from being on campus.

I can imagine that being told that you are deficient and required to leave feels similar to the university revoking admission. My friends who have gone on academic leave feel incompetent and undesirable; long after their leave they continue to wonder and doubt if they belong at Wesleyan.
Acceptance from the Wesleyan Admissions Office tells the recipients they are excellent—a sentiment that, for some, carries through their time at Wesleyan (and hopefully, to the global community beyond campus). On arrival day for first years, parents file into the Memorial Chapel to listen to speeches before they leave their children at Wesleyan for the first time. A fellow parent who is dropping off her third kid at Wesleyan spoke first. As she finished, the anxious parents clapped, and Dean of Admissions, Meislahn, took the podium. Nancy started by thanking the parents for all that they have done to get the students to this point. And she continued,

“Your students were literally handpicked… our process is so personal that we think of each individual and what they bring to the campus.” The speech also included Meislahn reading fragments from letters of recommendations written by the high school teachers of the incoming class and reciting some of their most impressive statistical achievements. This is broader than Wesleyan, of course: Andrew Delbanco writes, “Today’s incoming freshmen… are invariably welcomed by the college president ‘with some version of… ‘You are the most extraordinary class ever to walk through our gates’’” (cited in Deresiewicz 2014: 212). The speech tells parents to be proud of their children, assuring them that admittance marked the child as special and deserving—as worthy. This language leads students to believe that because we are a remarkable community, the university is going to love and keep students unconditionally throughout their four years.

Speeches such as Meislahn’s omit and cover over the experiences of rejection I listened to during my research and witnessed as a student. The appealing narrative of the Admissions Office handpicking each student to build a remarkable class, recognizing each student as a “special snowflake” that can bring value to campus cracks, when academic affairs asks a student to leave.
Indeed, this is a university that does not operate as an unconditionally loving community—certain behaviors are not permitted. As Laurel George writes, as a working-class student while at Wesleyan, “if I were to fail my classes, I would have no home” (2001: 225). Failing to perform academically, failing to perform with ease, failing to carry oneself in very specific raced and classed ways highlights that, “while masquerading as a ‘family’ in which class difference is more or less incidental, the university like any other corporation is deeply invested in reinforcing—rather than exposing class inequalities” (Prendergast and Abelmann 2006: 42). This is something bell hooks expands on when she points out that very few spaces affirm blackness or working-class backgrounds in the university.

“Ideologically, the message is clear—assimilation is the way to gain acceptance and approval from those in power” (1993: 108). It is this institutional culture or community that “continues to create an inhospitable environment for white women and men and women of color” as well as low-income people and queer people, which means that despite the more visible inclusion of women and people of color, universities still reproduce inequality (Võ 2012: 94).

It is a gray winter afternoon, and I sit beside Yasmine on a smooth wooden bench outside of the Career Center. Yasmine did not actually go on academic leave, but she did have a trial, which she describes:

In that moment I was not fucking with Wesleyan at all. I hated every dean in that office. They literally make you feel like an academic criminal, but I had not cheated... During the meeting I was so frustrated because they kept asking me, “Why didn’t you take classes over the summer?” Because I would’ve had to work and take classes and where was the money going to come from? ...It became a conversation very quickly about money. And it made me realize that unless you have money things are going to be that much more difficult. And this is a room full of faculty adults. My presence at this school is really not affecting them on a day-to-day basis. I haven’t had classes with them; they don’t know me as a student. They don’t know what I bring to the table as a student yet. They were making judgments based off of: well she didn’t take classes over the summer so therefore she
clearly didn’t care or whatever. …I started crying in there, I left the room crying, and I was just like, why am I made to feel as if I am a criminal in this process? And I just felt like everyone’s attitude toward me was just very …whatever, there’s another student, particularly another black student, another student of color, another low-income student. They don’t care. They’re going to get the money anyways.

There are eerie parallels between Yasmine’s description and the narratives of other students’ of color. Like Yasmine, students talk about realizing that administrators don’t care and realizing that what they bring to campus is replaceable. And most notably, all of the students of color I spoke with who faced required resignation described feeling disposable. Because Wesleyan is a university, numerical academic criteria (primarily GPA) are the primary factors that determine whether or not the student can stay, and this obscures the realities of the students’ specific situation. The punitive nature of the academic trial lead Yasmine, and many other students, to feel like an “academic criminal.”

This rejection feels even more disheartening because Wesleyan has sold itself so successfully as an inclusive community, so the leave becomes a question of the student’s very worth.

For Yasmine, “faculty adults” confer one’s belonging to “the community.” This student, like the activists and others, positions the faculty as an arm of the administration that can affirm or challenge her place in the school. This is one way that faculty are ambiguously located in the institution. This is especially apparent when the student says, “They don’t care. They’re going to get the money anyways.” Yasmine realizes that the university is a business and that money is a driving factor in how the institution is structured, but the faculty are hardly profiting off the current state of affairs. However, because the student feels that the faculty doesn’t care and they conduct the academic trial, she locates them as participants in and even benefiting from the unequal resource distribution of wealth within and outside the university.
Academic leave exposes that at Wesleyan we are in fact not a “community” – instead Wesleyan is an academic institution organized around “merit.” This is something Professor Acker noted:

“[Academic leaves are] really hard, and unfortunately we live in a society that is very individualistic. As much as we try to have community or want community in a place that is supposedly a meritocracy… It’s about the academic work you produce. And if you don’t produce the work, you don’t move forward. And no one can write papers for you.” Yet as many have shown, “merit” is itself as much of a myth as community.

During my interview with one of the class deans, Dean Missal, she explained that a primary part of her job is to work with students who “are really in trouble.” And, many times these are the students who are “on the verge of not being at Wesleyan anymore.” I asked her, “Is it hard to see students go on leave?”

“No, I think leaves are great actually.” She said with a light laugh.

“Okay,” I responded warily.

“I mean I don’t think about the bottom line there, right. I think students who go on leave are generally much happier and successful when they come back. And I’ve never had a student regret taking time away.”

“Really?” I asked. I do not believe her.

“And I’ve been doing this work for twenty-five years or so. I’ve never had a student come back and say, ‘that was a huge waste of time.’ Usually it enables students to get clarity and perspective that they didn’t have before. They’re too enmeshed in things and then they pull themselves out and see things for what they are.”

I think about students on leave who reiterated that they never had a choice to leave Wesleyan. How can one regret something they didn’t have control over? Maybe they regretted not doing well academically or feel like they made the best out of a bad situation. But required resignations are, well, required. There is no space for regret.
“Ok I guess I’ll just say it,” I say, deciding that I should be fully open, “I have a lot of friends who have been on leave, and it’s been really hard for them to be on leave.”

“Yes, it’s hard. I’m not saying it’s not hard. But usually when they come back they have gained from it somehow.”

“Hmm, even if they don’t—a lot of my friends have been low-income and kind of sitting at home being like, ‘I don’t know what to do now.’”

“Yes, it does happen. Yeah, but it still allows you to step out of whatever you were doing. And ordinarily, usually that means they were engaging in destructive behaviors.”

Adriana, a student whose friends have gone on such a leave and who narrowly avoided one herself, spoke about leaves quite differently. “It sucks that my friend also has to be an example to me of how the university just does not really care, is not here to accommodate you or thinks the best way to accommodate you is to send you home.” As the conversation progressed, Adriana’s words simmered with a sentiment contrary to Dean Missal:

You just erased this opportunity or put on pause this opportunity for this person to really grow, to be better, to do better because you decided that doing better is sending them to an environment that is maybe not a productive one … and who knows if that is going to make their time here easier. So that whole bullshit line about: oh, every student who has taken time off benefitted, okay well that’s for the students that actually come back because what about the students that are just like fuck it; what’s the point of coming back? Because that’s a bunch of students, and I was really confident that, that was going to be me.

Adriana’s biting words demonstrate a clear disconnect between Dean Missal’s perspective and many students’ experiences. Leaves are not a restorative method of engaging with the problem; they simply send the struggling student away. Leaves participate in the meritocratic idea of universal experiences—a logic that assumes sameness. Operating on the idea of meritocracy, leaves not only show the
lie of “community,” they also help construct a “Wesleyan community” where community members are all equally capable of achieving excellence.

William Deresiewicz argues that “getting through the door is very difficult, but once you’re in, there’s almost nothing you can do to get yourself kicked out” (2014: 219). But for some students, admittance comes with far more stability than others. All of the students I spoke to recognized that the resources that the student has while on leave (access to a therapist, access to college courses, a stable home life) play a huge role in whether the student returns from the leave. Many students wanted to see a race and class breakdown of leave statistics. Unfortunately, Dean Missal refused my request for any statistics on leaves, explaining that the information was not publicly available. Even without the statistics, there is shared knowledge among students of color who organized the Bridge the Gap event and students that I interviewed that leaves disproportionately disadvantage low-income students of color.\(^1\) This is a reality that the New York Times article “Who Gets to Graduate?” also mention in their discussion of income: “whether a student graduates or not seems to depend today almost entirely on just one factor — how much money his or her parents make” as many low-income students are forced to leave as a result of financial, academic, or social obstacles.

Administrators and students approach academic leaves from different ideological angles. For students who feel disposable, their raced and classed position define the prospect of required resignation; the leave is oriented around histories of exclusion and the blatant failure of both the “community” and the meritocracy narratives. For administrators, such as Dean Missal, the student had the same chances for academic success as other students—because Wesleyan is a meritocracy, it does not take into account race or class. In The Chosen (2005), Jerome Karabel chronicles a history of
exclusive admissions practices at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton and he fleshes out the logic of the meritocracy: “the lower classes know that they have had every chance’ and have little choice but to recognize that their inferior status is due not as in the past to a denial of opportunity, but to their own deficiencies” (Karabel 2005: 556). The use of the word “deficient” in the academic handbook to describe students who take academic leave echoes this long history of exclusion of non-WASP men from higher education. From an administrative perspective, the students who leave must overcome their deficiencies before they return because they had the “same” opportunities as their peers. Yasmine articulates this when she explains that “it’s impossible not to feel [ashamed] because when you see all your friends, you guys all started in the same place, and you’re the one that didn’t make it.”

This meritocratic rhetoric of Wesleyan shames the students who do not get to stay, and lends a sense of precarity to low-income students of color—a fear that at any moment they could be next. Such students “have to learn not just the course content, but a new culture as well” (Langston 1992: 69)—a culture where to be worthy of belonging is to perform academic excellence with ease, and to be otherwise is to be deficient.

These ideas of meritocracy and worth also organize some of the student experiences in the Mellon-Mays Undergraduate Fellowship (MMUFP), an affirmative action based program that aims to support students of color prior to and throughout graduate school so as to increase the number of faculty of color in the academy. Although the Mellon-Mays students are, in some ways, the opposite of the precarious students of color discussed above, in others, their experiences in the Program reinforce ideas of meritocracy. As a “highly selective mentoring program,” Mellon is both competitively merit-oriented and oriented around supporting people of color financially, academically, and socially. Some students found it “amazing,” and “awesome,”: “I’m so grateful and so
lucky.” Others were disappointed by the quality of intellectual discussion in the program and felt like other fellows were not “the cream of the crop at Wesleyan,” as they’d hoped. Even in this program, some students seemed able to get away with not doing much work—an attribute of ease.

Hector further highlighted the role of belonging in Mellon. He applied but did not receive the fellowship:

Not getting it at that point and seeing the students who did, it made me realize … that there’s a politics to everything and especially in a university setting. The students who are more familiar with the people on the board and just separate from knowing that Mellon existed just know them personally and just little things like that or what they’re choosing to study or what they’re choosing to focus on, if that is seen as adding value to the university or Mellon fellowship program or whatever that is who’s going to get picked. And I get that now, and it just makes me feel a little bit better, but I’m still a little bitter sometimes.

The Mellon Fellowship is a structural attempt to make higher education more racially diverse, but from these excerpts we see that on campus they operate as an affirmation of a student’s worth. At points Mellon appears to be a way to perform belonging, as became explicitly apparent when one student told me, “Even if I didn’t want to become a professor, I would never leave the program.” Acceptance into Mellon becomes a way of performing belonging while at Wesleyan much like performing academic ease, being an activist, or being in a secret society.

Throughout this chapter we have seen the ways that the myth of community shapes students experiences of belonging and how in order to belong, one must learn “ease,” a particular raced and classed way of being. We have also seen how student investment in belonging interferes with forming a more substantive critique of the university that is not oriented around community.
In this situation, subversive students, like the subversive intellectual that Fred Moten and Stefano Harney write about, need to find ways “to be in but not of” the university (2013: 26). We need to find ways to challenge the culture of elitism without feeding in to the logic of the university. In *Working-Class Women in the Academy* Saundra Gardner writes, “we can use our ‘outsider within’ status to challenge the institutions of which we are a part as well as to transform conventional ways of knowing within our respective disciplines” (1993: 56). Finding alternative ways to belong, to be “outsiders within,” would allow low-income students and students of color to engage at Wesleyan without reproducing the culture of elitism.

In this chapter we see the ways in which institutional language around community and worth shapes students’ sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is dependent on specific race and class performances that students must maintain in order to stay. The rhetoric around community obscures the structural transformations and class and race inequality that are part of the university today and ultimately prevents student activism from making more incisive critiques. In their essay “Alma Mater: College, Kinship, and the Pursuit of Diversity” (2006) Catherine Prendergast and Nancy Abelmann describe the president of Brown, Ruth Simmons, as initiating an investigation in April of 2003 of the links between the university, the Brown family, and the slave trade. The authors write, “the most radical and underappreciated aspect of Brown’s effort is its profound challenge to the prevailing idea of the university as a diverse and happy family” (51). Might students draw on our experiences of not belonging and the disjuncture between these experiences and the institutional narrative as sites to challenge the prevailing idea that the university is a community? Might student organizing not only expose the myth of community, but also
begin to center the university as a workplace in order to pose demands and critiques that could transform higher education?
Chapter 2

Critical Thinking: EDUCATING THE ELITE

“I had never wanted to surrender the conviction that one could teach without reinforcing existing systems of domination.” (hooks 1994: 18)

Mid-way through an Anthropology class discussion, one student points out that the author of the reading we are discussing has a child who is in fact a Wesleyan student. Many academics choose to send their child to Wesleyan, a dynamic that is part of a larger phenomenon; John Siegfried and Malcom Getz write, “the tilt toward liberal arts colleges by faculty families is unambiguous,” the study continues to explain that this preference is perhaps connected to “an appreciation for education that is not particularly career-oriented” (2003: 205). Yet the value in “learning for learning’s sake,” that is, the value in learning even when it lacks a direct use, intersects with class reproduction. Daniel Golden’s *The Price of Admissions* (2007) describes advantages in admission rates offered to faculty children (along with legacies, athletes, and famous people) and how these advantages ultimately diminish schools’ ability to offer financial aid and admission to low-income applicants. Such advantages help these applicants secure their position in “America’s upper echelons” (Golden 2007: 185).

In this chapter I explore contradictions between a school that prizes “learning for learning’s sake” yet still participates in elitist practices of being the best and reproducing class disparities. The epigraph represents an essential driving tension in the chapter between the hope in teaching as something that will liberate and an awareness that such
learning often ends up reincorporated into the university. I consider how critical thinking becomes something that both offers and closes down possibility and ultimately undermines and validates the academy. Continuing the questions I raise in the last chapter, I consider who has access to critical thinking and how this access shapes the possibilities for transformative thinking and learning.

THE LANGUAGE OF “CRITICAL THINKING” AND “ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE”

“Wesleyan University is dedicated to providing an education in the liberal arts that is characterized by boldness, rigor, and practical idealism. At Wesleyan, distinguished scholar-teachers work closely with students, taking advantage of fluidity among disciplines to explore the world with a variety of tools. The university seeks to build a diverse, energetic community of students, faculty, and staff who think critically and creatively and who value independence of mind and generosity of spirit.” –Mission Statement

According to the Wesleyan mission statement: “The University seeks to build a diverse, energetic community of students, faculty, and staff who think critically and creatively.” It is not only the University mission statement that mentions “thinking critically,” the Departments of Film, English, and History also mention critical thinking in their respective mission statements. Particularly striking is the English Department homepage in which “critical thinking” is repeatedly emphasized. The heading of the English department website reads: “English is writing intensive, reading intensive, and critical-thinking intensive.” The subsequent paragraph describing the major states that the department fosters “critical thinking,” whereby students become “critics,” through being “critical,” and studying “critically,” which comes out to a grand total of five mentions of some version of the word “critical.” Critical thinking is an important term for articulating the department’s investment in oppositional and rigorous intellectual work where one
investigates the implications of a belief by asking what is missing, what is distorted, or denied.

