Out of Class Experiences in Prep Schools: An Ethnographic Look at Educational Inequity, Nonprofit Intervention and Palliative Change

by

Rosemary Martin
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Preface

A year after I had decided to transfer from a very small, preppy liberal arts school in Connecticut (ironically, not Wesleyan), I decided to increase my academic knowledge of educational inequity with interest as a potential career focus. The truth is that I resented my first college for its homogeneity. It consisted of a student body from some of the wealthiest New England preparatory schools. While they were not the only demographics at this school, I was so overwhelmed by their - perhaps more accurately, our - presence that I saw little else.

After transferring to Wesleyan, I felt thankful to be in an environment known for its diversity - in both demographics and academic mission. However, as the years passed, I realized that, though this school is more diverse than many others like it, its history as a white educational institution does not absolve it of problems of inequity. Wesleyan’s history continues to have its own ripple effects - waves, not ripples - in the current moment.

As a sophomore, I took an internship in Harlem, New York, with an organization called Harlem RBI. This is a summer camp for six and seven year olds, living in and around East Harlem. Kids play board games, learn to cook, and play softball. It is also a summer school that focused on academics as kids read regularly throughout the course of the camp. As an organization, Harlem RBI seeks to minimize the effects of the summer reading gap, which is especially more drastic for “low income” children, and many of the children who participate in it belong to this category.¹ Unsurprisingly, one of the first things I noticed when I began my

internship was the demographics. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of students were Black and Hispanic. I remember having a conversation with a seven-year old girl during a game of kickball. She said to me: “You’re blonde. Where are you from?” I told her that I was from Connecticut. She crinkled her eyebrows in confusion and responded: “So you’re just white?” Indeed, I was one of very few white few people working at Harlem RBI, and I had a few interactions like this one that showed me that my presence was confusing, or perhaps different, for many students.

After that summer, I began to think about educational inequity more seriously and critically. I thought about my expectations of Wesleyan’s diverse environment and how that differed from the reality I was exposed to. I also thought about the role that Harlem RBI played in the students’ lives, specifically focusing on its position as a nonprofit organization. My summer memories, research, concerns and new awareness about what it means to be white and privileged merged when I began to think about writing a senior thesis.

I started big, and narrowed my topic down, until I decided to focus on one nonprofit’s approach to addressing and redressing a history of educational injustice. I settled on Prep for Prep - a New York City nonprofit that prepares students of color for leadership development and matriculation into private high schools - as the primary site of my research. Prep for Prep fit well because I actually knew Wesleyan students who had done it prior to starting this project, and it is also one of the more prominent nonprofits that addresses this issue.
I carry this thesis with me to my future. As I apply for jobs in the field of education and think about the trajectory of my career, I hold everything that this research and process has taught me very close.
Introduction

The Great Equalizer and the Playing Field

The saliency of the American Dream is so enmeshed in the social fabric and popular imagination of United States culture that much of the stories involving it tend to reify the myth. Less time is spent on actually deconstructing what it means. Whether or not people in this country and outside of it believe in the validity of the American Dream, the general view is built on several ideals: equality of opportunity, possibility for success, prosperity with initiative, resilience, and hard work. This definition is based on a premise that begs the questions: what is equality? Does everyone have equal opportunity? How do we define success and prosperity?

No discussion concerning the American belief in equality of opportunity can be had without addressing the equally important belief in different results.² This perception depends on everyone having the same access to varying degrees of prosperity. As such, the possibilities of success or failure are not unjust. In their book, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools*, education reform scholars Paul Peterson and William Howell consider the problematics of school vouchers and their effect on childhood performance. Vouchers are one method of leveling the playing field for marginalized students, an idea that is integral to understanding the American Dream, especially in the context of accessibility for people of color. A voucher allows a student to attend a school outside of their public school district, and the government covers the cost. In their discussion, Peterson and Howell highlight the nebulous tensions between notions of equal opportunity and the pursuit of prosperity:

² I cannot avoid using this term in reference to the American Dream, which in this context refers to the North American Dream. I recognize the hegemonic construction of the term, as it does not encompass Central and South America.
When Americans speak of equality, they speak mainly of equal opportunity. Each citizen has a right to the pursuit of happiness, not a guarantee of its realization. As long as the starting line in the economic race is clearly drawn, those who can run fast or are lucky enough to find shortcuts may dash unrestrained to the finish line, well ahead of their competitors. (Peterson and Howell 2006: 2).

Equal opportunity, then, is the fundamental element of the American Dream. The ahistorical premise lies in common advantages or disadvantages that place the burden of achievement on the shoulders of the individual.

The assumption that everyone has the same opportunities begs a couple of questions: what does success mean for those who actually achieve it and is it structurally possible for everyone to be successful? Anthropologist Sherry Ortner’s work on class, race, and upward mobility in her book New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of ’58 is useful here because she complicates the notion of upward mobility by explaining how class and raced dynamics are fundamental to its realization (or, in some cases, to its failure to be realized). Perceptions and definitions of achievement were integral to her analysis. She writes, “Like all key symbols, ‘success has highly variable meanings in American culture. Probably the dominant meaning is...making a lot of money” (Ortner 2003: 188). In this capitalist system, it is unsurprising that the obvious marker of triumph is the accumulation of capital as this remains the primary symbol of socio-economic achievement and wellbeing. As I will demonstrate and as Ortner has already demonstrated in her book, success is not equally attainable for everyone. People who are already situated highly on the classed ladder are more likely to be successful – make a lot of money – than those who are
working class. In addition, discrimination makes it so whites can more easily ascend the ladder than marginalized groups.

Being educated has always been the holy grail for those seeking upward mobility. While for some, it has been understood as a site for liberation and the cultivation of intellect, for most education is a stepping-stone to something more. Over the course of its history, United States presidents have emphasized education’s role in the betterment of the nation and its people. For example, President George Washington wrote, “The best means of forming a manly, virtuous, and happy people will be found in the right education of youth.”3 Even more recently, President Obama confirmed this popular belief, reflecting on his educational experience: “Michelle and I are only here because we were given a chance at an education. I will not settle for an America where some kids don’t have that chance.”4

Indeed, the evidence is embedded in people’s livelihood. Comparing median earnings between people with bachelor’s degrees and high school degrees substantiates the link between education (and a lot of it) and the accumulation of capital: in 2011, bachelor’s degrees recipients earned $21,000 higher than high school degree recipients. Master’s degrees recipients earned 90% more than people with high school degrees. Doctorates earned 2.6 times as much.5 The notion that education is a

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fundamental tool for success could not be more apparent than in this demonstrated socioeconomic value for knowledge.