But critical thinking (along with academic excellence) also operates as a buzzword for intellectual strength and rigor, a sort of corporate speak, rather than a term that designates particular modes of intellectual practice. In *The University in Ruins* (1996), Bill Readings writes, “Excellence has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless, or to put it more precisely, non-referential” (22). Academic excellence does not refer to a determinate set of values or ideology, and critical thinking is similarly and symptomatically vague in reference, used in multiple, often contradictory ways. In the article “Bosses Seek Critical Thinking but What Is That?” Dan Black states, “It’s one of those words—like diversity was, like big data is—where everyone talks about it but there are 50 different ways to define it.” Critical thinking appeals to corporations as it suggests speedy, independent, on your toes problem solving. By framing efficiency and production in terms of critical thinking, slower work or posing challenges become a sign of lacking intelligence or initiative. “Critical thinking” is a term that is so vague, so drained of referential content that, like the words diversity or excellence, its meanings proliferate according to who is using it.

But learning, what the mission statement refers to as “thinking critically and creatively,” is essential to Wesleyan’s purpose as a university—the alternative is that Wesleyan students are not thinking critically, that they are thinking uncritically, or worse, that they are not thinking at all. The multiplicity of definitions of “critical thinking” allows the term to appeal to a wide range of people. It is a concept that even the most radical professors who may be critical of the University can rally around—though perhaps with a
more oppositional take than the mission statement. Such faith in the value of critical thinking surfaces when Professor Lawrence states:

What I have to offer, what I want to offer is this possibility of really, deeply critical thinking. It’s about just not taking the world for granted. You know? Asking questions about how it got to be what it is. How we got to be what we are. And it matters a lot to me that queer students feel, and in this sense I’m going to talk about feeling, that their desires are utterly fantastic. Not just okay, but great, and I can do that through my teaching, I think. I can do that through the work that I assign. I can do that through my enthusiasms in class because they’re very real. Because I care.

Critical thinking affectively connects Professor Lawrence to students, in this instance, queer students. In Professor Lawrence’s perspective, critical thinking has the power to transform students’ sense of who they are and to empower them. bell hooks similarly writes about the transformative value of critical thinking: “To me ‘critical thinking’ was the primary element allowing the possibility of change… without the capacity to think critically… none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow” (1994: 202).

However, critical thinking does not appeal to everyone, as is evident when hooks continues: “In our society, which is so fundamentally anti-intellectual, critical thinking is not encouraged” (1994: 202). We can situate critical thinking within a larger discourse around intellectualism when Professor Juarez-Briggs states:

To me the class is semi-sacred. There is stuff that happens there that just doesn’t [happen anywhere else.] We don’t live in a world that encourages intellectual interaction of any kind. We don’t live in a country that encourages it. It’s frightened by it. Like when this country says, “We hate elites” they don’t mean rich people. People in this country fucking love rich people. They mean me. They mean you. Right?

Professor Juarez-Briggs laughs nervously. I nod. She continues, “Right. They’re not talking about wealth; they’re talking about intellectuals. So I think what we do in the classroom matters.” For Professor Juarez-Briggs the classroom is a rare opportunity for various kinds of intellectual interaction, including critical thinking that might be antagonistic or
oppositional—characteristics that corporate and institutional uses of the term often erase. If rather than blindly maintaining orders, one slows down by asking critical questions, one risks failing to be a productive and independent worker. Thus we see here how thoughtful critique and reflection becomes a sign of elitism or inefficiency rather than an investment in intellectual work. Corporate uses of critical thinking emphasize initiative and efficiency whereas for Professor Juarez-Briggs the thinking in the classroom is a chance to linger on ideas.

Wesleyan’s President Roth is known for his criticism of the supposedly antagonistic and negative effects of certain styles of critical thinking that he portrays as being unilaterally enforced in today’s academy. This is evident in his interview with the *Wesleyan* magazine:

> I’d like to see our students and faculty move from being sophisticated critics to becoming makers of meaning to generate values and meaning. At Wesleyan, for years now, we’ve had people say that they are critics of normativity. … If we just teach our students to be critical, then we don’t allow them the pleasures of absorption, of alliance, of solidarity—all important virtues of a full education. (Holder 2014: 43)

I find this critique of critical learning fascinating in part because it is ironic that the president of a university is publicly demeaning faculty and students at the school he oversees. When he discusses people who “say that they are critics of normativity,” he appears to be referring to identity studies such as feminist, gender, ethnic, and specifically queer studies, which is oriented around anti-normative critique. This critique of critical identity-based disciplines echoes a culture war rhetoric, where those invested in minoritarian subjectivities were labeled as elitist and overly politically correct. Roth’s limited portrayal of criticality obscures the ways in which critical thinking can contribute to the very things he charges it with preventing: “absorption, alliance, and solidarity.”
A similar juxtaposition to Roth’s language and radical thought at Wesleyan surfaced at the Academy and Activism Spring 2011 symposium that was composed of two five-person panels, “Intellectuals as Activists/Activists as Intellectuals” and “The Politics of the (Neoliberal) Academy.” The event drew many students and scholars from all over the country, and is available online for anyone’s viewing pleasure. Yet although the event was a critique of the university, the Wesleyan online newsletter—(the Wesleyan Connection, which keeps alumni updated on campus activity and inclined to donate),—featured the symposium with pictures and captions mentioning the panels in its pages. It might seem that such an event incarnates the negative, destructive, critique that President Roth dislikes, or that an event that was critical of many of the central aspects of Wesleyan today would be inappropriate for Wesleyan publicity. Still, in this example, the content of the event seemed not to matter.

In their essay summarizing the event the organizers, Naomi Greyser and Margot Weiss, state, “politicized intellectual labor is simultaneously promoted and contained” (2012: 94). President Roth critiques critical thinking while photographs of such intellectual engagement are simultaneously displayed to promote the university. In The Reorder of Things (2012) Roderick Ferguson writes about the “critical possibilities” work such as this symposium offer: “The possibility for a generative inquiry into institutionality lies in the interrogation of those relationships between textuality and institutionality and what they reveal about the co-constitutive anatomies of institutional belonging and minoritized subject formations” (18). Recognizing this relationship where political intellectual work is simultaneously contained and promoted is essential for understanding how institutional belonging operates and where there are spaces for what Ferguson calls “provisional forms
of insurgency.” In these examples, universities are “the scene of world-making and world-devastation all in one” (Ferguson 2012: uminnpressblog).

**ADMITTING THE ELITE**

Promotion and containment of critical, intellectual work begins in the Office of Admissions. Jacob, a student interviewer for the office, described debriefing his first interview with a prospective applicant:

I sat in on my first interview with Tim Weiss, and we were interviewing this girl from a really expensive school… she talked about the NSA … and she actually said she was pro-NSA and government surveillance. … [After] Tim sits me down, and he’s just like, “So what’d you think of her?” … I was just really impressed by her opportunities and the education she received at that school that allowed her to be so poised, and so confident, and so family friendly … And he was just like, “Okay, Jacob. You’re not really thinking right now.” And I was like, “What do you mean?” and he was like, “Between you and me she’s just a fucking—She goes to Choate. It’s the most expensive private school in the state. Her parents are paying out of the wazoo for her to get this education—She just seems like she’s trying really hard.” … And he pointed to her resume and he was like, “This is really expensive paper. Like why do we need this? This is just trying to impress us.” … she didn’t say anything why, and that makes me think that she’s just average intelligence, not very special. And we talked about the NSA paper … she originally didn’t know much about the subject, and if you open any newspaper, you know about the NSA. She’s sheltered. … And it’s not our job to judge people about what her political stance is, but it just seems kind of poorly formed... So she’s a four; she’s very talkative, and she definitely knew how to impress people.

The applicant receives no signs that something has gone amiss. For the people who are not a part of the office, the interaction is opaque. But underneath this opacity, there are multiple components in this interaction.

First, as a Dean of Admissions, Tim is openly critical of this potential applicant. The girl has money, but not the self-awareness or intellectual initiative that Tim is looking for. Tim is able to see through the girl’s attempts to please Admissions and he ultimately concludes that she is too sheltered. We see that admittance into Wesleyan is not simply a
matter of good grades and money—instead, one has to have a certain “character,” a
certain level of intellectual initiative. “Colleges are not looking to pick one kind of student
again and again… Instead, they are looking to pick a group of students whose individual
stories each say something interesting” (Khan 2011: 176). The student must find a way to
offer something additional to the school something beyond good grades and test scores.
The applicant has learned how to “package” herself, but appears to not be “authentic”
enough. Relatedly William Deresiewicz writes that students learn, “how to package
themselves for consumptions by admissions offices: which ultimately means, to create a
self—or at least, the illusion of a self—that is capable of being packaged” (2014: 57).
Small details start to matter as admissions makes finer decisions—Tim’s statement “she
didn’t say anything ‘why’” is a small distinction that might demonstrate she might not
make the cut (Stevens 2009: 208).

The second component here is that Jacob loses his initial awe of the candidate as
he begins to see her impressive performance as a result of money—“her opportunities and
the education she received” at “the most expensive private school in the state.” He learns
what he should look for and consider while interviewing students and to try looking
through applicants’ attempts to impress him. The ideal student is not simply poised and
confident, they are also aware, not sheltered. Jacob learns to carefully decipher between
strong applicants who would be a “good fit” and those who would not. In this example,
critical thinking is a necessary quality of prospective Wesleyan students—they are not
simply rich; they are also critical and forward thinking.iv

However when this critical thinking is less easily absorbed, when it interferes with
fundraising, it can become an obstacle. This surfaced during my interview with a student
worker from University Relations, Rick, who explained that “a lot of alumni feel bitter
about Wesleyan… There’s a lot of alumni who really just don’t want to talk to
Wesleyan.” Alumni bitterness toward the school is perhaps demonstrative of a sentiment
Rick later said that, like the alums, he has a “bad taste” in his mouth. He then clarified by
saying: “My criticism of the school is a direct response to the education I have gotten [at
Wesleyan].” Here the education students receive might directly interfere with fundraising
efforts. When alumni turn a critical lens onto the school, fundraising becomes more
challenging. As part of the corporatization of the university, there are increasing
institutional attempts to address such “bad tastes” and, through surveys, to measure
student satisfaction with the “Wesleyan experience” in the hopes that if students are
satisfied, the school will be able to maintain contact and receive monetary “gifts” after
graduation.

Sal, a supervisor from University Relations, similarly described critique as an
obstacle to fundraising, “The other thing is faculty in particular, but a lot of people here,
don’t want to talk about marketing. They think Wesleyan is not a product. Fine, you can
take that stance, but you have to raise money, and you have to bring in students or
you’re not going to have Wesleyan. As crass as it sounds, you have to market it. If you
don’t want to use the term ‘marketing,’ fine. … Wesleyan is not well known because
alumni aren’t talking about it as much as we’d like them to.” Sal’s concern that
“Wesleyan is not well known” echoes President Roth’s emphasis in chapter one on
“making our achievements known,” and demonstrates a link between “recognition of the
community” and fundraising. Additionally, much like Rick, Sal recognizes that faculty,
the people who instilled Rick’s “bad taste,” can be an obstacle to fundraising through
their critical analysis of university marketing and resistance to understanding students as
customers receiving a product. Sal’s statement, “If you don’t want to use the term
‘marketing,’ fine” demonstrates a willingness to work with the criticism in order to still
fundraise and attract students, and it exemplifies a readiness to absorb critique.

Richard, an alumnus staff member from University Relations who was more than
happy to meet with me, is specifically trying to counter post-graduation bitterness through
reaching out to current students who, of course, are future potential donors. He explained
his position in University Relations: “I am working with the undergrad population. This
year it’s the senior class, and the calling program. In coming years, I’ll see what I can get
people to do: …sort of educating the juniors and underclassmen about University
Relations, what it sort of is firstly, and how a university is funded. Just, there is a very clear
lack of knowledge even in faculty, even in students, even anywhere of how places like
Wesleyan are paid for.” Many students have never even heard of University Relations,
partly because the office’s goals of fundraising and building the school’s reputation
(through events, phone calls, and publicity) are removed from the daily life of a student.
Richard continues by explaining how this lack of knowledge of university finances means
that many alums are angry when they receive fundraising calls from the university. He is
striving to find ways to make current students aware of the department and eventually into
the habit of regularly donating to the school because even if individuals cannot donate a lot
now, the percent of recent graduates who donate to Wesleyan impacts the school’s rank
and reputation (Stevens 2009: 219).

Richard’s previous position as a similarly indignant student shapes his
understanding of student and alumni anger, using the example of the controversy of need
blind admissions: “I was really, really upset that need blind had been gotten rid of and I
was like, ‘Yeah this sucks. The administration should fix this’ and I had all these thoughts
and afterwards, after I got the position [in University Relations]… I realized just how many
gaps there were that lead me to believe that some administrative, monstrous being was in charge of getting rid of need blind or whatever.” Like Richard, many other upset students and alumni raised concerns about having admissions practices that are not based on merit. Alumni signed petitions pledging not to donate as a result of the decision while Roth justified the decision as an effort to improve the school’s financial situation by specifically increasing the endowment (Wilson 2012). However, the critical analysis that this debate leaves out is that even when schools like Wesleyan are need-blind, they still reproduce inequality.

In *The Price of Admissions* (2007) Golden writes, “Top colleges and universities like to boast that they are ‘need-blind’…But they are not wealth-blind. They take a disproportionate number of students from prep schools” (5). Golden goes on to highlight the ways in which university emphasis on finances determines decisions around admissions and ultimately disadvantages students who do not have a prior connection to the school, to fame, or to the world of academia. He specifically mentions Wesleyan when writing about legacies: “To widen the pool of potential donors, some schools, like Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut give an edge to alumni grandchildren, siblings, nieces, and nephews” (Golden 2007: 122). And in the ethnography *Creating a Class* (2009) Mitchell Stevens’ description of admissions draws links between University Relations and Admissions decisions highlighting the way the offices must work together—especially for schools that are need aware (220). While financial aid may be a cause that is “near and dear to all of our hearts” as members of University Relations often emphasize, it is the wealth of the alumni base and potential donor families that is most important. Here the semblance of meritocracy cracks.
If the University Relations staff can manage to use critical thinking to link students back to the school, criticality can be useful as a fundraising tool. An attempt to do just that is perhaps most obvious with the THISISWHY fundraising campaign which tells alumni, “BECAUSE just being smart has never been enough for us.” Like the “Are you Wesleyan?” slogan I discussed in chapter one, this campaign seeks to connect community and critical thinking to distinguish Wesleyan from other institutions. And such community belonging, mediated by “critical thinking,” might encourage alumni to donate to Wesleyan because we are more than just smart; we’re also unconventional, passionate thinkers. Wesleyan’s brand is one where students and alumni care about access and inclusion, but they must also care about the school and achieving/maintaining its elite status for their own futures.

**A REAL EDUCATION: THE CULTURE OF ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE**

Learning is something that is distinctive at Wesleyan as becomes evident in William Deresiewicz’s hit book *Excellent Sheep: the Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (2014) when Deresiewicz offers this backhanded complement while advising high school students on where to go to college: “The best option of all may be the second-tier—not second-rate—liberal arts colleges, places like Reed, Kenyon, Wesleyan… schools that, instead of trying to compete with Harvard and Yale, have retained their allegiance to real educational values” (2014: 195). For Deresiewicz, Wesleyan is the exception to the rule, one of the few schools that has remained true to “real educational values.” President Roth wrote a blog post called “No Sheep Here at Wesleyan” in response Deresiewicz’s work: “People often tell me that students choose Wes because of the culture — ‘sheep’ don’t do well in our ecology. Our culture prizes abilities to thrive in ambiguity, change our minds, and work with exuberance in creative endeavors.” The
distinctive intellectual culture is something Wesleyan prides itself on and something people often claim sets us apart from other schools. These opportunities to “think critically and creatively” become a distinguishing characteristic to how students relate to the school.

“Retaining an allegiance to real educational values” (or as students described it “learning for learning’s sake”) is part of an institutional emphasis on academic excellence. While the terms, “learning for learning’s sake” and “excellence” emphasize rigor and passion, Khan highlights the very specific “elite” ways of thinking that students learn:

“There are not things that are ‘off limits’—limits are not structured by the relations of the world around you; they are in you… As our future elite, these students are taught not to create fences and moats but instead to relentlessly engage with the varied world around them” (2011: 161). Rather than learning facts, students learn a “style of knowledge” where it is “not what one knows but how one knows” (158-9). In this style of knowing, “right and wrong do not apply” (Khan 2011: 158). “Relentless engagement with the world around you” surfaces as Wesleyan students learn “to take advantage of fluidity among disciplines to explore the world with a variety of tools,” as Wesleyan’s Mission Statement urges. In this interdisciplinary style of thinking, there are few limits on the material one can explore. We again see institutional investments in interdisciplinarity when Dave, an Admissions officer, explains that Wesleyan is a “leader of interdisciplinary programs,” and he continues by saying that this “melding of ideas,” “allows you to approach many issues of the day.” Students learn to draw connections across a wide range of fields rather than focus narrowly on a specific area.

In addition to this variability in content, we see academic excellence translate to an institutional belief that students are extraordinary; Dave describes students “being assigned things that have yet to be discovered.” He explains that Wesleyan’s impressive
faculty will turn to their students and say, “We don’t really know where this research is going. How about you research, take a look at it, and let us know what you think?” We see this belief in student extraordinariness again when faculty describe senior theses as “masters level theses” or student thinking as “at the graduate level.” Students’ intellectual work is capable of the extraordinary. These vague intangible ways of knowing in which there are no limits on content or potential allow for a certain “audacity” that connect to forms of ease and eliteness that I described in chapter one (Khan 2011: 162).

Roderick Ferguson also highlights the links between institutional emphasis on excellence and the reproduction of inequality. He builds off of Readings' analysis of excellence as a nonreferential buzzword through contextualizing the racial genealogy of excellence “as a way of engaging diversity, excellence would ingratiate minorities by making ability not only a standard of incorporation but a mode of surveillance, exclusion, and measurement” (2012: 86). Like the Mellon-Mays Program and other modes of assimilation, “excellence” appears to be based on universal merit, while it is in fact, as June Jordan argues “deadly, neutral.” While in institutional rhetoric, the term appears unmarked, Ferguson highlights the racist logic that underlies academic excellence. Here we see that excellence operates as a coded, racialized term for competence.

Yet many professors expressed genuine passion for “learning for learning’s sake” and that they saw critical thinking as a site for transgressive possibility. Professor Flink stated, “one thing I love about Wesleyan students is the way you all reach for ideas: the curiosity about how to understand phenomena. It’s exciting to facilitate that process. I’m not just imparting knowledge—I’m giving tools to apply critical thinking. These are reflexive tools that students can use for anything they encounter.” Professor Schlesinger similarly said: “[Students] can avoid falling into traps when they are working after, outside
of the university because they have concepts, critical concepts to help them to think about the world they live in.” In these descriptions we see that the learning and critical thinking that goes on in the classroom has the potential to shape student’s trajectories and interests. It is a space where as one professor said, he can teach students “not to be good citizens.”

Dean Missal, one of the class deans, echoed the critical component of the student body when she described her experience of teaching a class: “Yeah I loved it, it was great. The students are really incredibly analytical and critical for better or worse. I know Michael Roth is invested in this idea of critical, and so yeah. It was a really fascinating time to teach. I had been teaching at Yale. It was very different teaching at Yale than teaching at Wesleyan.” In Dean Missal’s North College office the air conditioning blasted while I sat sweating on her leather couch, having just come inside from the summer heat. “What did you notice as the difference?” I asked. “Well my common little story about this is that if you ask a Yale student to jump they’ll get a trampoline and jump miles in the sky, higher than anyone’s ever jumped.” She emphasized with her arms just how high Yale students will jump, “But if you ask a Wesleyan student they’re like, ‘why am I jumping? What’s the dynamic here?’” I start to chuckle as I envision myself asking someone why they want me to jump. As I giggle, Dean Missal lists a few more potential interrogative responses:

“Like what am I getting out of it? And what are you trying to prove?” So there’s a lot more analytical space than I felt like there was at Yale. Yale students want to do well, and so they’re not going to question as much as Wesleyan students do. I felt like I had been teaching this course for a while and not gotten into a rut, but gotten into a routine and Wesleyan students completely disrupted that routine, and actually I think made me a better teacher because I had to be really engaged in ideas they presented to me. I had been open, but I hadn’t realized how I had started doing things again, and again, and again.

Much to my surprise, I found myself swelling with pride at the thought of being described as a creative, analytical thinker. As a student who is openly critical of Wesleyan, I had not
expected to feel such investment in a narrative of distinctive intellectual engagement at Wesleyan, but it seems that this is where my school spirit surfaces.

At Wesleyan, criticality becomes a form of school spirit. I often hear students joke about how most of the students who attend Wesleyan athletic events are chilling and smoking weed on Foss and they just happen to face the game. In fact, most conversations I hear about school spirit include some sort of joke about how Wesleyan students do not have it. A Wesleying post about homecoming starts out: “How ironic is it that the one day when it’s totally accepted to dust off our Wesleyan apparel and wear our school colors (props to the people who do that normally), it’s Fall Break?” The article concludes: “So, as we head into Saturday, get your cardinal suits steamed and bone up on your Wesleyan Fight Song harmonizing. And remember to tweet all of the funny things your Non-Athlete-Real-People-friends say during the game @wesleying” (Samira 2014).

And indeed comical Non-Athlete student quotes were captured on social media as is evident by a friend’s Facebook status:
This “upstanding example of school spirit” demonstrates the Vice President of University Relations’ statement, “Wesleyan alumni, and I think students too, to a certain extent, they’re not classically ra-ra. Students or alumni. You know what I mean?” I told him that I did know what he meant. The lack of school spirit is in keeping with the narrative of Wesleyan as a weird or alternative student body that resists and is critical of mainstream norms, a student body where there are no sheep. Wearing school gear, and attending football games are some of the most traditional, conventional modes of expressing school spirit, and Wesleyan students refuse to blindly follow such norms.

This criticism of mainstream norms also surfaces during student discussion of grades. At the conclusion of each semester, North College rolls out The Dean’s List, a way of recognizing academic achievement. Students qualify to be placed on the list by having a GPA of at least 93.0. The class dean will send the qualifying student an email stating, “Your semester GPA speaks to your hard work, intellectual engagement, and love of
learning.” Achieving a high GPA and the subsequent recognition exhibits the school’s investment in rewarding scholastic excellence and merit. When the Deans started publicly listing the names of the qualifying students at the end of the semester, students feared that Wesleyan would lose its signature laidback, non-competitive culture. A Wespeak addressing the class deans titled “THE OPEN DEAN’S LIST: IT DOESN’T GET MUCH MORE UN-WESLEYAN THAN THIS!” came out in March of 2011 with seventeen students undersigned in support alongside the author. The letter concludes by stating: “It seems inimical to Wesleyan’s values of collaboration, community, and learning for learning’s sake to force the quantitative discussion of individual students’ grades into the open. Let us appreciate our education on our own, individual terms, not necessarily as a means of approval from some outside party. Most of us have seen enough of that competitive, grade-grubbing attitude back in high school.” The statement, “Most of us have seen enough of that competitive, grade-grubbing attitude back in high school,” demonstrates a belief that being competitively minded around academics and grade-oriented is immature and something that we left behind in high school. Instead, students at Wesleyan are passionate about critically engaging with material “on our individual terms” regardless of what the grade will be.

Interestingly, the student authors of the Wespeak are upset by the public display of the list—not that there is a Dean’s List for academic achievement. Academic achievement is quite “Wesleyan,” but open recognition and open competition for the achievements is “un-Wesleyan.” As one student simply put it, “There are two things Wesleyan students don’t talk about: grades and money.” Even if Wesleyan students do care about grades, many do not talk about them. One student, Shawn, stated: “I sort of talked myself out of feeling the need to compete with people just as long as I’m doing okay. You’ll be curious
about you’re friends grades and wonder how are they doing …we don’t even know what each others’ GPAs really are.” This student demonstrates a curiosity about how other students compare, but he would never directly ask other students about their grades. Asking would position him as “competitive and grade-grubbing” rather than one who is passionately “learning for learning’s sake.”

When the article about the Dean’s List was posted on Wesleying, one student anonymously commented, “I love the conceit that Wesleyan is a laid-back place where people learn for learning's sake instead of for grades. It's almost as if people don't go parading around bragging about how little sleep they get and pounding down Adderall.”

This anonymous comment highlights that “learning for learning’s sake” is part of a performance of ease: competition develops among students about who can be the most behind on work, who can procrastinate the most but still complete the assignment, or who can be the most over-extended. This is a phenomenon that Deresiewicz notices at other schools as well, and he ultimately concludes, “The problem is, the more you do, the less you do well and the less well you do everything” (2014: 66). Many students at Wesleyan describe feeling pressure to double major and take five or six classes a semester. And the anonymous commenter’s use of the word “bragging” indicates that students are supposed remain unstressed and even proud when they do not sleep or take Adderall in order to navigate their hyperactive schedules. The winning students are the ones who can commit to a lot of obligations while remaining emotionally composed and at ease with all the stress. Khan echoes the pressure to strike this perfect balance between academic achievement and ease in his ethnography: “Though everyone claimed an enormous amount of work, they displayed an ease or indifference to it. The work didn’t matter. The difficulty of getting it done was not displayed. Instead, achievements seemed to almost
passively ‘happen’—as if the students themselves hadn’t done it or that doing it was not really very hard for them” (2011: 120). An emotional breakdown or obsessing about grades would break the performance of ease; the student would seem high-strung.

This need to keep up translates into serious stress. In Excellent Sheep (2014) Deresiewicz instructs the reader: “Look beneath the facade of affable confidence and seamless well-adjustment that today’s elite students have learned to project, and what you find are toxic levels of fear, anxiety, and depression, of emptiness and aimlessness and isolation” (8). Initially it might appear that Wesleyan once again is able to differentiate itself from “peer schools.” Jacob, for example, told me “I also don’t say [to prospective Wesleyan students that] no one at Bard looked happy.” I chuckle, and he continues, “I don’t say that, but it’s true. That was one of the reasons why I chose Wesleyan over Bard because I saw people smiling here. Everyone at Bard looked miserable.” Jacob’s reason for choosing Wesleyan—he saw people smiling—is one I have heard students mention numerous times. Much like Jacob, the students describe how at other schools they visited, people did not seem to be capable of even smiling, but at Wesleyan people seemed happy, passionate, and vibrant—the very picture of critical Wesleyan community.

But mental health is something students struggle with here too. Many of the students I interviewed talked about feeling anxious or depressed. In an Argus article one student who was sexually assaulted on campus writes: “I have developed an eating disorder and anxiety. I have withdrawn from the community I love because I am now too afraid to be a part of it” (Anonymous 2014). Another student confides, “I’ve had feelings of worthlessness that shouldn’t happen to anybody. That are not in the college experience. Where I feel like I’m a throw away.” Other students I spoke to described having difficulty relaxing or mentioned that they have a low self-esteem. Cynthia, summed up these
emotional difficulties saying: “Last night you were fucked up and partying and you didn’t give a shit about anything. ...At this college, Wesleyan just tries to distract people from their miseries. And it tries to make you feel even more alone in the sense that if you’re not having a good time then you might as well just give up on it.” Cynthia’s statement points to an investment within student culture in “not giving a shit.” Several students spoke about how it is cool to be moody and angsty, and students can feel stigmatized if they are too openly happy or passionate. But simultaneously there is also pressure to go to parties, smile, and have fun or as Cynthia says, “if you’re not having a good time, then you might as well just give up on it.” Indeed students often debate whether or not to go out on weekends when they just really don’t want to but feel as though they must.

At a place like Wesleyan, there is always something exciting happening on campus and as a result it can be challenging for students to take the time required for deep and critical thinking, for attunement or quietness. The constant emphasis on being happy, but not too happy, on doing well but not working too hard, means that students cannot dwell with hard feelings or difficult situations. In striking this emotional balance we see that students feel pressure to have an emotional ease: to not care about anything too much but to also not be completely apathetic. This emotional ease connects to the pressures to “be Wesleyan,” where students display specific social and intellectual qualities that demonstrate their worth. The emotional pain that results from pressure to perform ease connects to a struggle to be both authentically passionate/internally motivated and a natural achiever.

**THE IMPERIAL UNIVERSITY? CONTAINMENT AND CRITIQUE**

Scaling up, we might contextualize and link these struggles with mental health to the histories of violence that permeate the histories of universities. In her book *Depression: a*
Cvetkovich takes up “the challenges of making links between the world of depressed white girls and national histories of trauma and mourning,” offering a reading of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* that links casual forms of racism to pervasive anxiety and stress (125). Universities have historically served as a means to maintain race and class inequalities. This history is perhaps most explicit in *Ebony and Ivy* (2013) in which Wilder states, “In the decades before the American Revolution, money from slave traders and planters transformed colleges into playgrounds for wealthy boys and drew these institutions further into the service of the colonial elite” (10). The *Imperial University* (2014) reinforces this when the editors state, “The University is an institution that has roots in an Enlightenment project of liberal Western modernity and was founded as a space historically open only to male, propertied subjects.” The editors discuss the role of patriotism in the university that often translates into “manifest knowledges—what is, and what can be, known about histories of genocide, warfare, enslavement, and social death, and what are manifestly insurgent truths” (Chatterjee and Maira 30). Persisting traumas throughout universities connect to the pervasive histories of colonial violence.

These national histories of trauma surface on a smaller level during moments when students pause to wonder about all of the haunting pain that lingers in campus spaces: from the many disciplinary trials in the administrative building North College, from Long Lane, the former correctional school for girls, from the murder that took place in Red and Black Café in 2009, from the many stolen mummies Wesleyan owns and stores in Exley that students have also stolen for pranks, from the years of violent sexual abuse. Cvetkovich asks, “Moreover, what are the consequences for white people of living lives of privilege in the vicinity of the violence of racism?” (2012: 120) There are links between widespread despair and living within the vicinity of historical and ongoing violence.
Still, the space to think that universities offer can provide possibilities for people to live with and reflect on these connections between the violence of the past and the misery of the present. Cvetkovich writes, “The experience of depression or being stuck can be an invitation to that which we don’t know and a way of reminding us why cultural studies matters” (2012: 202). Like critical thinking, cultural studies can offer one the space to dwell and understand depression as part of a learning process rather than something one must get past in order to be happy.

At the same time that critical scholarship can challenge the sort of ease and evasion I have detailed here, it also risks being re-absorbed back into the institution that fosters it. Like the symposium I discussed at the start of this chapter, critiques of the university (like this thesis itself) are sites of both containment and possibility. Julius, a student interviewee told me, “Critical studies [such as ethnic or queer studies] feed off of misery.” He later stated:

[Critical studies is] performing for an audience so you can make your livelihood, but it’s performing based on your pain. And I don’t know how much this is a cause to celebrate. I think critical studies have been really amazing in helping people free themselves from traps that the words they know so far can’t unlock, but if you free yourself in order to run that same track where all you’re doing is just dancing—that’s a weird double edged thing.

At the heart of Julius’ critique is an understanding of the way in which critical studies both frees people “from the traps that the words they know so far can’t unlock” but only insofar as we invest in the very institution we critique. This is what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call “the critical academic,” a professional critic who, in Jack Halberstam’s words, “the critical academic who holds the ‘for and against’ logic in place” (Halberstam 2013: 9) In their “The University and the Undercommons,” Moten and Harney write, “He claims to be critical of the negligence of the university. But is he not the most
accomplished professional in his studied negligence?” (2013: 39). Here the student and these scholars highlight the tensions between critique and reabsorption, between cultural studies as a space to dwell with depression and a space where depression becomes a commodity. Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains this commodification: “Radical theory can in fact become a commodity to be consumed; no longer seen as a product of activist scholarship or connected to emancipatory knowledge, it can circulate as a sign of prestige in an elitist, neoliberal landscape” (2013: 971). Criticality becomes a mark of an elite status and a quality that distinguishes Wesleyan students from other elites.

Ferguson writes about this tension between critical work as offering a space for possibility while also risking being absorbed when he argues that “differences that were often articulated as critiques of the presumed benevolence of political and economic institutions become absorbed within an administrative ethos that recast those differences as testaments to the progress of the university and the resuscitation of common national culture” (2014: 214). Institutions appropriate critiques that critical academics craft with the intent to challenge them, and these critiques become a commodity and a source of authenticity for the very institution that is producing the inequality. This contradiction surfaces in the remark of another student, Thomas: “I know with this whole academia thing that this institution is all about reproducing America’s upper-class or even the global upper-class, but still I have this more benevolent vision of academia … especially when you get into queer studies and cultural studies.” Indeed, the notoriously counter-normative, critical projects offer hope for a more egalitarian world. Thomas’ “benevolent vision of academia” simultaneously risks appropriation into the imperial empire and offers a disciplinary space for resistance alongside Chatterjee and Maira when they write: “The academy’s role in supporting state policies is crucial, even—and especially—as a presumably
Indeed, it is precisely the support of a liberal class that is always critical for the maintenance of ‘benevolent empire’” (2014: 7). Queer and cultural studies facilitate Thomas’ benevolent image of the academy and fuel the academy’s liberal legitimation of the state. It is perhaps investments such as Thomas’ in the academy as benevolent that obscure and expose this hegemony.