Horace Mann led the country in the Common School Movement, a movement in the 1840s and 1850s that led to near-universal, free, public elementary education. Similar to George Washington and Barack Obama, He preached the importance of universal public education for the betterment of the United States population. Today, he is still known as one of the fathers of American education and one of the first central education scholars in this country, and as such, he becomes an exemplar of popular education discourse. In the Twelfth Annual Report as Secretary of Massachusetts State Board of Education⁶, he said: “education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery” (Mann 2849: 59). This ideology - held by many Americans and organizations – including Prep for Prep - is consistent with the American belief in equality of opportunity: so long as American children have access to equal schools, their education will level the playing field, implying that students’ race and socioeconomic class will not impede or help them in their pursuit of education and success. Thus, combining this notion of education with perceptions of normative success, we understand that education becomes a path - that is purportedly accessible to everyone - towards a singular goal, the accumulation of capital.

Unfortunately, these ideologies are naively optimistic and hopeful. Their practical existence tells a different story. Educational programs such as Prep for Prep, Early Steps, and A Better Chance, which intervene in the pursuit of education among

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⁶ As secretary of the Board of Education in Massachusetts, Horace Mann gave a series of annual reports about the state of education and the potential for reform.
students of color, are tangible evidence that belies notions of equal opportunity and education as the great equalizer. The complexities of the falsehood of the American Dream are extensive.

Institutionalized residential segregation has led to stark racial division in cities and suburbs around the country that has directly caused gross disparities in educational opportunity and quality in residential areas. I will provide a personal example of this below. Black students whose residential options are limited both by class and race face this same injustice in their pursuit of education, calling into question the notion of equality of opportunity. A concrete indicator of inequality is the amount of money funneled to public schools in different towns; areas with higher taxes have more funds allocated to their schools. Thus, if the realization of the American Dream rests on quality education and hard work, Black students are at a considerable disadvantage. Scholar of education and activist Jonathan Kozol, who spent two years traveling to different public schools throughout the United States, captures this poignantly in his book *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*:

> Placing the burden on the individual to break down doors in finding better education for a child is attractive to conservatives because it reaffirms their faith in individual ambition and autonomy. But to ask an individual to break down doors that we have chained and bolted in advance of his arrival is unfair. (Kozol 1991: 62)

Kozol’s book is a painful report on racial and classed inequality in America’s schools. Although written in 1991, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools* still remains pertinent. Unequal access to quality schooling begins in early education but remains consistent throughout until a terminal degree due to geographic,
demographic, and economic influences. White students are concentrated in the nation’s 468 most well-funded, competitive four-year colleges and universities. Similarly, African-American and Hispanic students are increasingly concentrated in the 3,250 least-well funded, two- and four-year colleges.⁷

Without tokenizing people of color who do achieve success - that is, accumulate capital - it is not impossible for marginalized people to climb a classed ladder (the ladder I refer to here is one only built on financial status). So is education the great equalizer for some? Does it in fact level the playing field?

First, it is important to note that upward mobility for marginalized groups is often exceptional rather than structural. It is not impossible to obtain but it is lived differently for Black Americans than it is for white Americans in a way that highlights this uneven discrepancy. Black Americans who achieve middle class status stratify race and class categories; they are financially dominant but still belong to a racial category that positions them as inferior (Cole and Omari, 2003). Black feminist cultural critic bell hooks’ work on class and race elucidates such stratification. Raised in a segregated small community, hooks and her family spoke about race frequently but about class, they did not talk as much. She eventually went Stanford University, as the first person in her family to attend college. This experience was instrumental to her perceptions of the overlapping: “The surrounding white supremacist world reminded all of us through exploitation and domination that even the richest black person could be crushed by racism’s heavy weight” (hooks 2000: 91). This classed

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and racialized stratification leads to an essentially different experience of middleclassness for Black Americans; an experience that may be characterized by victory in some sense but with an enduring perception of lack in others.

The Beginnings

America’s racial beginnings expose the myths of the Dream, which has been constructed through and alongside the systemic exclusion of Blacks who were forcibly brought to this continent. Racial hierarchies would eventually ferment into social constructions. With their monopoly of economic and social power, whites deployed scientific racism, which “…entailed the use of ‘scientific techniques,’ to sanction the belief in European and American racial Superiority,” to justify their enslavement of Blacks. Would be anthropologists, travel writers and “scientists” of all kinds pursued and documented this otherness. For example, Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, a French physician studied the civilization of the “savage,” wrote “…civilization woke the intellectual faculties of our savage from their lethargy…” (1972: 168). From the onset, education was conceptualized as a process only meant for the “civilized” man. It was both the instrument that civilized, and the foundation on which the existence of civilization rested. Thus, to be included in the existing social structure, to be deemed a civilian, the so-called “savage” had to be educated. However, his skin would be a lasting marker of inferiority regardless of his education.

However, the transition from “savage” to civilian through education is not so simply chronological. The simplicity of this process is complicated when considering

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8 Americanness excluded anyone who was not white.
the colonialist nature of the education of so-called “savages” throughout history. In
his analysis of the relationship between education, colonialism, and citizenry during
the Enlightenment, education social theorist Murray Simpson writes, “Indeed, there
was no question that [civilizing the savage] was a primary duty for the colonizers, and
it depended fundamentally on viewing the savage as capable of being civilized”
(Simpson 2007: 563). The colonialist categorized the “savage” as inferior so that he
could intervene, and this racist dynamic persists even after the “savage” has been
schooled and civilized.

The belief that education was integral to citizenship and participation in the
political sphere lies at the center of slave owners’ prohibition of schooling for slaves.
In order to maintain supremacy, whites had to ensure that they reaffirmed slaves’
Education in Slavery and Freedom*, Heather Andrea Williams retraces the link
between education, slavery, and freedom for African American slaves. She highlights
the importance of literacy in the fight for freedom, and its fundamental threat to slave
owners:

Masters made every attempt to control their captives’ thoughts and
imaginations, indeed their hearts and minds. Maintaining a system of bondage
in the Age of Enlightenment depended upon the master’s being able to speak
for the slave, to deny his or her humanity, and to draw a line between slave
consciousness and human will. The presence of literate slaves threatened to
give lie to the entire system. Reading indicated to the world that this so-called
property had a mind, and writing foretold the ability to construct an alternative
narrative about bondage itself. Literacy among the slaves would expose
slavery, and masters knew it. (Williams 2005: 7)
Slaves, however, still pursued education. But under these circumstances, the beginning of Black education in the United States was surreptitious, dangerous, and anti-colonialist.

In 1865, slavery was abolished, but segregation was reified in all social spaces and was deemed constitutional until it was repeatedly contested legally. America continued to evolve as a nation bound to the doctrine of “separate but equal.” The landmark *Plessy versus Ferguson* (1896) case legalized segregation at the end of the 19th century. A court room quote during a trial similar to *Plessy versus Ferguson* highlights the notion of separate but equal: “…to assert separateness is not to declare inferiority in either…it is simply to say that…human authority ought not to compel these widely separate races to intermix” (Robbins 1909: 140). Education remained divided along legalized racial lines.