Thomas is not alone in his investment in disciplines that promote critical thought—or in imagining these forms of critical thinking are distinguishing elements of Wesleyan college classes. This became apparent during conversations with students who described feeling out of place in the community college classes they took while on academic leave. Multiple students explained that students in the classes were mostly quiet, and the classes did not go much beyond summaries of the assigned readings. I witnessed a similar situation firsthand over the summer when I visited a community college class in Chicago, and the teacher spent the entire class time probing students to ask more questions about an assignment she had handed out the previous week. I was surprised to find that I felt as though I was back in high school: far calmer and more at ease in the room than in Wesleyan classes but also restless and a bit bored. bell hooks quotes her City College students as saying: “You’ve taught us how to think critically, to challenge, and to confront, and you’ve encouraged us to have a voice. But how can we go to other classrooms? No one wants us to have a voice in those classrooms!” (1994: 149). In contrast, most Wesleyan classes allow for and sometimes even encourage students to challenge our teachers and our classmates. As hooks observes, institution variations in classroom practices reflect and reinforce class differences: “In the privileged liberal arts colleges, it is acceptable for professors to respect the ‘voice’ of any student who wants to make a point. Many students in those institutions feel they are entitled—that their voices
deserve to be heard. But students in public institutions, mostly from working-class backgrounds, come to college assuming that professors see them as having nothing of value to say” (1994: 149). The opportunity to express oneself in class, to offer one’s own perspective alongside the professor’s, is a privilege that not every school provides. And, like “learning for learning’s sake,” this is a mark of privilege and the form of elite education Wesleyan promotes itself as providing.

One Assistant Dean of Admissions tells prospective students:

You have the right by being admitted, to have the opportunity to get the classes you want to take. Whatever class you’re in at Wes, everyone in that class will want to be in that classroom. That’s pretty important. You can take … really anything, and no one in that room has to take that class… That really allows our classes, which tend to be seminar style classes, to have a certain type of energy and sort of buzz from that type of intellectual engagement.\[\text{xi}\]

The admissions officer highlights the opportunities for intellectual engagement students receive: the small classes, the “buzz,” the freedom to learn for learning’s sake and fluidly explore ideas. But one student who volunteers with Wesleyan’s Center for Prison Education (CPE) noted a large difference between the incarcerated students taking Wesleyan classes and Wesleyan students. The student pointed out that while the CPE students do not get to pick their classes, all of them really want to be in the classroom and are passionate and invested in the material in a way unlike students on campus. They “hang on every word the professor says” because “they are just happy to have someone there teaching.” Whereas for Wesleyan students on campus this access is, as the admissions officer put it, a “right” upon admission. If an elite education is a right rather than a privilege, then students must believe they really deserve their spot at Wesleyan. This “right” brings students one step close to becoming elites.
What does it mean that the elite students have not only the opportunity, but the expectation of having a voice and thinking critically in class? Summarizing Paul Lauter, Vijay Prashad writes: “What the university teaches in its very structure is the culture of the dominant classes…this culture of the dominant class is a culture of hierarchy. Those who are in the right schools are able to aspire to upward mobility” (2014: 334). In addition to disparities between students at privileged liberal arts schools and community colleges, this culture of hierarchy surfaces on a micro-level in the classroom. I turn to hooks again, who writes, “As the classroom becomes more diverse, teachers are faced with the way the politics of domination are often reproduce in the educational setting. For example, white male students continue to be the most vocal in our classes” (1993: 39). And indeed I can think of many classes where this has been the reality, and where faculty, through modes of embodied expression, “perpetuate those very hierarchies and biases they are critiquing” (hooks 1994: 141).

hooks writes, “From grade school on, we are all encouraged to cross the threshold of the classroom believing we are entering a democratic space—a free zone where the desire to study and learn makes us all equal” (1993: 177). Professor Kerns expressed this sentiment quite clearly, stating: “I don’t WANT to know who’s got money, I really don’t; I don’t want to know who has money, because it would prejudice me against them. I just don’t want to know. And I don’t want to look out at a class and think you’ve got tons of money and you are struggling; I need to teach everyone.” Professor Kerns does not deny that students enter the classroom with different financial backgrounds, but he needs to blur this fact in order to teach. Sheila spoke about the challenge of being in these classrooms, saying “The majority of the kids professors work with are kids who are going to give me shit on the street … and that decision is weird for me because it’s like you
know it’s fucked up, but all were going to do is sit here and still be a part of Wesleyan and work in the system.” But since “professors respect the voice of any student who wants to be heard,” there are also many times when non-white, non-male students can and do take space for themselves, and challenge these other, more elite students. These different perspectives highlight the power and contradictions operating within the classroom.

The classroom is both a site of the reproduction of inequality and of critique—it offers modes of belonging, embodied ease, and critical community that both reestablish hierarchies of domination and offer space for resistance and possibility—for reclaiming.

In Paulo Freire’s pivotal book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), he critiques traditional forms of learning as falling into the “banking model” of education where the professor is the one with wisdom. In this model, the professor fills the passive student with knowledge. Instead, Freire advocates for a mode of learning (indeed, of “critical thinking”) where both the professor and the student learn from and teach each other. For Freire this type of learning is part of radical liberation. But what does it mean that I assigned this text in my student forum? That a handful of Wesleyan students take up this text as part of their senior capstone projects (as was apparent when I needed the book for this thesis and the student sitting next to me had a copy with him for his own) –even while many of the students will ultimately become (or rather, we already are) part of the dominant elites Freire writes about? Ferguson describes the way in which institutions “get hold of and neutralize difference” (2012: 213). The transgressive power within *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a text that has had a foundational impact on critical pedagogy, can become a tool for institutionalizing and maintaining inequality.

Part of this dilemma is due to a historical shift. Academics and activists began, in the 1970s, to demand the institutionalization of ethnic studies, feminist studies, and, later,
queer and disability studies—in the form of courses, faculty, programs, and departments. As Ferguson writes, “difference became a commodity of capital and of the university as the moment in which a new type of academic subject came into being, one that spoke in terms of institutionalization of difference… it hinged on the promise of permanence” (2012: 223). The promise of permanence offered hope for lasting change allowing “modes of inquiry and histories of difference” that were previously ephemeral and illegitimate to become legitimate forms of academic inquiry (Ferguson 2012: 232). At the same time, institutionalization, as others, like Robyn Wiegman (2012), Chandra Mohanty (2013), and Margot Weiss (in press) have pointed out, also leads to absorption, containment. Ferguson argues that we must shift our investments away from institutionality, “To undermine the reproduction of hegemony in those little acts of production—reading, writing, teaching and advising—we might discover the revolutionary potential in such whatnots as an old woman’s lemon tea and olive oil or a scholar’s syllabus and research question” (2012: 232).

An old women’s lemon tea or a scholar’s syllabus—these are forms of slow critical thinking, of dwelling in these histories of trauma, imperialism, of the reproductions and production of dominations, that don’t move too quickly to quantifiable, corporate-ready modes of thought. It is this kind of thought—unwieldy, impossible—that we might seek as subversive students and intellectuals seeking to be “in but not off” the academy today.
Chapter 3

Alma Mater: negotiating student-faculty relationships in the neoliberal university

During one interview a student describes their relationship with a professor: “He comes to my house for house dinners and different things and people would say things like… ‘Oh, wow you’re close.’” Another student tells me about the acronym PILF: “Professor I’d Like to Fuck,” and a third interviewee says, “Why did I choose to go to Wesleyan if it weren’t for the large number of professors in relationship to the number of students?” and continues, “I like talking to [professors] because they’re all so smart, and they’re cool, and they’re all just nerds who are paid a lot of money to talk to us—Or not a lot of money sometimes.” In these excerpts a student builds a notably close relationship with a professor, another student discusses student attraction to faculty, and a third admires them. Students build these conceptualizations of faculty within a context in which they chose Wesleyan and thus expect the school to deliver on the promise in the Mission Statement that students will “work-closely with distinguished scholar-teachers.”

In this chapter I use student perspectives to take up some of the most prevalent narratives about student-faculty relationships and student hopes and expectations of professors. I unpack rhetorical parallels that compare professors to parents or mentors or lovers, and I take up psychoanalysis as a method to explore the classroom as a site of transference and parallels between the student/professor and analysand/analyst.
relationship. Finally the chapter considers the emotional demands placed on professors, and how professors choose to navigate the server/customer dynamic that pervades the corporate university.

THE WESLEYAN FAMILY

For many students, Wesleyan is the first time living without parents, away from home. On arrival day hundreds of seemingly concerned, mostly white parents pile into Crowell Concert Hall to hear a panel of staff from the Health Center, Residential Life, Public Safety, and Religious Life. The panel is intended to address the transitional issues first year students might face, but they mostly just answer nervous questions about broken dorm screen windows, flu shots, and dorm temperatures. Rick Culliton, the Dean of Students, introduces the panel and emphasizes that as hard as it may be: “don’t be the first one to text your son or daughter.” But just hours later in the Memorial Chapel the Dean of Admissions welcomes parents and tells them, “We do think of you as the extended Wesleyan family.” Parents seem to occupy a contradictory position of both members of the “Wesleyan family” and figures who need to remove themselves from daily contact with their student, as students shift from their nuclear family to the Wesleyan family.

On the section of the Wesleyan website that is designed for parents, the school recognizes that distance can grow between parents and their children. They list a variety of discussion questions both generic and specific to each class year that parents can ask their child, such as, “Do you get along with your hall mates or housemates? Where are they from? What are they studying?” As a prelude to the questions the website states: “We hope that they assist you in discussing the college experience with your son or daughter in a way that allows for his or her independence and your continued support.” In order for
students to join the Wesleyan community I described in the first chapter, and embark on the critical ways of thinking I discussed in chapter two, they must make this break from their parents.

This Facebook status rings so true that I “liked” it. Underneath it a student commented: “I had to explain why ‘person of color’ is the acceptable term during dinner :l” Another classmate adds a quote: “‘You’ve been yelling angrily about the patriarchy a lot tonight’ –my younger male cousin.” And the thirteen comments and many likes certainly show that the writer is not alone in her alienation from her family. After some time living at Wesleyan, many students return home to find that the courses they have taken and their newly critical ways of thinking change the way they relate to their home life. hooks writes: “I teach about shifting paradigms and talk about the discomfort it can cause. White students learning to think more critically about questions of race and racism may go home for the holidays and suddenly see their parents in a different light. They may recognize nonprogressive thinking, racism, and so on, and it may hurt them that new ways of knowing may create estrangement where there was none” (1994: 43). One student who had gone home for Thanksgiving described an exasperated mother turning to their older sibling and asking, “Do you remember other kids doing this when you were in college?”
The mother was searching to find out why her child seemed to come home politically transformed.

Students’ new perspectives bring them into closer connection with faculty, who help connect them to the Wesleyan family. Professors and students sometimes even use familial language to speak about their relationships within the university. At the Senior Voices baccalaureate address, a speech written by a selected professor for seniors just days before their graduation, Professor Mahurin told the class: “Critical distance has its place. Critical distance is a huge part of my job. But another part of my job has to do with kinship networks, and the ways in which people talk to and about and around each other. Part of my job today is to remind you that distance – like independence – is easier than it sounds” (Rubenstein 2014). Her speech emphasized the importance of depending on people and building connections. And a student similarly emphasized kinship networks when talking about professors saying: “I think for a lot of them, they are genuinely worried about us, and it would be a failure on their part not to check in. It’s alternative family; that’s what it is.”

In her auto-ethnographic essay “Like Family to Me” (2001), George expresses a similar sentiment when she writes about her time as a Wesleyan student: “Certainly what made Wesleyan a stand-in for family was not only its promise of institutional security, but the fact that it, like Williams [prep school], was peopled with kindred individuals like these special professors” (227). The familial relationships that one can build within the university is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by Professor Kovach who described celebrating Christmas Eve with a group of his students for ten years after they graduated. Professor
Kovach explained, “It was family that kind of undid it” as the students married and had kids—nuclear families of their own.

These kin-like connections surface throughout university speeches. On graduation day President Roth addresses the class of 2014 and in his final words he proclaims:

My dear friends and colleagues, four years ago we met while unloading cars here on Andrus field. Later that day, many of your family members sat teary-eyed in the chapel as we spoke about how they would be leaving you “on your own” at Wesleyan. It seems like a very short time ago. Now it’s you who are leaving, but do remember that no matter how “on your own” you feel yourselves to be, you will always be members of the Wesleyan community. Wherever your exciting pursuits take you, please, please, come home to alma mater, share your news, your memories and your dreams. Thank you and good luck! (Rubenstein 2014)

He concludes, positioning Wesleyan as their home, their nourishing mother, or in Latin, *alma mater*. Family rhetoric appears throughout the speech when Roth mentions “generations” of Wesleyan alums and “the Wesleyan family.” This language appears in speeches welcoming new students, in Wesconnect newsletters, and throughout university literature. This institutional rhetoric of Wesleyan as a family operates much like the institutional use of Wesleyan as a community that I discussed in chapter one. The difference here is that whereas, student demands for an inclusive community fall on the administration, the “family” discourse burdens faculty and lower-level staff with these affective demands. Student Residential Advisors, Deans, and professors are responsible for student well being at home, in the classroom, and throughout student life. “The Wesleyan Family” thus operates as a more interpersonal component of “the community”: and faculty—in large part because of their success in offering transformative thinking in the classroom—become crucial links in this affective chain.

**PROFESSORS AS PARENTS; PROFESSORS AS MENTORS**
Student’s newfound independence leaves room for a new parental figure: professors, the very people whose ideas fuel some of this growing distance. I think about one student who chose his major because the professors in the department reminded him of his mom. Or Nicole who said that a lot of her professors “want me to become a professor—a lot of them have said that. When they say, ‘You could become a professor,’ they’re doing good work, but there is a certain kind of pressure” that they put on her—a pressure “that people associate with their parents. Like parents want to live vicariously through their kids.” Nicole seamlessly switches between speaking about her professors as instructors and as parents, which exemplifies the familial component of their relationship. The professors’ statements, “You could become a professor” are perhaps intended to be encouraging but she hears the encouragement as she would career pressure from her parents.

This parental fantasy also surfaces in campus discourse about the much-loved Professor Sarah Mahurin. During the student movement to keep Professor Mahurin at Wesleyan, one student wrote a Wespeak stating:

To me the most amazing testament to Sarah Mahurin's impact on campus is this: when her name comes up in conversation among students, recognition, smiles, and appreciation show on the faces of everyone around regardless of whether they've taken a class with her or even spoken with her one on one. If they've never had her in class, students know her as the professor who went to their rugby game during homecoming (or football, or softball, or crew, etc.), the professor who was on the allyship panel in the DFC (or the one who participated in many other such events), the professor at the student recital on the weekend, or just as the professor their roommates rave about so frequently she’s a household name in the woodframes. (Kelley 2014)

This description of seniors in woodframes raving about Professor Mahurin reminds me of little kids lighting up when talking about their mom. Like Mom, Professor Mahurin goes to football games, performances, and teaches students to eat their peas, or rather, do their
reading. And as Diana Hume George states, “A good mother is always there when you need her, and she gives you unlimited time” (1994: 234). George also points out that these demands for a mother fall largely on women faculty as “the work of mothering” extends “from the domestic to the professional sphere” (1994: 227). The intersection of the raced and gendered aspects of the professor as a mother surfaces in Sherreé Wilson’s essay “They Forgot Mammy Had a Brain” when Andra says, “It was almost like the mammy syndrome. They wanted me to be their mammy. ‘Oh, Mammy, I feel bad; take care of me, mammy.’ But they forgot Mammy had a brain and the same kind of PhD as others” (2012: 72). Many students expect a caretaker from women professors, especially women of color professors. We see that imagining the professor as a parent, or mammy figure, positions teaching as a type of feminized care work where the teacher is doing emotional labor not simply intellectual labor. But unlike a parent, professors are at Wesleyan to research and teach; it’s their workplace, not their home. This tension between student expectations and faculty work produces frustration and confusion.

There seems to be some administrative attempts to address this professor-as-parent imagining through the class deans who serve to mediate professor student relationships when necessary. Dean Missal explained her purpose: “It’s different being a dean—you might know things that you never would know as an instructor though that’s not always the case. The dean position is made for that. If your father dies you’re going to go to the dean. The position is built there to be a buffer for everybody.” Institutionally, the class dean is almost a stand-in for the more parental, non-academic needs that students might have. One could read this as the bureaucratizing of faculty-student relationships or as helping to ensure that relationships do not become too onerous for either the professor or the student. However the institutionalization of class deans is also a part of a huge (and
growth in the number of administrators throughout universities—especially private universities and part of the simultaneous decline of full-time faculty positions. Marcus states, “the doubling of administrative and professional staffs doesn’t seem to have improved universities’ performance” (2014). Indeed because many students make it through their whole time at Wesleyan rarely or never stepping foot in their class dean’s office, the dean position does not prevent family-like identifications between faculty and students.