It was not until the mid-twentieth century that American rhetoric shifted. In 1954, *Plessy vs. Ferguson* was overturned by *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which ruled that de jure segregation in public schools violated the Equal Protection Clause and the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution. The legal decision to desegregate was multifaceted, but an important element of it was the

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10 Homer Plessy boarded a “whites-only” car on a Louisiana interstate in a test case initially orchestrated by the Comité des Citoyens, a group of Black, Creole, and white New Orleans residents. Plessy was one-eighth African and seventh-eights white; by law, he was Black. Plessy was arrested upon boarding the train. In the Supreme Court, Plessy’s lawyer, Albion Tourgée argued that the event violated the 13th and 14th Amendments. In a 7 to 1 majority opinion, the Supreme Court ruled against Plessy (Medley 2003).

white fear of the social parity with Blacks, and of the collective radicalization of Black people. hooks, in retracing and historicizing her own educational journey, writes, “It was better to give privileged black people great access to the existing social structure than to have a radical talented tenth that would lead the black masses to revolt and cultural revolution” (hooks 2000: 92). I return here to Murray Simpson’s discussion of the civilized “savage;” incorporating Blacks into the existing social structure would reinforce white control because whites were doing the civilizing according to their hegemonic social structure. Desegregation, then, was not about the collective recognition of the injustice of inequity, but instead, an attempt for the white supremacist state to reinforce its superiority insidiously and forcefully.

**De Jure Desegregation/Militarized Segregation**

Below, I point to three moments when Black students desegregated white schools. While these schools are concentrated in the South, these moments offer insight into how attempts to desegregate have been met with extreme militarization and nation-wide fear and resistance from whites. The Little Rock Nine Crisis of 1957 exemplified the paradoxes of integration and the impact of de facto segregation within schools. Nine Black students were prevented from entering a previously all-white high school by Governor Orval Faubus, who deployed the Arkansas National Guard to physically stop the students from entering. It was not until the President intervened, deploying federal troops to Arkansas who accompanied the students into the school, that they physically entered Little Rock High School (Freyer 1981).
Such aggressive attempts to block (literally and metaphorically) were not uncommon. In 1962, James Meredith, a Black military veteran, became the first Black student to attend the University of Mississippi. He entered the school with 500 United States Marshals alongside him (Donovan 2002). He had been denied admissions twice at Ole Miss. Moreover, Meredith filed a suit in the federal district court case about his eligibility for admissions, which led to a purposefully tedious and elongated series of legal proceedings, each one more aggressively discriminatory than the one before. In one of the last attempts to keep Meredith from attending Ole Miss, Mississippi governor Ross Barnett’s declared: “I have said in every county in Mississippi that no school in our state will be integrated while I am your Governor. I shall do everything in my power to prevent integration in our schools.”

President

Kennedy intervened, and eventually Meredith arrived on campus with twenty-four federal marshals by his side.

In 1963, Vivian Malone and James Hood were prevented from attending the University of Alabama by Alabama Governor George Wallace. Wallace, who infamously proclaimed “segregation now...segregation tomorrow...segregation forever,” blocked the students from entering the university, and only surrendered his position when Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach said to him, “Sir, it is my sad duty to ask you to step aside under orders from the president of the United States” (Lesher 1994: 233).

The previous three examples exemplify how federal efforts to integrate educational institutions were met with militarized and forceful resistance from state political leaders who wished to maintain segregated schools and white supremacist power. Resistance to integration persists today, and though it may not always be overtly physical, its effects are still demonstrative of racial and classed exclusion. It is not uncommon today for parents seeking better education for their children to look at which areas have the strongest public schools. More often than not, these areas are expensive and thus exclusionary so parents are compelled to seek alternative ways to allow their children to have the best education possible.

Tonya McDowell of Bridgeport, Connecticut was accused of stealing $15,000 from the Norwalk School District because she registered the Norwalk address of her son’s babysitter so her son could go to school in that district, rather than in

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13 I do not mean to imply that only state governments, and not the federal government, had racist intentions in their attempts to uphold segregation.
Bridgeport. McDowel was found guilty of first-degree larceny and conspiracy to commit larceny, and is currently serving five years for these crimes. During her trial, McDowel asked, “Who would have thought that wanting a good education for my son would put me in this predicament.” Whether or not the Norwalk School District was $15,000 short is irrelevant. Of greater import are the lengths to which the wealthier, whiter district went to ensure a non-Norwalk student - a poorer, darker Other - would not have access to the education offered at this school.

Segregation Today and Programmatic Intervention

My high school’s curriculum, as well as its demographic makeup, elucidate how the public education system in the United States is not equally accessible for all students and is exclusionary towards minorities. Weston High School received A+ rankings in nearly every category of Niche Ranking, a system used by parents, students, and teachers to measure the success of public and private schools throughout the United States. Niche evaluates schools using ten different categories: academics, administration and policies, educational outcomes, extracurriculars, food,

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14 According to the 2010 Census, Norwalk’s white population is 58,826 and the black population is 12,187. Per capita income is $31,781. Bridgeport’s per capita income is $16,306 and the white population is 57,070 and black population is 49,842 (2010 Census). Test scores in 2013 at Norwalk’s leading elementary school, the Tracey School, were better than at Bridgeport’s leading elementary school, the Read School. 69% of Norwalk third graders were proficient or better in math, 51% in reading, and 61% in writing. At Read, 68% of students were proficient or better in math, 44% in reading, and 69% in writing.


health and safety, resources and facilities, sports and fitness, student culture and diversity, and teachers.16

A look at the demographics of my high school is representative of the racialized and classed access to quality public education. 90% of the student body is white, 3% Asian, 2% African American, 2% Hispanic, and 1% multiracial. Unsurprisingly, socioeconomic diversity is not common either: only 2.7% of Weston High School students were eligible for free or reduced price lunch in 2013.17 Westonites are not all blind to the distinct homogeneity, but they often use rhetoric that mystifies such inequity. A Niche user writes, “highly lacking in diversity, but not hostile to diverse people just unexposed.” The lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity at the schools reflects the breakdown of the town which is 94% white with a median income of $208,078 per household (American Fact Finder). Central High School located in Bridgeport, Connecticut is 44% African American, 39% Hispanic, 11% White, and 3% Asian. 99.7% of the students are on free or reduced lunch and thus provides a counterpoint to Weston’s homogeneity. Niche gives Central High School an overall grade of a C-. Particularly low ranking categories according to Niche at Central High School are academics, educational outcomes (performance on standardized tests), and resources.18

Weston and Central are less than 25 minutes apart from each other. The differences in socioeconomic and racial balance at these two schools, along with their academic performance reflect the inequality of the public educational system in the

United States. Weston High School exemplifies the fact that schools attended by affluent students consistently perform better academically than schools attended by impoverished students (Putnam 2015). Though this generalization remains true for both public and private schools, it becomes more complicated for public schools, which are supposed to provide equal, free education to all citizens, regardless of class or race. I return here to Kozol, whose unequivocal account of American education illuminates the injustice of unequal public schools:

> Unless we have the wealth to pay for private education, we are compelled by law to go to public school - and to the public school in our district. Thus the state, by requiring attendance but refusing to require equity, effectively requires inequality. Compulsory inequity, perpetuated by state law, too frequently condemns our children to unequal lives. (1991: 56)

Inequity in public education, he suggests, is more easily traceable to the United State’s government’s history as an institution that at one point sanctioned the lawful slavery of Black people, their lawful segregation, and currently the de facto segregation and racism that persists. That public schools are regional further proves their inherent inequality.

In his expository piece, “The Case for Reparations,” Ta-Nehisi Coates traces Chicago’s history of fierce and assiduous residential segregation to demonstrate how it has become one of the most segregated cities in the country. His account is useful in the context of public educational, because it shows us how unequal public schools did not just happen; rather, they were the work of years of purposeful exclusion and segregation sanctioned formally and informally by the government. Coates starts in 1917, when the Chicago Real Estate Board lobbied to zone the city upon the influx of Blacks. The Supreme Court ruled against this, so the Federal Housing Administration
began to use restrictive covenants to control where and how Black citizens were living. In 1948, the Supreme Court ruled that restrictive covenants were not lawfully enforceable. The next tactic for maintaining residential segregation came with the construction of Chicago’s family public housing units, 98% of which were built in all-Black neighborhoods. As these various methods of de jure and de facto segregation were implemented, white racism filled any remaining voids. Violence committed against Black Americans ensured that white neighborhoods would stay homogenous. And when white violence was not enough, white flight took over. Coates writes, “...white flight was a triumph of social engineering, orchestrated by the shared racist presumptions of America’s public and private sectors.”

The force with which the government has maintained residential segregation is inextricably tied to striking segregation in public schools. As we learned from *Plessy vs. Ferguson* and subsequently *Brown vs. Board of Education*, segregated schools are never equal. This, in part, has to do with perceptions of Black students versus white students; Blacks are perceived to be underachieving and unintellectual, so those who control education – usually, whites – do not provide the same resources to all schools. Anthropologist Signithia Fordham writes about the struggles of high-achieving Black students who study and academically excel in a world that expects them to fail:

> Within their ecological structure black Americans traditionally have been provided with substandard schooling, based on white American’s perception of the education needs of black Americans; and white Americans have controlled black Americans’ education. (Fordham 1985: 178-179)

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Fordham’s work helps us to understand the *hows* and the *whys* of academic success at Weston High School and academic failure at Central High School. Indeed, the socioeconomic and racial differences at my high school and Central High School are clearly correlated to their academic performances. Such a close correlation is troubling, but disturbingly predictable. As Fordham has demonstrated, as a nation, we have grown accustomed to elite white schools and underperforming Black schools, never finding fault within the socio-economic system that created the problem.

In recent years, nonprofit programs like Prep for Prep have risen in popularity to assist marginalized people in the pursuit of education and to avoid confronting the real ailments of the failing public educational system. I return to Kozol to situate persistence of these issues in our current moment:

The struggle being waged today, where there is any struggle being waged at all, is closer to the one that was addressed in 1896 in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in which the court accepted segregated institutions for black people, stipulating only that they must be equal to those of white people. The dual society, at least in public education, seems in general to be unquestioned. (1991: 4).

Kozol wrote this book a quarter of a century ago, yet its messages are still alarmingly pertinent, thus demonstrating the necessity of Prep for Prep and other programs like it. In the first chapter, I will discuss Prep for Prep in greater detail. Prior to doing so, I will provide a brief historical development of two programs similar to it.

A Better Chance was founded in 1963, and assists students of color in matriculating into boarding, day, and public schools around the country. Their stated mission: “...is to increase substantially the number of well-educated young people of color who are capable of assuming positions of responsibility and leadership in
American society.” These programs reflect the persistence of educational inequity and the failure of many educational institutions to desegregate and “equalize.” Still, today as in the 1960s, students of color need programmatic intervention. In 1986, Early Steps was started to “...create a tapestry of diversity in New York City independent schools.” Early Steps works with the families and children applying for entry into independent schools in kindergarten and 1st grade. Their principal concern is to increase diversity in NYC preparatory schools and also to provide quality education, guidance, and support for families and children of color.

**Self-Reflection/Self-Reflexion**

My pursuit of education, frankly, has involved no roadblocks. The public school in my town was not only a reliable option, but an exceptional one. I lived five minutes away from it by car, which I drove each day, like the majority of my other classmates. Programs like Prep for Prep were foreign to us, a feature of a world outside of our very sanitized bubble - one that we would never truly confront. I speak of my privilege not to overshadow what is to follow in this ethnography, but to position it next to and within the story I need to tell.

This ethnography is the story of a non-profit organization about which I knew nothing until I began researching it. It is a story that captures snippets of experiences I never had. Throughout the course of my research, I have asked myself: can I or how do I differentiate myself from the intellectual imperialist, the colonialist or travel

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writer who studied culture of “others” and called it anthropology? Can I or how do I decolonize an ethnography that involves a white researcher and Black and Brown “subjects?” Can I conduct research from a position of privilege and still comprehend the complexity of the situation despite my apparent complicity? To answer these questions, I engage Black feminist anthropologist Faye Harrison’s work on “Decolonizing Anthropology.” She calls on anthropologists to consciously, “ politicize deconstruction of various hegemonic ideologies and discourses” (Harrison 1991: 8). Harrison confronts the colonialist history of Anthropology and the legacy it has left in the field today: silencing of Black and Brown voices, prioritizing white voices, and delegitimizing autoethnography. Inspired by her, I hope that this ethnography will take the form of a “cultural critique and politicized discourse deconstruction” that will trouble hegemony (Harrison 1991: 8).

These questions have floated around my head for several months, frequently bringing me to the brink of intellectual and academic crisis, and always allowing me to interrogate, reevaluate, and discover my own intentions. Despite my self-doubt and continuing hesitation, here is what I have discovered: it is not enough for me to simply state that there is a system out there - that theorists call a political machine - that creates, strengthens, and ignores injustice that I, in most ways, do not experience. It does not serve for me stray away from conversations of injustice because I am inexperienced in the realization of them. The “system,” the “monster,” does not exist outside of me because I do not experience its most vicious and insidious attacks. On the contrary, it is precisely because I went to a public school that is both 97% white
and academically prestigious (these two not being coincidental), that I am implicated in the political machine.

There is, of course, a productive intervention and an unproductive intervention. An intervention that is decolonized, and one that is definitely not. In this ethnography, I have included otherwise marginalized voices to avoid the repetition of the same hegemonic narratives within the discipline of anthropology, and society, in general. At the same time, I have included a self-reflexive component to this ethnography in an effort to position myself next to my Prep for Prep peers. In doing this, my aim is to demonstrate my implication in the same system in a drastically different manner. If I do not reflect on my own whiteness, my own classed position, am I any different from Kalervo Oberg and Edward Burnett Tylor? These ethnographers ethnocentrically categorized others, unconscious of how their own positionality affected their perceptions. As Harrison has noticed, they are anthropologists who have “...studied people radically different from themselves and constructed ethnographic exoticism in terms of a radical alterity and otherness…” (2006: 9). The desire for facts - for science that is not affected by the observer or scholar - still takes precedence. I want to subvert hegemonic anthropology by including a critical look inwards; a self-reflexion, if you will. Without that, this ethnography would be yet another reiteration of the very systemic structures which create the absolute necessity for organizations like Prep for Prep.