These kinship narratives, both imagined and lived, are part of another narrative of professors taking students “under their wing.” Diana Hume George writes about mothering in the academy stating, “Female students are seeking an alternative to the lives they see their mothers live…In me they see what they imagine to be, and what is, in relative terms, a woman of power” (1994: 235). We see here that for some students, professors become almost a replacement for the parent through offering students an alternative vision for themselves. This vision allows students to distance themselves from “becoming their parents”; it offers a vision of not being a stay at home mom or of being upwardly mobile. This is something Emily, a low-income Wesleyan student who has since become a professor validates. The two of us sit in a café in New York; she sips her tea, and I scarf a slice of vegan chocolate cake. She describes her relationship with her advisor:

I had one advisor who really sort of took me under her wing and really explained stuff to me and encouraged me to go to grad school, which I ended up doing. And it was really awesome for me. Actually I think my first semester here I tried to drop out because I hated the other students so much. I was just very alienated and really shocked by folks. And I went to her office, she was assigned my advisor, and I said, “Here’s the paper for you to sign. I quit.” And she was like, “Whoa!” And we would meet for coffee once a month just to chat, and that was really helpful for me to just think about how to get through stuff, and how to think about myself as not just a person going to college, but also a person embarking on this career in academia. (Emphasis added)
Just weeks later I heard the same story from Professor Sheldon. And yet another professor, Professor Spearman, described specifically “targeting” students of color as a way to support them and draw them to the department: “So if you were my target you would have a hard time getting away: I invite you to lunch. …I hire you to do this. I encourage you. So you can be here or you can be in Government where they aren’t even going to talk to you. So why not be here?”

The narrative of the charismatic professor caring for troubled low-income student(s) of color is a recurring one in movies and feel-good news clips about teaching and higher education. It’s a narrative that plays on understandings of the ideal teacher who in the starkest of terms acts as a savior for their impoverished students’ lives. Within this baby-bird/savior narrative, the savior must prioritize the students first. Khan describes the badge at St. Paul’s (where he taught) as an image of a “pelican picking the meat from its own breast to feed its young” (2011: 31). Perhaps this is the expectation underlying the phrase “taking under one’s wing”: sacrifice at the expense of one’s self. Khan and Lauren Berlant also both highlight the value placed on “being there for the students” (Berlant 1997: 147 emphasis in original; and Khan 2011: 66). When talking about and relating to professors, students can easily fall into this formulaic narrative. Collin reflected: “I definitely could’ve sought out a closer relationship, but there’s no guarantees that a professor would’ve liked me enough to take me under their wing …I don’t even know if they do that for anyone” (emphasis added). The idea of a professor taking a student “under their wing” becomes a defining feature of many narratives about teachers who transform their students’ lives—and teach them to fly.

The office of admissions certainly plays on these expectations. During an information session for prospective students, the Assistant Dean of Admissions speaks
about a student who took an economics class with Gary Yohe. The Dean first explained that Professor Yohe is on a United Nations Panel, an author, and won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. He then continued by saying:

[The student] took just one class with him; …came up to him after class and said, “Hey I’m not an econ major, but can I do research with you?” He said “Sure! You’re a Wesleyan student. You probably have some knowledge of research already; let’s go for it.” …That’s very much an extreme but good example of Wesleyan students willingness to sort of go above and beyond to push themselves …and just how cool and accessible our faculty are.

The admissions office is notorious for stretching the truth, but still this depiction of a Nobel Peace Prize wielding professor willing to work with students just because they are at Wesleyan primes students to have unrealistic expectations about close student-faculty interactions and faulty encouragement.

These “extreme but good” narratives of “how cool and accessible our faculty are” set students up for disappointment. Indeed Michael complained to me “I don’t feel supported” and several others have developed elaborate theories about why professors are unwilling to build organic connections with students. It became clear that this is part of a larger sentiment among the student body when I attended a Wesleyan Student Assembly (WSA) meeting where two faculty representatives answered student questions and listened to student concerns. The students expressed a desire for more faculty participation on campus saying, “I understand they’re busy, but students look up to faculty, and it’d be nice to know where they stand on certain issues.” One student at the meeting asked if tenure could be tied to the quality with which professors advise students. It took considerable effort to keep my jaw from dropping as I imagined wealthy student evaluations holding even greater sway over professors’ job stability. Faith recognized this internal tension in her expectations when she self-critically reflected on a similar demand: “you’re such a
spoiled kid if you really think that you’re going to go to college and have these relationships with professors. How much time do you actually expect them to commit to you? You’re just one of many students that they’re kind of paid to work with.”

These expectations highlight how little students know about the work of being a professor. Wesleyan faculty are “teacher-scholars” and that means to get tenure they must teach, produce scholarship (research), and demonstrate service. Research is the most important of the three—something Admissions highlights: “[Their work is] cited at rates that are higher than any other liberal arts college in the country” and “[they] collectively receive double the amount of federal research funding than our next competitor liberal arts college.” Faculty are striving to meet the research demands to publish while simultaneously striving to offer students the close interaction that Wesleyan so heavily markets. These pressures for research and student contact make Wesleyan an exciting, but very demanding workplace. The job entails teaching, preparing for class, grading, holding office hours, applying for funding, giving talks, attending conferences, responding to hundreds of emails, advising student initiatives, attending committee meetings, attending departmental meetings, completing administrative tasks, attending lectures, and publishing peer reviewed articles and books. In one study at Boise State University, faculty reported working on average 61 hours per week with very little of that going towards research (Flaherty 2014). This massive workload in which faculty must increasingly do more with less resources is a symptom of the structural changes in the university such as the increasing bureaucratization and emphasis on intellectual work that is at the cutting edge of research. It’s no wonder that faculty don’t have time to be more involved in student activities on campus—many are just trying stay on top of the workload as it is.
But indeed these narratives of kinship and of professors taking students under their wings hold considerable sway even as students recognize the impossibility of this demand. Travis said, “Part of my brain would like to think I’m more important. Where I’m like ‘I talk more than other kids, and I say valuable things, and my professors like me.’ [But] my professors like a lot of people, and they’ve been teaching here for many years.” Another student, Gina, further pointed out the huge imbalance in this expectation to be taken under the teacher’s “wing” recognizing the numerical difference in this setup:

I think that professors see so many more students than students see professors. So I think that they’ll remember me for a time… I had the realization that this professor who I spent the six hour conversation with. I thought we had a special relationship. And it occurred to me that she also has special relationships with several other students… I realized she’s more special to me in that role than I am to her.

Indeed this hope to be taken under their wing is shared by fifty other students with a similar hope. And as Tanner also explained, “There’s something inappropriate about [a professor] complementing or focusing on one student in a class because that’s not like what they’re supposed to be doing. They’re supposed to be treating all of their students with an equal amount of respect and attention.” In these narratives, we see that professors and students have fundamentally different stakes in their relationships with one another. Faculty must do an outstanding job teaching every student in the class while students focus on learning from and connecting to their professors as emotional and intellectual resources.

The professor as a parent discourse also surfaced when Professor Andrews said, “Do you know Winnicott? I’m trying to be like Winnicott’s good enough mother [for my students].” The good enough mother is a psychoanalytic understanding of infant development and separation from the mother: as the infant begins to separate from the mother, the infant uses the mother as an emotional dumping ground for the anxiety, anger,
rage, love, and fear that accompany this separation, thus “Situating the mother as the passive repository for the child’s unwanted raging affects” (Brennan 2004: 15, 13). It is up to the mother to withstand all of this and to provide what Winnicott termed a “holding space” for the infant to develop. As the infant gradually separates, the mother becomes less attuned to the needs of the child who must learn to convey their needs. Winnicott writes: “if she knows too well what the infant needs, this is magic and forms no basis for an object relationship” (1960: 593). So the mother must respond to the infant’s needs but not too well—she must be just good enough. Like the infant who gradually separates from the mother, college students begin transitioning to adulthood. In this transition, professors often stand in for parents offering that holding space for students’ emotions.

IDENTIFICATION AND DESIRE

As the discussion of the “holding space” suggests, the relationship between students and faculty is subject to more than the structural pressures of students wanting more individual attention and faculty feeling pulled in too many directions. It is also the site of transferential dynamics of both identification and desire.

Every semester there are certain professors who are hot, the ones who students asked to speak at the Wes Thinks BIG TED Talks in 2012 and 2013 or to lead a discussion outside of class, to sit on a panel, or attend a performance. At the end of the semester, when students plan out their schedules for the next year, the cool professors have a waitlist sixty students long for their upcoming courses. The fact that there are student followings for specific professors surfaced during my first interview when Shannon described being “mildly, creepily obsessed” with Professor Elmer on a “purely academic basis.” When I asked her about her mild obsession, she said:
I mean that’s probably stating it a little strongly, but she’s probably the professor I’m like: Oh my god; I want her approval. And I’m not sure where that’s coming from—or like the moments when we’re like leaving sociology and people are like: Oh my god Rosie Elmer! And I’m like: Yes, Rosie Elmer. Like when people walk out and have conversations after class. And just in terms of professors most of my friends aren’t in either of my majors so they wouldn’t recognize most of my professors’ names, but all of them would recognize Rosie Elmer’s name because I always want to take classes with her …I guess academic hero worship would be a good way to put that.

This mild obsession or academic hero worship is shared among students, as a type of open fandom. Another student, Joan, described similar conversation about certain professors among their friends:

I tell other queers about times I’ve gone to queer professors’ office hours. Especially if they’ve had the same professor, they too have this giddiness about it. So that’s when I talk about it with people; with everyone else it’s a, “Why would I care about that kind of thing?”

Joan describes a shared investment in queer professors among other queer students. These students’ shared giddiness demonstrates identification with and desire for these professors—something Diana Fuss offers insights on when she writes, “Identifications are erotic, intellectual, and emotional” (1995: 2). In the essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” (2009) Judith Butler builds on this when she writes about the compression of desire and identification as it relates to the repetition and uncertainty of (sexual) identities: “It is precisely the pleasure produced by the instability of those categories which sustains the various erotic practices” (14). Joan already identifies as queer, but talking to queer professors and other queer students allows this student the chance to be queer—what another student termed an “Academicized queerness.” Joan explains this when she says, “in some ways [professors] are kind of initiating you into it, which is kind of sexy to me.” The shared queerness between the professor and student is an erotic
identification that operates through queer readings, classes, and gossiping with other students.

Some professors seem to cultivate their own posse of students. For example, Professor Fuller-Trevino maintains a “Cc List” – a list of students who he will “Cc” emails to about upcoming panels, articles, talks, etc. Not surprisingly, many of the students on the list know each other and often discuss whether or not they made it onto the professor’s latest email. “I don’t know if it’s a problem that a lot of these questions are about Professor Fuller-Trevino.” I bashfully ask Laura, who responds encouragingly:

“I love talking about him; I do.”

I laugh and ask her,
“You know how he has a little cohort of students? Where he’ll invite students to things.”

“The Cc List. Uuhh.”

“Do you ever feel like you want to stand out from that or are you confident that you do?”

“You know that’s definitely something that I feel. I want to prove myself as different, and there’s some kind of anxiety knowing that he has a close relationship with other people.”

Khan perhaps also described this dynamic of students openly and excitedly speaking about specific professors: “Students often had a near pathological fascination with faculty lives. On countless occasions I heard students talking about faculty and their families, speculating about the ins and outs of their lives. Students were also eager to pump me for information about other teachers and were unafraid to ask me about my own life. For unmarried faculty, our romantic lives were the source of endless speculation” (2011: 59). Much like Khan describes, many of the students that I spoke with had fantasies and plans to seduce their professors, some had planned ornate dinners where they envisioned all of their favorite faculty would be in attendance with few or no other students, some
described dreaming about their professors, and other students mentioned Googling images of their professors. For some students who are particularly drawn to a professor, there is an obsessive component to their relationship and perhaps a desire to really know the professor. As Khan notes, this might be especially true for unmarried faculty, faculty of color, and queer faculty who are more accessible because they do not have “families of their own.”

In part, this “near pathological fascination” can be read in terms of transference. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the transferential relationship between the analyst and patient allows the patient to work through relationships and traumas of the past by acting out these traumas and relationships in a therapeutic setting. The most common example relates to the patient working through traumatic experiences with their parents by transferring these fantasies onto the analyst. Freud explains that “we render the compulsion-harmless, and indeed useful, by giving it the right to assert itself in a definite field. We admit it into the transference as a playground in which it is allowed to expand in almost complete freedom” (1914: 154). Here we see that the space of transference in therapy, much like Winnicott’s holding space, allows for the patient to act out. However in transference, unlike the good enough mother, there is often desire for the analyst.

L. Friedman further explains the use of transference: “The analyst actually seduces the patient’s wishes and, by being a seducer with only the fundamental rule as a desire, requires the patient to frustrate himself to please the analyst” (1991: 592). Or, in Freud’s language, "the transference, which, whether affectionate or hostile, seemed in every case to constitute the greatest threat to the treatment, becomes its best tool” (1915: 496). Much like in therapy, transference fuels education and motivates students to learn. In the introduction to “Transference-Love,” Glen Gabbard differentiates between erotic and
erotized transference—transference is erotic when the patient recognizes that their attraction is not reasonable, whereas it is erotized when the patient is completely serious in their goal to seduce the analyst (1993: 171-2). This distinction similarly surfaces in student transference. Some students sincerely propose a date or drinks to their professors, while for others, such fantasies are more of a playful running joke that everyone knows will probably never happen.

Here, transference offers an analytical framework for understanding why some students feel such frustration in their relationships with faculty. For not only are faculty idealized as parents and mentors, they are also fantasy potential lovers (at least for some students). I take up these psychoanalytic concepts (the good enough mother and transference) because they are useful in understanding students’ affective experiences of their relationships and in explaining professors’ responses. I recognize that the classroom is not therapy: students are not in the classroom to work through neuroses and traumas; they are in class to learn. Nevertheless these concepts, especially as they have been applied to the pedagogical relations, have helped me to parse student experiences.

In the psychoanalytic relationship, transference is a central dynamic for the work. Deborah Britzman notes that both pedagogy and therapy are “psychic events” that take up “questions of suffering,” and indeed learning happens in both spaces. But Avgi Saketopoulou also points out that the professor is an expert in their area of study and unlike the analyst, does not have the clinical training to address all that could come with these dynamics (2014). So even while the learning hinges on this dynamic, the emotional impasses become tricky to navigate.

It took me sometime before I realized that many of the experiences students shared with me were about transference. In these descriptions we see
some of the productive elements of transference. For example, Fletcher talks about how course material and the teacher were crucial to his own identity:

Exposing me to these ideas and also exposing me to their own embodiment. Like the ideology of just seeing them be queer, as queer professors you’re seeing them be queer. And I just think about this class that I took freshman year with this professor… it really opened me up to being gay. Like before that I was really shy about it, and I didn’t really have any imaginary or queer resources to draw on in order to build my own personhood. But that class was such a rich field for personal growth and queering my own self. So these are deep things, but they’re also constricted things.

Fletcher’s identification with the professor is a productive force that helps the student build his own identity. In this situation, transference had a transformative impact on him.

We also see that this transference combines a powerful blend of both identifying with and desire for. Diana Fuss shows the ways in which desire and identification can be “coterminous,” as José Muñoz put it (1999: 13). This blending of desire and identification queers traditionally heterosexual psychoanalytic scripts where one’s desire and identity are necessarily in opposition. In Identification Papers (1995) Diana Fuss writes, “psychoanalysis’s basic distinction between wanting to be the other and wanting to have the other is a precarious one at best” (11). Fuss highlights that Freud often saw homosexual desire as inherently contradictory, and then points out the flaws with this thinking when she writes, “What is identification if not a way to assume desires of the other? And what is desire if not a means of becoming the other whom one wishes to have?” (1995: 12).

Professor Salazar seemed to point to a transferential teaching dynamic when she stated, “Because I’m very passionate about this shit, yeah of course I think people latch onto that, which is good. This is to me part of what’s pleasurable about it to encourage exactly that sort of affect.” Students latch on, or identify with/desire this professor as a result of their passion for the intellectual material. For the professor, student investments
in the material make teaching pleasurable. A student, Farah, similarly described professors as teaching students “these jazzy movements of their naked body that they can’t help but share with the world.” The professor’s passion for the course material motivates connection and learning. In addition to teaching students content, faculty teach students how to be excited about learning.

In therapy, transference requires a safe space or “playground”: similarly, pedagogical transference is often most productive when the teacher maintains a certain level of distance so that the student can use the space however they need. Joelle spoke about how the space within this dynamic allows for a special kind of stability:

“A professor’s like a pillar, or not something as phallic. But they’re like a thing, like a solid thing. They’re like a solid thing that you can’t move. And sometimes a friend is like a post that just floats away in the wind.”

“You think you can’t move them because it’s their job?”

“Because it’s their job. Because it’s their job to talk about heavy stuff.”

The distance that the professor maintains in a transferential relationship allows for a certain level a stability that is not always present in other spaces especially those with friends. Because professors have a professional obligation to students, the relationship takes on a layer of steadiness that other relationships do not. The deep connections that these students form are strong precisely because they are constricted by the workplace.