22 In his book, Primitive Culture: Researchers Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom, evolutionary anthropologist E.B. Tylor wrote “…processes, customs, and opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved” (1871: 16). He believed in cultural evolutionism, describing a linearly evolution of savage to civilized man.
Methodology

To understand Prep for Prep and its activities and goals, I conducted archival and library research and oral interviews. My oral interviews have contributed to my understanding of how the Prep lived experience differs from the purported experience of students. Part of the work that contributed to this thesis has also been a culmination of serendipitous conversations that have inspired me through my years at Wesleyan. Informal though they were, they, in part, led me to this topic and have stayed with me as I write critically about it.

I was terrified for my first interview. It felt like no time passed between the actual planning of the interview (back and forth emails, phone calls, the saga) and when I was staring at Prep for Prep’s office door, waiting for 2:30 PM to roll around. As usual, I had arrived early, with a half hour to spare, and somehow still felt that that I didn’t have enough time. I knew what questions to ask. I knew how to talk about my interests in an informed and conscientious way, but I still felt entirely unprepared. I could not stop focusing on my informant’s undergraduate Columbia degree. I could not stop thinking about her first, second master’s degrees, and finally her doctorate—all in education; I had looked her up on LinkedIn the day prior. Did I really know my questions that well? Did I really, really know what I was talking about? My self-assurance dwindled as I walked closer to the office.

To calm my nerves and pass the time, I walked around the surrounding Upper West Side area for a while. I was hungry, but I struggled to find an eating option where I wouldn’t spend at least $15.00 on a small snack. Whole Foods, Dean &
Deluca, the works. Finally, I found a CVS where I got enough to settle my stomach but not enough to make me feel truly nauseous before my interview.

After my snack, I walked back toward the office, taking deep breaths as I went, trying to remind myself that this was just a conversation with another person. I felt odd as I walked down the residential street on the Upper West Side, scanning each of the brownstones and looking for number 328. They were some of the most beautiful houses I had ever seen, and I felt mildly uncomfortable that one of them was Prep for Prep’s office. I thought back to my days as an intern for Harlem RBI and couldn’t help but compare its humble storefront office to Prep’s grand apartment. I also thought about Prep students entering this building for the first time; did they also feel uncomfortable? I couldn’t understand why I felt these feelings of discomfort, why I felt that a non-profit organization should operate humbly in all ways, but still I could not shake them. I did my best to set them aside and entered.

The inside of the office was equally as striking as the outside, and though my discomfort continued, my nerves distracted me. A young man greeted me at the front desk. My presence seemed to confuse him, but he was helpful and asked me to please have a seat and wait. More deep breaths. Sofia finally came out with an infectious smile and a warm welcome. I was still half expecting her to be rigid and curt after our introduction, but as she guided me into the library and began asking about my project, I could tell that she was excited to inform and help me. We exchanged stories about what led us to where we are. She asked me how I became interested in accessibility to quality education for marginalized groups. I knew this question was coming: why would someone so seemingly distant from this topic be interested in it? My answer
was my first opportunity to explain myself, to validate my reasons for being where I was, and to emphasize my sincerity. I believe I did this well. I realized that my lack of experience in this world would not always be met with skepticism; perhaps I would have to explain my interest, but I would not have to defend myself.

During our interview, I asked Sofia about the other faculty members at Prep: how did they come to work for Prep? This question was personal, not related to the thesis. She told me that the employees at Prep for Prep are not all Prep grads, but they are people who have had Prep-like experiences: they have sought and found quality education despite their racial and socioeconomic positions. It was then that I thought about my aspirations to work in education policy, and about how I may have to give up on some of them; only people who truly understand the reasons for why certain policies must exist should be the ones to make those policies (and these policies should deconstruct educational inequity). This conversation allowed me to reflect and think deeply about where my own position in this “world” should be; it was both discouraging and hopeful. I respect Prep for having this tradition even if it means I cannot be a part of it.

Sofia made me feel at ease during our interview. She was helpful and especially pleasant to speak to. I was anxious about using my phone for the first time to record the interview, but she kept reassuring me that she had been through the same recording woes during her dissertation, and that I should take as much time as I needed. She told me about the inner workings of the program, about how it started and how it is expanding, and she did so with such charisma and enthusiasm. With each answer, I was surprised by how much there was to say about Prep for Prep. I
learned how much it has evolved from the beginning and I became impressed with how the program has changed in order to meet its students’ needs. I began to question my critical approach to my project; maybe I shouldn’t criticize Prep, maybe I should praise it. I liked the program more as I learned more about it. I tried to remain as neutral as possible, but at times my feelings of amazement got the best of me.

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This ethnography is the product of nine months of fieldwork and research during which I interviewed both Prep for Prep staff members and Prep for Prep alumnae. I interviewed three Prep staff members who worked in admissions and mentorship of the program. Sofia was one of them. These conversations, though informative, are not as integral to the project as my conversations with Prep alumna. I interviewed five women who had participated in Prep during high school and are now alumna of the program.

The subjects wish to remain anonymous, so I decided to refer to them using pseudonyms. Renee, Ariel, Sarah, Anna, and Alexis were, or still are, Wesleyan students. In addition to our shared genders, I appreciated this common experience we had as well. Most of them critiqued Prep for Prep, for reasons you will see, but still remain grateful that the program has given them opportunities they seemingly would not have had without it. These conversations highlighted the commonly experienced faults of Prep, but also gave me a sense of what the program does very well. Indeed, I will explore this tension.
If I have learned anything, it is that Prep is not easy. It is very, very difficult in many ways. I remain grateful to the women for sharing what they did and I admire their resilience and compassion.

**Where We Stand**

This culminates in my commitment to make sense of a preoccupation with inequity. Education and educational spaces have always been hegemonic constructions. With everything I know, I continue to ponder: who is education really *meant for* in this country? Who does the American educational system include and exclude? How does the historic and continuous exclusion of certain groups and inclusion of others reflect the dynamics of American society more generally? How does segregation persist outside of the classroom and inside of it? Indeed, much like the process of educating of the so-called “savages” during the era of colonialism, education of marginalized “others” necessitates a process of re-socialization to incorporate them into the current social structure.

Prep for Prep is an organization that works to essentially desegregate and integrate marginalized groups into historically white spaces. It cultivates the re-socialization of students to ensure that secondary schools will admit them into these environments where they could potentially succeed. This thesis is an exploration of this process of resocialization. In chapter one, I give a brief history and background of Prep for Prep to contextualize my critique. Chapter two is an introduction into how Prep begins the resocialization process for its students by exposing them to the middle class lifestyle. The organization takes students to social events, hoping that
they will accumulate cultural capital in the same way that their peers do at preparatory school.

In chapter three, I explore what actually happens with this apparent social capital. I will focus on how independent schools are historically white environments that reproduce exclusionary cultural norms. Citing dress and pedagogy as two sites for exclusion, I emphasize the confrontation that occurs when a person of color enters a white and wealthy independent school. Finally, in chapter four I will explore how this process of resocialization reaffirms structural violence because it positions hegemonic middleclass whiteness as desirable and necessary. Framing this in the broader context of social service non-profits, I show how non-profits and Prep for Prep paradoxically work within a hegemonic system to counter hegemony.

The conclusion is an exploration of possibilities in revolutionary tactics that can be used and adapted to create moments of rupture within neoliberal capitalist schools that are exclusionary and discriminatory. I will highlight the significance of small acts of transgression that translate into something more radical using the Zapatismo framework of resistance to capitalism and neoliberalism. Zapatismo defends indigenous autonomy and, though seemingly unrelated to Prep for Prep historically and geopolitically, provides a radical response to the same structures that cause inequity in educational institutions. Drawing from this more radical approach, I will discuss how this past year has been exemplary of moments of transgression within educational institutions nationally. Movements at University of Missouri, Yale University, and here at Wesleyan University have gained traction and called attention
to persistent racism on college campuses. Such movements represent moments of rupture that pave the way towards change – however we may imagine it.
Chapter One
A Brief History and Background of Prep for Prep

Prep for Prep was founded in 1978 by a South Bronx elementary school teacher named Gary Simons. Through his time teaching, he encountered students who were academically successful, driven, and excited but lacked the proper school support that would help them succeed. Thus, Simons began to place his most talented student in independent schools throughout New York. However, what he found was that many students, despite their intellectual aptitude and enthusiasm, did not make it through high school. He began to feel discomfort in “…playing Russian roulette with the lives of these youngsters” (Simons 2003: XIV). His discomfort led to deep thought which eventually led to the idea of Prep for Prep. Simons had been completing graduate work at Columbia University’s Teachers College and he convinced the school to sponsor Prep for Prep as a pilot project. The Trinity School agreed to provide a space for Prep to complete its first Preparatory Component. 1979 marked the first “Contingent” of Prep students: there were 22. By 1981, 100 Prep students were enrolled in independent schools. In 1985, New York magazine did a cover story on Prep for Prep. In 1986, Prep hosted its first Iris Ball (renamed the Lilac Ball), which still remains its signature fundraising event. By 2003, the number of Prep graduates was above 1,000. Today, there are over 2,500 Prep college graduates.

In this chapter, I explain in greater detail what Prep for Prep does and the ideologies that drive its actions then discuss how the program approaches its role in the lives of gifted students of color and how it seeks to soften the effects of inequality in the educational system and society in general, for these students. My aim is to
show all of this is made possible through the funding Prep receives from its Board and other donors. Because Prep for Prep is so successful and accumulates a fair share of funds, one must ask why funders feel like Prep is successful in carrying out its mission. I will seek to answer the question: how does Prep measure its success?

**Background**

Based in New York City, Prep for Prep is an organization that provides gifted students of color with leadership development and the opportunity for private school education. Prep students are selected based on their middle school academic profiles, a series of skills-based testing, interviews, teacher recommendations, and need. Students who score in the top 10% to 15% of the initial round of testing are invited in for an interview. During this interview, Prep evaluates how the student demonstrates his or her motivation, goals, worldview, and ambition for the future. From the teacher evaluations, Prep looks for signs of a curious student who enriches an academic environment. Using these and a series of other evaluation methods, Prep selects 200 students, out its 4,000 applicants, for admission into the program.

Once placed in the program, students undergo what is called the Preparatory Component. They continue school at their public middle schools around New York City, but they also take a series of rigorous courses at Prep that academically and socially prepare them for matriculation into independent schools. Students have class five days a week during the summer. During the school year, students have class on Wednesday (students come in after they have finished school at the public middle school) and all day on Saturday. The next summer, they have another session of class.
five days a week. Classes include science, math, literature, writing, research, individual meetings with an advisor and Conclave. 23 Some classes emphasize leadership development and social justice awareness while others are logistically focused and prepare students for the interview and application processes to apply to independent schools.

Students choose where they would like to apply for high school. Some of the more popular schools for Prep students are the Trinity School, Fieldston, Dalton, Grace Church, Philips Exeter Academy, Hotchkiss, among others. These schools are among the most elite and most expensive high schools in the country. Admissions departments at these independent schools give away a total of $30 million annually in financial aid to Prep students (Bloomberg Business 2015). Because Prep has become such a prestigious organization with some of New York’s most brilliant minds, it has established networks and connections with these preparatory high schools that secure spots and aid for Prep students.

After students matriculate into private high school, Prep provides them with social and academic support to ease what can be a very emotionally, physically, and intellectually taxing transition. Each student is matched with a counselor who completed Prep for Prep or had an experience similar to that of the student. A counselor checks on the student’s grades and meets with them regularly. These relationships are supposed to provide the student with some degree of comfort and a sense that he or she has someone with whom they can share experiences and doubts without fear of judgment or misunderstanding. In addition to the counselors, Prep also

organizes events for Prep students to come back together and continue to build on their network of peer support. Thus, Prep’s goal is not only to assist students in matriculation into private school, but also to help the students stay and thrive within these new environments.

Prep provides a series of other supports for its students that deal less directly with the high school experience and more with ensuring that Prep students are exposed to what most of their peers from the independent schools are. For example, the organization’s Alumni Affairs Department is incredibly active in assisting with students’ search for summer internships. Prep also financially supports students who wish to complete summer programs abroad. Prep organizes events during which students may go apple picking, or ice-skating at Rockefeller Center. These types of programs continue after Prep students go to college, even though a student is technically an alumnus at that time.

If a Prep student is unable to complete the Preparatory Component, or must, for whatever reason, leave their independent school, Prep tries to assist these students and help them re-enter the Preparatory Component or school. However, if a student leaves the program permanently - which happens often because of the intensity of the summer school – the program announces it to the other students. Prep students call this “getting dropped;” names of students are read out loud to the entire cohort (the whole class of students in an given year) in the mornings before the students begin their studies.
Ideology

The inaccessibility of quality education is widely accepted as a fundamental problem to this country’s educational system. This problem first becomes apparent when we think about how “quality” education is defined in this country. In many areas, the free choice is not a “quality” choice. For example, New York City, despite spending more money per student than most other cities in the country, is known to have a particularly weak public education system. In the 2012-2013 school year, almost 450,000 students were enrolled in overcrowded schools. The average classroom size increased from 24.6 children to 25.5 children in just two years (Baker
Parents who recognize this weakness but lack financial flexibility do not have many choices; students may be stuck with a mediocre education that does not provide the most effective platform for success. Prep for Prep intervenes to fill these gaps where and to the extent that it can.