Zack saw faculty in similarly productive terms: “And so professors are amazing because they’re always there. They’re always in that space where they’re like, ‘No, there’s sadness in the world, and we need to talk about it. And you can be vulnerable here.’ And sometimes professors are not so good at being vulnerable, but they provide a space for you to have a breakdown.” This demonstrates the emotionally productive outlet professors
offer this student, but it also highlights the intensity and importance of these relationships. The student depends on their relationship with professors when they are struggling socially or emotionally, and there is a weight within these relationships that is most evident when the student describes professors as providing “space to have a breakdown.” This description certainly echoes a therapy scene. Both operate as a space for the client to work through their pain. However unlike in the therapeutic relationship “providing space for students to have a breakdown” is not technically the professor’s job. They do not have the clinical training; indeed, one can be a professor without ever taking a course on pedagogy—much less a course on how to navigate transference. However, the therapeutic framework also orients us toward the more familial, affective, and erotic qualities of university life as part of the workplace landscape.

Still, the twinning of these demands on faculty to be mothers, parents, mentors and role models as well as to navigate difficulty terrains of intimacy and distance produces frustration. Students spoke about this frustration in ways where it was clear that transference is also a site of suffering. In fact, several students felt too invested in a professor and described attempting to care less and striving to remain unaffected. One student, Isaac, spoke about pain that came from an experience where there was an explicit, mutual romantic interest between himself and his professor, saying:

That was one classroom environment where the possibility of and even the definite presence of a deeper, more personal even sexual, romantic relationship did come through ...No, something was definitely there in the way that we interacted. …that made me be like and my mind be like “Whoa! What if- what if- what if-“ and that’s a kind of a site of suffering. It’s like there’s all these hints and all these gestures, and there’s something, but that something is also very much limited and didn’t, or hasn’t yet, gone to whatever fulfillment it could go to. But in some ways the fulfillment is just playing around with the fantasy. It doesn’t necessarily have to go anywhere else, but it kind of does, but it’s also enough as it is.
He later states, “This failed aspect of our relationship leaves me suffering and lacking.”

This painful blurriness where Isaac recognizes the potential, but there is never fulfillment drives a tenuous, unresolved relationship. While this may seem like a unique example, another student, Lila, expressed a hope for connection beyond the relationship she already has with Professor Dalton: “Professor Dalton is—she has the safety of the desk. And this is going to sound weird, but I take her hugs as signs. And they probably weren’t even signs, but I’m not used to getting physical affection from a professor. She’s complimented my outfits, which is another thing. And I’ve complimented hers. And when you see a person turn red, it’s a strange thing, a strange feeling.” The liminality and unresolved tensions lead both students to think: “What if- what if- what if.” Both students’ deep investments in their relationships with the professors, while academically productive, also are a source of intense, futile hope.

In “The Intimacies of Instruction” (1997) John Glavin writes, “the harm is inevitable whenever teaching really takes. …The more powerfully the student introjects the teacher’s story, the heavier the price the deluded student must later pay for the enchantment” (17). That is, the more strongly the student admires the professor, the more likely they are to misunderstand the relationship. The essay highlights that intense, passionate transferential dynamics appear in the classroom frequently; vacations and the start of a new semester offer breaks that limit the emotional damage inherent in these relationships. We often do not name the pain and seduction that come with the best and most transformative of teaching.

I later asked Lila if there was anything more that she wanted from professors, and she expressed a related feeling:

They do a lot for me. I wish they would check in more. I wish that they were on this side of the equation. I wish they were a student, but they still
possessed that same kind of potential for a relationship, and that they were a wise person. Because it’s almost sad in a way that you have to go out of your way to find this kind of support, you know? I have to perform well in class in order to get their favor, in order for them to like me and think that I’m someone who is interesting to talk to. So if I was a shitty student, Professor Hensley would never have wanted to talk to me about my paper. So there is a sense that I have to perform at a certain level for them to find me interesting enough for them to care about me.

Both Lila and Isaac describe a suffering or sadness that accompanies these erotic, transferential, electrifying relationships. For both students, their writing mediates their connections with professors—something that is incredibly productive for learning but also is saddening for Lila. And while they already have connections with their professors, both students express a wish for something more. This wish is succinctly articulated when Georgia shared, “I would just wish that they don’t talk about this shit 24/7 and that we could talk about the things that they talk about with their friends.” These frustrations come out of a hope to transcend the transferential boundary within the relationship: to be the professors’ friend, or lover, or colleague, something outside of student.

Previously I pointed out that in “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through” Freud sees “transference as a playground” that allows the patient’s compulsions, “to expand in almost complete freedom.” However, he qualifies this when he later states that the patient must show, “compliance enough to respect the necessary conditions of the analysis” (1914: 154). Transference is only useful if the patient/student respects the boundaries. These boundaries are essential for a productive environment. We see that the student desire to transcend transference can become a serious problem if the student (or the professor) chooses to act on this hope.

One might understand my decision to interview professors as a creative attempt to transcend these transferential barriers. With no prior understanding of transference, I, like many students, did not understand how these boundaries worked. Even as my questions
attempted to confront and pin down certain aspects about professors’ perspectives and experiences, in many ways I remained unable to do so precisely because I could not step out of my position as a student. The transcripts of my interviews perhaps demonstrate exactly what I was trying to describe without ever explicitly naming it. Professor Broussard nicely summed this up when he described himself as having an “elusive nature.” In the interviews, professors were still teaching me, and thus maintaining their elusive performance while I remained focused on intellectually keeping up with and pleasing the professors. Rather than transcend these dynamics and share their experiences of countertransference or connection and frustration, it is the job of the professor to let these transference affects play out and then let the student examine and learn from these dynamics. vi Ann Pelligrini writes, “In this place [of the classroom] I do command tremendous personal authority over the student, an authority no less personal for it’s being, ultimately not about me. The trick, then, is to take the student’s transference seriously without taking it personally” (1999: 624). Freud helps us understand the narcissism and ego boost that can accompany student affection for the professor—a desire for attention on the student’s part paired with a desire for admiration on the professor’s part. vii By not taking transference personally, professors maintain a learning dynamic and allow students space to engage intellectually.

One student rather seriously told me, “They want to hang out with us so bad; they can’t even handle it.” I quickly responded that I thought she was projecting—she wants to hang out with the professors so bad that she can’t even handle it, but do they? In her essay “Feminism and the Institutions of Intimacy” (1997), Lauren Berlant highlights a disparity within the fantasy discourse of student-professor intimacy: “there is no voice of the teacher here, no different life history, no struggle or anxiety, no question of boundaries or
recognition of difference, no unshared aspiration, no aversion at the heart of what might also truly be a scene of pedagogical and political intimacy” (147). We see that in these fantasies, the professor’s experience of the situation, alongside their pedagogical goals, is largely omitted and often remains unacknowledged by students.

Professor Hawthorn expressed frustration that students willfully identify with him because “the student is being dishonest in their presentation” he then explained, “it becomes a game of mirrors.” Mirroring is when one subconsciously imitates the gestures or speech of another person, so a “game of mirrors” is a loop in which Professor Hawthorn only gets his reflection back. He wants these connections to be more dynamic and organic. Perhaps this willful identification is connected to the expectation that the professor/analyst is perfect. Avgi Saketopoulou and Diana Hume George describe confronting these expectations with students/patients and Lauren Berlant does too when she writes, “the academic queer/feminist project holds a promise of a teacher who is infinitely patient, available, and confident of her knowledge, an intellectual and sexual role model who uses her long office hours therapeutically to help students develop subjectivity and self-esteem” (1997: 147). If within transference the student identifies with the professor, the student may easily perceive the teacher to be perfect. These authors highlight the burden that the expectation of perfection places throughout the interaction: professor must be patient, knowledgeable, caring, and available and they cannot have needs or flaws that impact their relationships.

Lauren Berlant also writes about how her faith and investments in gender studies classrooms shapes her engagement with these fantasied dynamics: “It motivates taking on kinds of therapeutic and mentoring functions that are way beyond our expertise; it motivates us to overidentify with students’ happiness or unhappiness as the source of our
value; it motivates the ways we shield students from experiencing the various kinds of ambivalence we have toward being called to personhood in this way” (1997: 153-4). The pressure for perfection and belief in the course material translates into some professors feeling as if they are too invested in their students or the demands of their job. In these contexts it seems that the professor position experiences contradictory tensions: a desire to educate, the pressure to support students, and ambivalence about an untenable situation. For some professors these competing, tenuous demands feel like a trap.

**TRANSGRESSIONS: REFLECTING ON TEACHING AND THE UNIVERSITY**

I interviewed many students and professors who both knew each other, but mutual descriptions were a rare occurrence. While many of the students I interviewed openly named professors, sharing what they thought about them, interactions they had had, or even sharing crushes, unsurprisingly professors rarely named other students and it was even uncommon for them to speak about an individual, unnamed student. While certainly part of this difference has to do with the fact that professors see many more students than students see professors, it also suggests that professors need to watch what they say, especially in an interview. Deresiewicz describes this carefulness when he writes: “It often feels that there are certain things you cannot say inside a classroom—the most serious things that you want to say, the most genuine things… you feel your institutional surroundings holding you as if between quotation marks. You fear that your words will fall to the ground with an audible clink” (2014: 179-180). Here Deresiewicz wants to speak in class about life beyond just the reading, about his beliefs and the stakes within the reading, but his institutional surroundings shape what he chooses to say.
One example of the pressure to conform to certain expectations might be found in faculty interviews with the online Wesleyan newsletter. Newly hired faculty generally depict Wesleyan students as critical, passionate thinkers, echoing the language of “learning for learning’s sake” I discussed in the last chapter. Below are selected excerpts from several issues from September and October 2014:

**Professor 1**
**Q:** What are you most looking forward to about working at Wesleyan?
**A:** I am very happy to be here. My colleagues are great, and the students are even better! I especially appreciate the classroom dynamics that can get established when students are already interested in a topic and are essentially demanding that I teach them everything I know – it’s hardly an environment in which I confront a classroom of passive and bored students!

**Professor 2**
**Q:** What drew you to Wesleyan?
**A:** I love teaching, and I love research. I can’t think of a better place where you can be passionate about both. I love the liberal arts environment, and the students here seem incredibly enthusiastic, passionate and intelligent. As somebody who loves teaching, that’s very exciting. At the institutional level, to have support for your research, and the freedom to develop courses that you’re passionate about and that fit with your research is also amazing.

**Professor 3**
**Q:** How did you come to teach at Wesleyan? Is it true that you were previously a visiting professor here?
**A:** I was indeed a visiting professor here four years ago, and enjoyed the experience enormously. At the risk of pandering, I’d have to say that the enthusiasm and intelligence of the students here were huge factors that made me want to return.

(Emphasis added)

Many of the professors I interviewed made similarly complimentary statements about student passion and intellectual engagement. For example, Professor Montgomery, a full professor, said, “It’s been a wonderful place for me to teach. The students are truly
curious, and they’re not just smart. They want to know; there’s something about wanting to know.”

I am struck by the similarity between these comments and the more official narratives of the Wesleyan student as distinctly smart, but also critical: as we saw in the THISISWHY campaign, which describes students as more than “just being smart.” Given the connection between these types of classroom expectations and larger cultures of elitism (as I argued in the last chapter), I wonder how much of this professorial praise flatters students in ways that reproduce, rather than challenge, cultures of privilege. Although rarely printed in the Wesleyan newsletter, I have heard professors complain about how frustrating it can be to ask their class a question and have students stare back blankly, or how disrespectful it is when students are on Facebook during class.

In one interview, Professor Abelson offered a taste of this flip side when she told me: “I hear faculty complain about entitled and needy students who gobble up a lot of their time, and who feel basically entitled to time and attention.” This complaint, one that Professor Abelson attributes to other faculty, might suggest that in my interviews, faculty felt pressure to keep their performance intact, to flatter the student (as customer) as a way of managing the affective demands of the job. Professor 3 seems to acknowledge this expectation and perhaps even feed into it when she says, “At the risk of pandering, I’d have to say that the enthusiasm and intelligence of the students here were huge factors that made me want to return.” These flattering performances conceal faculty work conditions and maintain student understandings of the university as simply a passionate community of thinkers, and ultimately such pleasing statements perhaps even uphold illusory or fantasied “connections” (with the customer).
Sometimes, much to the students’ thrill, professors relaxed and shared things they normally wouldn't. For example one student described, “knowing more than I wanted to know” when a professor gossiped to him about extramarital affairs among professors. Sierra, describing the way she and a professor mutually discuss their families followed by stating: “It’s special—I hope she won’t get fired for this.” This statement points to the perceived transgression that violating these boundaries holds—an awareness that sharing too much is a risk. Another student, DeSean, described venting with his professor about his class:

Some of the stuff I got told did kind of cross professor [-student lines]— But it’s like who else are they going to tell? …Anytime someone bitches about a class that someone is in, it’s a little bit crossing a boundary. But not in a way that I’m uncomfortable with. And also I would never tell an administrator they told me that. I get that for Professor Mullins; he needed to tell someone who had seen what was going on and that took it down to people that had been in the class. I don’t know. If I was in his position for a class, and they were treating me like that, I would need some confirmation from somewhere that I didn’t massively fuck up in creating that situation. And he didn’t. It was just some jackasses in the class.

The transgression here is asking students to validate concerns about pedagogy, or weigh in on classroom dynamics. It is transgressive because the professor not only shares their frustrations, they also expose their own professional limitations, or - that they do not have complete control over the classroom, disrupting the image of the professor as all-knowing expert.

Another student, Gabe, described realizing the border of unsanctioned topics:

“There was one time where [Professor Larson] was in a particularly fiery mood where it seemed like he just wanted to talk shit about the University and Michael Roth. And he did that for a while, and then he gave a command to me like: Oh, but your supposed to be this docile student, and I’m supposed to be this professor. And I kind of corrected what I was doing. Because I was like playing in, feeding into what he was saying.”
“Like agreeing?”

“Yeah, and then he corrected himself—it was a policing that I didn’t know was supposed to be going on. And then he was like: ‘I’m not supposed to be sharing this kind of thing with you.’ But we both know we do that kind of stuff all the time. So I almost didn’t realize that he thought of it in a way that was possibly compromising. So that was probably the most confusing part. Because I didn’t know that it was weird. I didn’t know that it was strange what we were doing until he did that thing.”

In this moment we see that for Professor Larson to discuss President Roth with a student is a risk. Openly discussing the university as a workplace is subversive or risky because the professor asks students for reassurance or support about their job performance. We can read these moments as revealing an authentic “backstage” behind seemingly effortless emotional labor disrupting the emotional performance. Critics like Arlie Hochschild similarly describes a backstage during her discussion of flight attendants who learn to “govern and control” emotions in front of customers (1983: 133). Hochschild points out that “support for anger or a sense of grievance… is bad for service and bad for company” (1983: 116). Thus we see that faculty expressing anger about work conditions in front of their students is a transgression because it is “bad for service.”

Given how little students understand about faculty workloads, demands, or goals, these moments of “transgression” have the potential to disrupt the myths of community and family that obscure the institutional structure and reality of the university today. As we saw in chapter one, students often understand Wesleyan in terms of community—rather than as a workplace, so they tend to read these moments as signs of interpersonal intimacy. Still, speaking openly about the conditions of university life today might crack the myth of community, or family. I will return to this possibility at the end of the chapter: for now, I want to emphasize that these are moments when students feel as though they are on the “same side” as the faculty, yet this shared positionality may be illusory. Faculty are not
supposed to talk about their jobs with students because, as I have shown, part of the task is to praise students in ways that reflect Wesleyan’s distinct culture (the other part of transformative teaching is to perform with ease, which I address in the next section).

**EVALUATING TEACHING**

As I described in the last chapter, even radical course content might, as hooks argues, reestablish hierarchy in the classroom through the professor’s “body posture, tone, word choice, and so on.” This is the performance of “ease,” the same class- and race-inflected performance that students also learn to embody. Indeed professors are one of the avenues through which students pick up ease. Professors teach students ease by disciplining students into certain modes of engagement (as they taught me), but they also teach students ease by embodying a particular self-comportment. Much like students’ effortlessly achieve academic excellence through learning for learning’s sake, ease serves as a way for faculty to achieve excellence in teaching, and it locates their skill and success as inherent qualities of their personalities. Professors have highly stressful jobs, especially untenured professors who occupy more tenuous positions in the university. Yet many professors never let on to students the impact of these demands. Like a duck that appears calm and level above the surface of the water but remains furiously paddling below, professors embody ease. This constant performance of ease in front of students prevents them from seeing or grappling with the actual conditions of faculty work.

This appeared quite strongly when I asked professors about teaching evaluations. Sitting in their offices I asked, “How do teacher evaluations shape your relationships with students?” Professor Spector responded:

I was just happy. I’ve gotten really good evaluations. I read them for what they tell me about the course design, and I do take them seriously. I do
read them, and I think about them. I have this great advantage where my personality matches the classroom, and when that happens, it’s not hard to be a good teacher. I think for people whose personalities do not match the classroom they struggle variously. But I just hit it out of the park when I started and really have had good evaluations all the way through. So what they do is satisfy my vanity.