Critical race theory suggests that “…racism is ‘normal, not aberrant, in American society,’ and, because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture” (Ladson-Billings 2010: 11). Institutional racism is disastrously harmful in education. During the 2011 – 2012 school year, a quarter of the schools with the highest percentage of Black and Latino students did not offer Algebra II. Black students were more than three times as likely to attend a school where less than 40% of teachers met all the state certification and license standards. At schools with gifted and talented programs, Black and Latino students constituted 26% of the students in these programs, even though they accounted for 40% of the total student populations at these schools. These facts offer just a snapshot of the extensive racial inequity of America’s public schools. It is impossible to erase this inequity, although Prep attempts to minimize its effects and develop new leaders from underrepresented groups:

Programmatic intervention, whether by private, not-for-profit organizations or by publicly taken initiatives, has an important role to play in leveling the playing field so that social and economic circumstances and less than adequate educational opportunities do not continue to thwart the development of achievement-oriented, forward-looking, goal-focused behavior, even on the part of very able youngsters who just do not see life’s possibilities or do not believe these possibilities are applicable to them. (Simons 2003: xvii)

The organization inspires Prep students to work with diligence, determination, initiative, and excitement. It believes that ultimately these qualities are what make success attainable. This concept – the individualized, American Dream – guides Prep ideologically: “…even in the midst of our country’s obvious failure to honor the commitments implicit in the American dream, we ask our students to believe in the power of that concept and to envision ways in which they can put their education, their values and their leadership to work in the effort to realize the full potential of that unifying construct” (Simons 2003: xviii).

**Funding**

Prep is completely privately funded. Its annual operating budget is $9.5 million, nearly half of which comes from the Board of Trustees. The Board is made up of about 50 members. Many of them work at banks such as Citi, investment firms such as Goldman Sachs, and private law firms such as Debevoise and Plimpton. Prep also has what they call an Associates Council, which “…represents young professionals who are passionate about helping Prep achieve its mission through fundraising, volunteering, creating leadership opportunities, and building greater awareness about the program.”

A large portion of Prep’s funding comes from their annual fundraising event, the Lilac Ball. It is both a fundraising event and a graduation ceremony for Prep’s high school seniors. Over 1,000 supporters, students, and staff are present. Tickets start at $1,000 and tables of up to ten people start at $10,000. There are also more

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expensive tickets for special tables: the “Underwriter Table” at $100,000, the “Co-Chair Table” at $50,000, the “Benefactor Table” at $25,000, the “Sponsor Table” at $15,000 and the “Supporter Table” at $10,000.26 People who buy these tickets are recognized at the event and in listing materials.

Prep for Prep’s location and reputation play an important role in its fundraising. When I interviewed one of Prep’s staff members, she mentioned how fortunate Prep is to be in New York City, where the finance and business worlds accumulate an incredible amount of capital that is partially donated to the non-profit sector. In addition, Prep has worked for nearly 40 years to build a reputation. It is widely accepted as an elite, prestigious, special organization. It selects its students at a highly competitive level. Prep has created a culture in which being exceptional is what is expected. This is appealing to funders; they know that their money will go to a worthwhile cause because Prep has a history of success.

Scaling: Measures of Success

One of the primary ways Prep for Prep measures its success is by looking at where its students go to independent school and college. That, in most cases, students attend the most highly competitive schools in the country is illustrative that at the very least, the Preparatory Component is effective in ensuring that students are academically prepared for admission into these schools. Retention at these schools shows that Prep for Prep succeeds in supporting them both academically and socially throughout students’ careers. Prep does not make its retention rates public but from

what I understood in my interviews, it is high. Because the preparatory component is so vigorous, students are somewhat prepared for the challenges they will face in high school. For those students who do lag – academically and socially – there are more support systems such as tutoring, psychological services, and group counseling sessions that assist them in returning to their schools.

Another way Prep measures the success of its students is by examining students’ lives after college. Aileen Hefferren, the current executive director of Prep for Prep, refers to the two Prep Rhodes scholars, dozens of fellowship winners, and three judges when talking about how Prep measures its success; the huge variety of fields in which Prep graduates work shows how they are intellectually driven, diverse, and curious people – all characteristics that Prep emphasizes. Hefferren also mentions that the number one employer for Prep for Prep alumni is the Department of Education; this, she says, illustrates how Prep students have developed a desire to reciprocate and “give back,” ultimately indicating that Prep students have become leaders who wish to change the policies that have affected them most.\(^\text{27}\)

The idea of “giving back” more generally speaks to Prep for Prep’s lasting effect on students; even alumni who aren’t involved with the Department of Education give back by making internships available for Prep students at their companies, or donating money, or sitting on a board. Thus, the cyclical nature of the student experience – the idea that Prep is not just for high school or college, but instead for life – is fundamental to determining the longitudinal success the program has had on an individual person.

Conclusion

It is undisputed that Prep for Prep provides its students with educational opportunities they would not otherwise have. The organization is committed to academic rigor and excellence, and this is not lost on its students. As I mentioned above, Prep students attend some of the most prestigious independent schools in the country. They go on to attend undergraduate schools like Harvard, Wesleyan, and Yale, which are the three most highly attended colleges by Prep students. There is no question that the organization helps its students access elite education.

Such access is typically only available to this country’s most privileged groups, thus Prep accomplishes something crucial in financing these opportunities for students of color and diversifying these schools. However, their work is deeply problematic and paradoxical. Prep does little to address the structural issues that are both at the core of and sustain educational inequality. These issues are, paradoxically, precisely what create the need for programs like Prep for Prep. Thus, Prep’s mission is rooted in acceptance of an oppressive system. As a nonprofit organization, it has little choice but to work with capitalism, rather than against it. The rest of this thesis will be dedicated to addressing how Prep accepts rather than works against.
Chapter Two:

Exposure & Re-socialization: Accumulating Cultural Capital

Introduction

In this chapter I will explore how Prep for Prep aims to provide its students with opportunities to cultivate middle class habitus so that they can readily access and achieve upward mobility. These opportunities play into Prep’s larger project of resocializing its students so they will both fit in and thrive at their preparatory schools, thus further preparing them for life “success,” or better yet, The American Dream. By exposing them to social situations that are normal for their prep school white peers, Prep for Prep expects this social and cultural know-how and savviness to facilitate students’ ability to “keep up,” thus sustaining them in these alienating institutions. Fundamental to the resocialization project in this context is the assumption that Prep students do not possess middle class habitus, but should they want to succeed in their high schools, colleges, and dominant society, they must acquire it and adapt. In that sense, “success” - obtaining a bachelor’s degree, making a comfortable amount of money, etc. - and middle class habitus become inextricably linked.