[I snicker.]

It’s very true. I’m very happy to get good evaluations because it’s hard work.

While Professor Specter is a full professor, this answer was in fact a quite common response at every stage of seniority. A tenure-track professor similarly told me:

… I don’t think they measure learning; I think they measure the perception of personalities … For whatever slippages there are and whatever perceptions of perceptions there are for me because my tendency is for different kinds of people to want to get along with me. I don’t fret in the same way I think I would if I were a little more quiet, a little more kind keeps to herself. So there’s a kind of privilege of personality that I think inflects into what it is that you all are evaluating. … So I guess the basic answer to the question would be: Yes, I think about them. Yes, I am aware of how easily they’re quantified and misread. Yes, I am aware of how easily personality comes into play. … So I guess I say these things, which is to say yes, they matter to me. Of course, because they affect whether I get tenure. There’s absolutely a selfish component to this. I’m trying to protect a lot of other things too. But I try not; I mean I’m not a paranoid, not too paranoid of a person. So you don’t design a class thinking about that. Or I don’t design a class thinking about that.

Professor Flink also emphasized that she was “not too paranoid of a person” and that her temperament or personality was the key in her successful teaching at Wesleyan. She described several advantages to being a visiting professor so I asked: “I guess from what I’ve read, or talking to other people, I’ve gotten the sense that having a contingent position, it can be really stressful because you know that you could leave at any point, is that not [your experience]?” She responded: “Well, I think it is stressful. I’m lucky that temperamentally I’m not an anxious person so it hasn’t been stressful for me as much as a reality that it’s just part of. I’m not a stressful person in general, which is just good fortune.”
All of these professors emphasize that their personalities are a good fit with the classroom, that they are, in some ways, “natural” teachers.

For faculty of all ranks, successful teaching is attributed to “temperament” and “easy-going personalities”—rather than pedagogical strategies or skills. Such discourses present some faculty as inevitably liked and popular among students. They appear to effortlessly master course material, meeting massive demands on their time. Even this performance of ease appears to come easily—despite job instability. If and when these easy-going professors do have success, for example receiving tenure or moving from a contingent position to a tenure-track one, their success will “seem to almost passively ‘happen’” in the words of Khan (2011: 120). This ease naturalizes the multiple demands that come with the job, locating both success (and failure) in individual temperaments, rather than structural demands or job-based skills. In this way, professors’ performance of ease does not resist, and might even perpetuate these institutional, affective, and intellectual demands on faculty today.

Performing ease, a marker of one’s competence, becomes an essential way for women faculty and faculty of color to establish authority and credibility in the classroom particularly because universities continue to invest in teaching evaluations even though research shows that evaluations do not measure good teaching. The faculty most vulnerable to the flaws of evaluations are women, queer people, and people of color. “Research shows that both minorities and women are presumed to be incompetent as soon as they walk in the door” (Lazos 2012: 177). So women faculty and faculty of color must, through their teaching, prove to the students in class that they are competent. The article “Beyond ‘Bossy’ or ‘Brilliant’” goes beyond simply noting the gendered differences in language on teaching evaluations to show that women are held to higher standards
around professionalism and organization, expected to do more emotional labor for
students, and are subject to more comments on physical appearance than men. One
professor touched on this when she said, “I had a mentor in graduate school who told me
you have a round face, and your nose goes up, and you like to wear dresses. You need to
bring the handbook out in class or they will not take you seriously.” Here we see that the
professor’s physical appearance becomes a barrier to being taken seriously in the
classroom. If she does not “bring the handbook out” she risks students seeing her as more
of a friend than an authority figure. Faculty are tasked with establishing credibility in the
classroom even as these courses and relationships are overburdened: students want friends,
allies, mentors, mothers; courses are freighted with demands to be immediately relevant to
a student’s life; meanwhile structural racism, sexism, and homophobia mean that these
professors are working under greater demand with less assistance. Thus the pressure to be
excellent, and to manage these almost impossible demands while also making the work
look like it comes naturally explains why faculty wouldn't want to talk about teaching,
stresses, and the university with students.

If faculty spoke more openly to students about these stresses, they might reveal
the "backstage" of the institution. One tenure-track faculty member, Professor Reynolds,
said a bit more about the pressures to perform when I asked her about how teaching
evaluations shape her relationships with students. She shared with remarkable transparency
the challenges that accompany these evaluations:

I think it’s difficult for them not to when you’re on a tenure track job. Because you know
that student evaluations can sink you at this university if you don’t make that 91% cutoff rate
for outstanding slash good and the “is the class hard or not?” criteria. So there’s a lot at stake.
There’s a tremendous amount at stake for those student evaluations. And that’s also part of the pedagogy, right? It filters into pedagogy. So it puts pressure on young faculty. At least it put pressure on me. I felt anxious in the classroom.
It takes a lot of self-discipline to park the anxiety and do what I think is right to do in the class and to follow what I think good pedagogy is. So does it influence my relationship with students? You mean do I start people pleasing because I want the students to like me so I can get the thing? I maybe have had moments of that. But it's certainly not my general experience of the classroom and relationship with students. I am generally interested in the students. It's easier to get to know students in a small classroom so I feel the most comfortable in the small classroom because I can do the pedagogy that I know I do well and that kind of carries itself. In a larger lecture-discussion class it becomes a little bit harder. You can't have that relationship with every student in the class of forty kids. You just can't. So I have those anxieties. I've had moments where I felt like “Ooo should I pander to the students or not?” But I try to stay focused on what it is that I need to do in that particular classroom in that particular period. It's a self-discipline not to let it creep in.

Professor Reynolds' answer demonstrates a careful, balanced navigation in which she openly shares the stress she faces responding to the increased reliance on teaching evaluations for tenure, while still highlighting that she is an ethical, committed educator. Here we see how institutional emphasis translates into a pressure to “people please.” This is something Ann Pellegrini similarly stresses: “Hurt feelings are to be avoided; good feelings (and satisfied consumer-citizens) are to be maximized” (2014). This emphasis on students feeling good is part of the student-as-consumer logic and means that faculty feel pressure to satisfy students rather than teach them and to do so with ease. As a result of these pressures to “people please,” students remain unaware of work conditions and continue to conceive of their connections in fantasied terms.

This emphasis on people pleasing through excellent teaching evaluations also presumes that learning will be positive and immediate. hooks explains that sometimes it’s not until years later that a student will appreciate the material that they learned in her class. “We want to feel that by the end of the semester every student will be sitting there filling out their evaluations testifying that I’m a ‘good teacher.’ It’s all about feeling good… we have to learn how to appreciate difficulty as a stage in intellectual development” (1994:}
hooks points out that teaching evaluations rely on an understanding of learning as immediate and comfortable. The transferential relationship necessarily depends on some amount of discomfort in order to learn, and certainly this pressure to have only good feelings in class becomes an even greater barrier for professors who teach queer and ethnic studies whose courses cover material that is as seven mostly Humanities professors explain in a jointly written essay, “by its nature unsettling” (7 Humanities Professors 2014). This customer-server dynamic relies on students as consumers of their education and so dynamic learning and real relationships are outside of this paradigm (Schings 2015).

Pressure to demonstrate one has “achieved excellence” in teaching and to receives exclusively good feedback also surfaced when Professor Murphy revealed that some faculty compete for popularity among students and that this competition often translates into “humble bragging,” where the professor might say something like, “It’s too bad I can’t give all the students on my sixty person long wait-list a spot in my class this semester.” Sure enough, I came across an example of this humble bragging in my interview notes when I asked a professor about their experience of interactions during office hours:

This is going to sound like [I’m] an asshole. My office hours are often insufficient to meet student need to talk to me…. These aren’t my office hours, but you’re the third person I’ve seen today. ….I think with office hours you run the risk that if you keep them strictly, of leaving students in the hall or things that can’t be taken care of on Tuesdays between one and four. …But you see how that can sound kind of like an asshole response? Students want to come so often that office hours can’t quite [meet the demand].

This professor recognizes as they speak exactly what they are doing; casually underscoring how popular they are while emphasizing their intense commitment to being a good educator. Here ease surfaces in that underlying the professor’s statement is effortless popularity: “Student want to come so often that office hours can’t quite meet the demand.” We might also read humble bragging as an instance when the professor
succumbs to the transferential “ego satisfaction” that accompanies student admiration for a professor. Humble bragging is both a symptom of the immense pressure faculty operate under and a result of the transferential relationship between professors and students, and like ease, humble bragging does not acknowledge or expose the “backstage” of teaching.

The flip side of this popularity is that one can be too popular. One professor explained that when departments and committees evaluate professors for tenure, they might question one’s level of academic rigor if the professor appears to be too popular—the idea seems to be that if students love you, then perhaps you’re not pushing them hard enough. A few professors informally shared concerns about how popularity among students can also translate into appearing to be “too personal.” Professor Browne summed up the dilemma that comes with the delicate balance of rigor and likeability: “On the narrative evaluation it creates enough ambiguity that if my tenure case goes to review, somebody can make that argument [that I am not rigorous enough] based on what students are writing in my class. So that’s a very real and a very vicious tension.” We see that professors must be likeable to students, but not too likeable. These standards for finding the personal/professional, rigorous/likeable balance with students also appears to structurally disadvantage faculty in disciplines such as ethnic studies, working class studies, disability studies, queer studies, or gender studies because they are perhaps at greater risk for being cast as “too personal”; the material in these courses is not only “unsettling,” it also “often feels immediate” (7 Humanities Professors 2014). Students often go to these professors for emotional support related to course material and the professor must decide how to respond to these multiple and sometimes intense affective demands. And Avgi Saketopoulou points out that, “the professor who teaches courses related to social inequalities and institutional oppressions…is perhaps herself more intimately familiar with
their impact on her personal life. What are the limits then to how she can respond to the student's plea for care?” (2014). Even while these faculty have their own needs and limitations, as we saw earlier in the chapter, many students also seek out women faculty, faculty of color, and queer faculty as role models thus placing differential demands on women, queer people, and people of color in these positions. Here we again see that certain faculty operate under greater demands with little or less assistance.

Even while I am able to structurally contextualize the problems with evaluations professors’ affective experiences remained largely undiscussed during my interviews. Professor competition for popularity among students and bell hooks’ desire for students to “testify that I’m a ‘good teacher’” demonstrates that many professors are emotionally invested in how their students feel about them but try to avoid having these feelings affect their teaching. Richard Ohmann, a former Wesleyan faculty member (now retired), touches on this when he writes, “Did I want their approval? Their affection? Certainly; but I could not be a person who wanted affection at the same time I was being a teacher” (2003: 207). Because a professor is not a friend, and they are an authority figure, caring about what students think and caring about being liked is not necessarily the best way to teach. While professors might derive pleasure out of positive evaluations and positive feedback from students, they must maintain a level of emotional independence. Professors are there to teach students, not be liked by them. One professor explained the emotional boundary they have with students: “Students will talk to me about problems. I would never talk to a student about a problem. Part of it is just creating a space where you feel like you can have this conversation with me at your need, but that train doesn’t run both ways. If I’m going through something, I need to find a different outlet.” These boundaries are important for professors to create the transferential space: detailed knowledge about
professors’ problems would distract the student from learning. The distance helps to create a stable learning environment, which is essential for good teaching, but this also translates into faculty silently sacrificing for students who are oblivious—the concealed backstage. This silence might ultimately maintain narratives of professors as parents and students as baby birds. The pressure to perform effortlessly in front of students means that faculty avoid talking to students about Wesleyan as a workplace, however, if faculty did say more to students, perhaps they would reveal a “backstage” and create a discourse that could ultimately empower both.

INTELLECTUAL LOVE VERSUS THE CORPORATE UNIVERSITY

With all of this it seems clear that students unwittingly contribute to professors’ job precarity. As students place affective demands on their professors, the students are not just part of professors’ jobs but also occupy a position that if they are careless, can seriously hurt the professor. The teaching evaluations are a primary site of this conflict because students often do not realize their own role in evaluating faculty for tenure and promotion. In this instance, professors and students often occupy a structurally antagonistic relation to one another. Their wants are often in opposition even in more informal ways as we saw during my discussion of psychoanalysis.

I find this antagonism to be particularly distressing when thinking about queer professors and queer students or professors of color and students of color—groups where the professors and students share experiences of suffering in and outside the university. Shouldn’t these professors and students have shared stakes with one another and find ways to help each other richly live in academia? This antagonism between professors and
student can obscure the shared experiences of racism and heterosexism in universities for those that are queer and/or people of color.

But we must engage with these shared experiences in a way that exposes rather than reestablishes fantasied connection or false community and family. Perhaps faculty and students can find spaces in the university in which they can enact a more transformative critique that reveals the conditions of the neoliberal university. These possibilities begin to surface in the “Open Letter of Love to Black Students #blacklivesmatter” that hundreds of black professors signed. They highlight shared experiences between black students and faculty when they say, “You, with your stories of erasure break our hearts because you are family, because your stories of erasure ultimately are stories of violence, because your stories mirror our experiences, past and present” (blackspaceblog 2014). Here discourse around family surfaces but unlike in university rhetoric black students and professors are family because of their shared racial background rather than their relation to one another in the university. The description of erasure and silence in the university challenge the myth of the singular university community that I discuss in chapter one and through acknowledging current experiences of racism in the university, the faculty also reveal part of their backstage. Both black professors and black students are struggling to figure out how to really, fully live in the university. In this letter black professors craft a narrative of solidarity.

Such possibilities are not only available to faculty of color, or through language of family. I asked Professor Marlow, “Do you feel like your work is rewarded?” and she gave an example of a reward that comes with teaching:

I have a student that is sitting there looking puzzled the entire time we’re talking about Donna Haraway the first class in Feminist Theories, and at the end she’s holding up Donna Haraway and saying, “Donna and me, we’re best friends now.” It helped her write her thesis, and I think it helped
her be who she now is, which is not who she was then. I think that’s great. If I had even a small part in that, I’m very happy.

Professor Iverson shared his own understanding of his work, which helps articulate the rewards of teaching: “Doing what I do, which is creative work, which is something the philosopher Spinoza says about intellectual labor—intellectual love actually is that intellectual love makes the world. This is what makes the world…what I am creating, what I am generating …it’s not reducing people to only being commodities. It’s imaginative work.” Teaching someone to learn and understand Donna Haraway is world-making work. It’s work that challenges the increasing pressure that comes with the corporatization of the university to treat students as consumers. It does not reduce people to commodities. The work in the classroom, while, as I have explored throughout this thesis, is often absorbed and contained, still contains potential for resistance and possibility.

A student, Tessa, also spoke about “intellectual love” saying that learning was helping her to become a “More self realized, more compassionate individual.” She continued by saying:

To me it’s all about chasing this deep resonating love. Which I don’t think is how everyone interacts with this place or thinks about how this place should be. It seems like almost a queer misuse to treat it in this quest for deep, rich love. It’s not the official story. Should you really be looking for love? Shouldn’t you really be looking for what will give you the most knowledge or set you ahead in life? Or get that degree? To me it’s like no, I’m just using this whole classist, racist structure to encounter these rich intellectual loves.

This intellectual love surfaced again when Lyle shared about a professor, “I could not have been more grateful for what she opened my mind to and the readings that, that class gave me.” This world-making, creative labor—intellectual love—is a site where faculty and student language overlaps. This world-making intellectual labor is where there are shared stakes. This is where professors and students queerly misuse the university for
intellectual love instead of the reproduction of race and class inequality and where there is potential to subvert the commodification of radical thought. I see this queer misuse of the university as deeply linked to the world-making power of disidentifications that Muñoz writes about. This intellectual love “changes one’s perception of the world” (1999: xiii) and has the power to, signal “a world to come”—to make a queer world (1999: xiv). This intellectual love reworks the racism and classism of the university and uses this fact to cultivate affective affinities where the professor and student are not a server and customer but might instead engage in subversive intellectual work that builds meaningful relationships and transforms the university. In intellectual love professors and students misuse the university through exposing the myths of community and family and instead form relationships through this disruption.

Lauren Berlant contributes to this vision when she expresses a desire to challenge the professor/student “fantasy of rescue and identity.” She writes, “it involves teaching students to learn, once again, the limits of faculty magic and the necessity of making demands on knowledge and on history that go beyond the horizon of possibility their teachers can represent to them” (1997: 160). Berlant’s use of the word, “magic” echoes Winnicott’s language from the good enough mother at the beginning of this chapter. However, here the limits of faculty magic are explicit. Berlant’s use of “magic” reworks narratives of a giving, selfless professor-mother to expose the limitations and the possibilities that come from this exposure—for students to explore. By “teaching students to learn” about these limits, about the “backstage” of the university, professors and students can begin to enact transformative critiques to understand narratives where the professor is a martyr and students are oblivious consumers and they can begin to unpack the power that underlies the myth of the university as a community or family. In
intellectual love, students and professors are not lovers, they are not parent and child, they are not mentors and mentees, and they are not colleagues. This is where one can build real, dynamic relationships, where there can be transformative learning and thinking, and where we can imagine what Roderick Ferguson terms “critical forms of community” that might make a university that could transform all of us (2012: 232).
Conclusion

Writing this conclusion is one of the hardest parts of this thesis because I never envisioned it actually coming to an end. I find myself in a position that feels bittersweet: I am unsettled, frustrated, saddened, and incredibly satisfied, and joyful. I thought that this project would be cathartic—a chance to express frustrations that so often felt invisible, but I did not know just how intense it would be. Writing throughout was not painless, but it has been an enlivening source of empowerment. Many of my experiences throughout the past four years have been laced with pained sadness, as well as transformative opportunities for expressive experimentation, and this project has given me a space to echo both. Learning about the concept of ease, about how universities reproduce class inequality, and writing about the infuriating hegemony that I witnessed throughout the past four years has been one very enriching way “in which depression and related affects are lived with rather than banished” (Cvetkovich 2012: 189). It’s been a way, through writing, to resist silently succumbing to these pressures.

Chapter one highlights the prevalence of a community logic and the leakages and moments when these narratives fail students. Through locating experiences of dis-belonging the chapter is a start to cracking tales of community. Chapter two explores the contradictions between critical thinking and social reproduction. Through seeing the places where radical thought perpetuates inequality the chapter begins to think about being in and against the university. Finally, chapter three discusses the silence of professor experiences from student understandings while also beginning to address these gaps and envision the world-making power of intellectual love. This thesis shares and contextualizes experiences often not talked about, often obscured, and unnoticed to
reveal the pressures and failures, the inner-workings of the university. Without these perspectives and experiences we cannot understand the state of the university today.

This project leaves me with a sharp analysis of our disheartening reality that I must now continue to find my way through. Graduating and completing this thesis does not free me, or anyone for that matter, from class inequality, and searching for jobs is a new, corporeal skill I must quickly learn. Learning these new skills (interviewing, writing professional emails and cover letters, embodying professional confidence and worth) will continue the training I have received at Wesleyan to be elite. I, like many other Wesleyan students, will be in a position where I attempt to use my degree, to use that “Wesleyan Network,” and the privileged critical thinking I got from Wesleyan as I apply for jobs. These are my strange, remaining stakes in the themes and contexts I map in this project.

Still I have been inspired by the process of writing this thesis: students in the forum finding insights, an interview transcript that inspired a faculty member’s job talk, and dialogues that provided chances to cultivate relationships and reflexive affects. I hope that in written form this thesis will continue to inspire others to locate possibilities “in and against” the university in the name of a dissident horizon.
On first look, secret societies appear to exemplify the history of universities as “fraternal club with very social,” and as a result, they failed to remain on neutral or good terms with these students.

Surprisingly, secret societies are one place that students receive affirmation of their belonging and where ease surfaces socially: students in secret societies build social networks that appear to effortlessly fall into place. One student I interviewed broke into the tomb which is perhaps a failure to perform ease because they unwittingly challenged the social networks of people who are “big names on campus and very social,” and as a result, they failed to remain on neutral or good terms with these students. On first look, secret societies appear to exemplify the history of universities as “fraternal club with fraternal rules.” The Chosen describes admittance into secret societies and private eating clubs as originally based off of a combination of merit, wealth, legacy, and social status. In the article “Skull

NOTES

Prologue

Introduction

1 Neo-liberalism is a term that generally refers to growing emphasis on individualism, choice, and laissez-faire economics.
2 The number of administrators today has risen: “from 1987 until 2011-12—the most recent academic year for which comparable figures are available universities and colleges collectively added 517,636 administrators and professional employees, or an average of 87 every working day.” This statistic contrasts with the declining number of full-time faculty positions. “The ratio of nonacademic employees to faculty has also doubled. There are now two nonacademic employees at public and two and a half at private universities and colleges for every one full-time, tenure-track member of the faculty.” (Marcus 2014)
3 Cary Nelson infamously reversed his stance on academic freedom with regard to political injustices in Palestine when he failed to support Professor Steven Salaita, who lost his job for openly expressing criticism of Israel. For more information on this case, see Flaherty, August 2014.
4 See the article “What a Professor Learned as an Undercover Freshman” for more information on Rebekah Nathan’s ethnography (Schema 2006).
5 Khan’s theory of ease builds off of Pierre Bourdieu’s work on habitus, class reproduction, and corporeal memory (See Bourdieu 1986). Thank you so much to Laurel George for this outstanding book recommendation.

Chapter 1

1 The rhetoric of the university as community also connects to in loco parentis (or translated in English: in place of the parent), in which universities operate as parental caretakers of their students. Catherine Prendergast and Nancy Abellmann write about the rise of this logic: “The great irony of in loco parentis is that the very generation that provoked its demise as students would become today’s parents who are purportedly actively reviving its spirit. According to recent reports, families now look for safe colleges that will coddle their children” (2006: 40-41). Thank you to Abbie Boggs for directing me to this essay.
2 Additionally the Wesleying article “Something’s Wrong: Breaking Down the Graduation Rate” (2014) offers a statistical breakdown of graduation rates at Wesleyan by race and gender. Alt writes, “We can slice and compare these numbers in many more ways—and we can even delve into data from earlier cohorts, but even just from this cohort’s data one thing is clear: there are students in our community that are graduating at a much lower rate than others.”
3 Mellon aims to “increase the number of minority students, and others with a demonstrated commitment to eradicating racial disparities, who will pursue PhDs in core fields in the arts and sciences. The program aims to reduce over time the serious underrepresentation on faculties of individuals from certain minority groups, as well as to address the attendant educational consequences of these disparities.” This is a problem not only at Wesleyan (as AFAMiswhy demonstrates), but at universities across the country, where there has been growing diversity among students, but “change among faculty and administrative ranks is incremental or even stagnant” (Võ 2012: 106). Still, given how dismal the job market is in many disciplines, it is not clear that increasing graduate students of color will have a transformative effect on universities.
4 Secret societies are one place that students receive affirmation of their belonging and where ease surfaces socially: students in secret societies build social networks that appear to effortlessly fall into place. One student I interviewed broke into the tomb which is perhaps a failure to perform ease because they unwittingly challenged the social networks of people who are “big names on campus and very social,” and as a result, they failed to remain on neutral or good terms with these students. On first look, secret societies appear to exemplify the history of universities as “fraternal club with fraternal rules;” The Chosen describes admittance into secret societies and private eating clubs as originally based off of a combination of merit, wealth, legacy, and social status. In the article “Skull
&Bones: It’s Not Just for White Dudes Anymore” (2013), Buster Brown describes a shift from admittance based on merit and legacy to including women and recruiting students of color and queer students. Kahn notes this when he writes, “The new elite seem to exhibit an openness and generosity toward previously excluded members” (2011: 36). This openness and generosity demonstrates the ways in which structures of belonging that aim to be inclusive of some people of color and queer students may still feed into an elite culture of ease. “This great trick of privilege helps us see how the world can be more open and yet more unequal” (Khan 2011: 40).

Chapter 2

I And indeed Sara Ahmed’s On Being Included (2012) articulates the enigmatic nature of diversity and its role in perpetuating homogeneity.

ii See Christopher Newfield’s Unmaking the Public University for an in depth discussion of the “PC Wars”

http://activismacademia.conference.wesleyan.edu/

iii Indeed, Wesleyan plays on this idea of “forward thinking” in their Admissions tours. A tour guide from the Office of Admissions explained that they, unlike most college tour guides, would resolutely not walk backward while talking during the tour because Wesleyan is a “forward thinking” school.

iv I recently received an email asking me to fill out a “10-minute survey” that “asks about your experiences with advising, your major(s), academics, and extracurricular activities, as well as your satisfaction with various aspects of the Wesleyan experience.”

v In addition to interdisciplinarity, institutions such as Wesleyan emphasize “breadth and depth” of the curriculum.

vi A high Dean’s List qualifying GPA might not necessarily even correlate to “intellectual engagement, hard work, and a love of learning” because grade inflation has become rampant especially at highly selective private universities. Deresiewicz explains, “At elite schools, at this point, if an upperclassman does the work, it is almost impossible to give them less than a B+, and even, increasingly an A-” (2014: 65). Deresiewicz also points out that grade inflation at the most elite schools contrasts strongly with public institutions that have average GPAs of 3.01 (2014: 218). This claim is apparent when considering that the average grades for classes in many if not all departments at Wesleyan are B+’s or A-‘s. Many students do not even need to “grade grub” to have academic success.

vii This performance where achievements appear to almost passively “happen” while students simultaneously remain critical of mainstream norms surfaces on a larger scale each spring when college rankings come out. Each year, students write articles covering Wesleyan’s position in the rankings and without fail mention the arbitrariness of these scores. In 2008 the Wesleying post “Another Year, Another Ranking Fluctuation” reads, “What does this mean? Not a whole lot, unless you really find it meaningful to scrutinize schools based on minute differences in statistics that fluctuate all the time anyway. Besides, you’re certainly allowed some choice in which college ranking list you attach your self-esteem to” (Emphasis in original). And again the 2012 Wesleying post “US News and Stupid Farts Report: Wes Plummets to #17” expresses a similar sentiment (as do the intermediate articles in the four years between) stating, “Not that anyone cares, because these things don’t mean anything, and they’re all just so arbitrary, and because rankings do not even matter unless Wesleyan scores high, in which case it’s super-exciting and you can disregard all that other stuff, but...” (Emphasis in original). Both articles satirize the logic and personal investment that so often accompany college rankings. Through joking, the articles demonstrate that we Wesleyan students are mature enough not to depend on rankings for our self-worth or the worth of the school because we, unlike other schools on the list, are smart enough to know how arbitrary these rankings are. This is similar to the way Wesleyan students move beyond grade grubbing. The humor allows students to maintain a laid-back image and performance of ease: we don’t care about the rankings because they are so arbitrary, but we do happen to be among the best liberal arts colleges in the country.

But it is the students who claim not to care—the administration very much cares. During one speech to alumni President Roth told them, “some of you are some of you are annoyed, I hope, that Wesleyan has declined in US News and World Report pretty dramatically over the last few years. I
expected for us to go down—why? Because US News and World Report rankings are based on spending per student. And so if you want to go up you build a waterfall in the library like Milton did, and you just waste money willy-nilly like Williams [the alumni laugh]... We’re not going to do that because it’s an education.” In the speech President Roth justifies Wesleyan’s rank by explaining that instead of trying to have the highest rank, he is prioritizing the school’s financial future. He critiques the rankings and emphasizes his priorities on learning rather than simply having the best ranking, but he also clearly recognizes the significance of rankings. In the Atlantic article “Is There Life After Rankings?” (2005) Colin Diver explains that “rankings depend heavily on audited self-reported data” and that this evaluation includes a statistical survey of 656 questions and peer evaluations for 220 other schools. Colleges remain invested in rankings because they play a huge role in shaping where students will choose to apply and attend. Students want to attend the best, most prestigious school possible, and colleges want the best, most talented students. This means that many schools feel pressure to improve their rank. For example, because “U.S. News gives positive weight to the percentage of classes with fewer than twenty students” (Diver 2005) Wesleyan departments are encouraged to cap enrollment in seminar courses at 19 students especially in the fall, because that is when this data is collected. These arbitrary caps on class size demonstrate that while students might claim they do not care about rankings, Wesleyan the institution does care. Diver explains, “Criticism of the rankings is nearly unanimous, but so is compliance with them” (2005).

Student discourses about not caring comes from a need to justify the decision to come to Wesleyan: that it was the best school we could get into or if it wasn’t the best school at least it has the best culture, that we made the right decision, that we are going to have a bright future, that the student debt was a worthwhile investment. President Roth taps into this anxiety when discussing a liberal arts education: “Lots of people think it’s irrelevant, think it’s impractical. They would have our students learn something that would get them their first job....So you spend four years in college preparing for the worst job you’ll ever have.” Everyone laughs, “really smart,” he says sarcastically. By claiming that Wesleyan offers a holistic education that is superior to more applied or practical educations, Roth rhetorically justifies a liberal arts education as one that does not blindly prepare students to get their first job after graduation, but rather teaches students to become well-rounded, adaptable, lifelong learners. This allows him to articulate the ways in which a unique education where one is “learning for learning’s sake” will actually also help one have a strong, dynamic career.

Deresiewicz also discusses students’ use of Adderall (and other drugs: antidepressants, antianxiets, other stimulants) as a way for students to handle all of the pressure (2014: 9).

This institutional obligation for patriotism surfaces at Wesleyan with the new POSSE scholar program. POSSE offers veterans the opportunity to attend private schools such as Vassar, Dartmouth, or Wesleyan. The program is great in that it gives opportunities to a population that is marginalized after their time in the military however it also allows Wesleyan to demonstrate patriotism through the program. Nicholas De Genova’s essay “Within and Against the Imperial University: Reflections on Crossing the Line ” offers additional insights on how academics must self-censor so that they never express anti-patriotic sentiments.

Of course this language of rights and choice is totally neoliberal. And the emphasis on seminar style classes (though perhaps misleading) is among the milder “fibs” I heard during the information session.

Chapter 3

One student shared that professors were probably the biggest reason they decided to remain at Wesleyan. Lawrence Wittner (2014) describes administrators’ soaring salaries and links it to the growing corporate culture on college campuses.

Nate Kreuter highlights that he, as well as many other faculty he knows, might even work more than 60-hour week weeks (2013).

This is a rereading of the Oedipal complex as the formation of heteronormative gender. In the original reading, the child must split herself between the parent she desires (the father/men) and the
parent with whom she identifies (the mother/women). Both Butler and Fuss have complicated the heteronormativity of this reading of gender subjectification and desire.

\[ \text{In Feminist accused of Sexual Harassment Jan Gallop also writes, “At its most intense—and, I would argue, its most productive—the pedagogical relation between teacher and student is, in fact, a ‘consensual amorous relation.’ And if schools decide to prohibit not only sex, but ‘amorous relations’ between teacher and student, the ‘consensual amorous relation’ that will be banned from our campuses might just be teaching itself” (1997: 57).} \]

\[ \text{In “Transference-Love” Freud writes, “He must recognize that the patient’s falling in love is induced by the analytic situation and is not to be attributed to the charms of his own person” (1958: 174) I don’t mean to suggest that Wesleyan students are not like this at all – but that the parallel myths show us less the “truth,” and more ways that both students and faculty are motivated to believe in and reproduce ideas about Wesleyan’s distinctness and superiority (as an excellent place to work and to attend college).} \]

\[ \text{Rebecca Schuman writes, “Student learning hardly factors in, because (surprise) students are often poor judges of what will help them learn. (They are, instead, excellent judges of how to get an easy A)” (2014).} \]

\[ \text{Additionally the article “Students Praise Male Professors” (Mulhere 2014) further highlights the role of gender perception in advancing men on teaching evaluations. One professor I interviewed spoke about being told she wasn’t maternal enough and that the clothes she wore were “boring.” And another professor described a teaching evaluation that was written as if it was a report card with “grades” on her clothing, the way she talked, and her personality.} \]

\[ \text{Ease also becomes a way to establish credibility for a subject like queer or ethnic studies, which is often not taken seriously.} \]

\[ \text{The recent student demand that professors make students exclusively feel good in the classroom is part of a larger discourse on trigger warnings in which student activists request that professors give students “trigger warnings” before addressing emotionally unsettling material. In response many professors, such as Ann Pelligrini, have pointed out that it is impossible for faculty to predict what will trigger students and unfair for this burden to fall on them. Particularly because students are more likely to place these demands on queer and feminist faculty and faculty of color who are more likely to teach “triggering” material. Ann Pelligrini’s blog post is part of a series of a larger discourse on trigger warnings in which many queer professors and professors of color have highlighted how the affective demands that come with trigger warnings unfairly fall on queer, feminist, disability, and ethnic studies professors. Avgi Sakotopoulou, Katherine McKittrick, and Lisa Duggan offer some additional critiques of trigger warnings. In her blog post “Feminist Hurt/Feminism Hurts” Sara Ahmed shares a nuanced defense for sensitivity in the classroom.} \]

\[ \text{In the article “Sexual Paranoia Strikes” (2015) Laura Kipnis describes the way paranoia about professors as capable of sexually harassing students inverts traditional power dynamics: “In fact, it’s just as likely that a student can derail a professor’s career these days as the other way around.” Kipnis later highlights the way this anxiety about sexual assault is misdirected at professors when she states, “If colleges and universities around the country were in any way serious about policies to prevent sexual assaults, the path is obvious: Don’t ban teacher-student romance, ban fraternities.”} \]
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