The word “exposure” became so integral to my research that ignoring it would be to miss a fundamental element of Prep’s notion of upward mobility for its students, which they impart on students. Prep’s resocialization seeks to “lift” students by exposing them to an array of activities and events attended by mostly white, middle class people, with extensive networks - which possess a great deal of cultural capital that may be useful to the students. Possessing, using, and enacting this middle class
habitus rests on Prep students’ ability to observe, acquire, and enact these dispositions and behaviors. The ideal scenario is that they will leave these social encounters with new knowledge, a contact or simply a new experience that will be pivotal to social and academic success, which they can use to negotiate and navigate life in their independent schools.

Indeed, this belief in the value of resocialization is predicated upon the perception of this underrepresented student as a person with an inherent lacks. Could this not also be read as a contemporary attempt to “civilize” the “savage?” In so doing, Prep for Prep seeks to both overtly, and perhaps even subliminally, attempt to soften and minimize this essentialist and racist perception. However, resocialization cannot be completed to the extent that a student of color is equally equipped to “succeed” as a white student. It is inherently an incomplete process. I will conclude this chapter by situating exposure and upward mobility in a broader context, giving special attention to the impossibility of the Black student’s full resocialization into hegemonic culture that positions whiteness as virtuous and superior.

**Buzzword: “exposure”**

When we hear the word “exposure,” what do we think? Perhaps we think of exposure to a disease, the exposure setting of a fancy camera, or exposure to a country. Regardless of where our minds go, one element of our constructed concept of this word remains consistent: exposure inherently implies the juxtaposition

28 Here, I invoke Signithia Fordham’s analysis of “acting white” as a way for Black students to cope with and manage society’s perception of them as students who underperform, for example: “Acting white implies both Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemony plus impersonation, the power and ability to act buttressed by the assumption of an image external to the Black Self, an image that is not bloated by a perception of ‘lack’” (1996: 237).
between sameness and difference. Exposure to an infectious disease involves a foreign organism invading our body; the threat of this exposure lies in our body’s unfamiliarity with this organism and thus its inability to promptly and properly respond to its presence. When our body is exposed to a foreign pathogen, our immune system quickly and ideally attacks it. We may show symptoms of ill health prior to and during the execution of this process, but by the time it has finished, we return to a state of comfortable equilibrium, to the sameness and familiarity that make us feel most at ease. We often take this agreeable state for granted, not noticing our bodies’ rhythms and habits when they work as they should, but sickness makes us all too aware of the right and wrong functions of our bodies. Our immune systems may be stronger after sickness, our bodies better equipped to attack future pathogens; the exposure to the pathogen made us stronger. After having experienced the foreign, we return to an altered sameness and stability in a more advanced state.

Social exposure, like this type of biological exposure, is a confrontation with difference. An instance of social exposure may be exposure to a different culture; we may leave our homes and enter a new country, experiencing difference overtly. Such confrontations reaffirm the very structures and elements that distinguish one thing from another. My pathogen metaphor is insufficient here because it does not fully encapsulate the exclusionary nature of difference in the context of social situations. This is especially important to consider within the context of race at independent schools. Scholar of education Carol Vincent highlights the production of identities and difference within the context of social justice and education. She writes, “...identity is about difference and difference generates exclusions” (2003: 57).
Identity articulates what we are and what we are not, and in this way, we can understand that social exposure highlights these differences in a way that biological exposure cannot encapsulate.

Prep for Prep’s investment in ever-occurring processes of social exchanges involve difference and exposure that are omnipresent. Their activities also include First World-Third World encounters. Both of these serve the same purpose as they depict how class and racial differences are constructed and frequently strengthened in such encounters. Boundaries are reinforced, and individuals are exposed to what they are and what they are not. In my high school years, one of the most popular trips for students to take during spring break was called Builders Beyond Borders. “...Students travel to a developing nation in order to help a community in need. Teams live and work alongside their host community to develop, repair, or build a new facility that will transform lives.” This project follows modern developmentalist and voluntourist logic stating that America is an exceptionally modern country, thus its citizens have a responsibility to go elsewhere to help other countries that are behind in their progress toward Westernization.

In his ground breaking work that deconstructed the flawed underpinnings of global inequity, development theorist Andre Gunder Frank wrote,

“It is generally held that economic development occurs in a succession of capitalist stages and that today’s underdeveloped countries are still in a stage, sometimes depicted as an original stage in history, through which the now developed countries passed long ago” (1969: 4).

Frank’s idea underlines the perception that modernization (normatively defined as democracy and capitalism) is achieved through a chronological process in which

underdevelopment is to be expected and can be corrected by the right kind of interventions by modern (Western) subjects, institutions, and technologies.

Voluntourism, then, becomes a process of exposure and learning primarily for the travelers. In order to experience the “authentic” “Other,” one has to travel to a developing country; doing that in itself—regardless of one’s understanding of culture, difference, or history—becomes a marker of a cosmopolitan, worldly identity that is valued. Exposure to this geopolitical, classed, and racial difference provides a “First-World” individual with an opportunity to become a more well-rounded, conscientious person, thus accumulating cultural capital, which is useful when seeking admission to college, for example. This exposure however, is limited and controlled because the difference the students see on these trips is a sanitized, consumable, a sort of generic “Third World” difference. In her essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” postcolonial and transnational feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty problematizes this essentialist gaze aimed at the Third World individual, specifically highlighting how these perceptions are exacerbated for Third World women. She deserves to be quoted at length:

Universal images of ‘the third-world woman’ (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the ‘third-world difference’ to ‘sexual difference’, are predicated on (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives…only from the vantage point of the west is it possible to define the ‘third world’ as underdeveloped and economically dependent. Without the overdetermined discourse that creates the third world, there would be no (singular and privileged) first world. Without the ‘third-world woman’, the particular self-presentation of western women mentioned above would be problematical. I am suggesting, in effect, that the one enables and sustains the other. (Mohanty 1988: 81-82)
Mohanty articulates how the gaze and creation of the “Third World” woman makes her real at the same time as it makes the “First World” woman real. Such images and gazes operate as articulations of difference; they are enough to mark distinction, but at the same time, not enough to create the kind of unease that comes from implicating oneself in the histories and conditions of those deemed different from, and technologically behind, Westerners. A similar perspective is espoused by anthropologist and gender and women’s studies scholars, respectively, Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins. They use the magazine National Geographic as an example of how consumable difference is enacted:

...In looking for and finding perfection, the National Geographic camera may prevent the reader from finding the exotic other too different. Motivated by its classic humanism, the Geographic has cleaned up the culturally different person in the same way that other photographers have created images of gays and lesbians in American, presenting ‘clean-cut, shiny-haired, Land’s End citizens with difference. (Lutz and Collins 1993: 96)

Volunteering programs abroad tend to function on a similar uncritical humanism that collapses inequalities into surface differences, beneath which we are all, supposedly, the same. Maintaining the balance between sameness and non-threatening difference is essential in ensuring the First World is comfortable, yet intrigued enough to be entertained and curious.

I have added development discourse, not to divert my analysis of exposure as it relates to Prep for Prep, but rather to underscore how Prep’s mission to resocialize its students is not unlike the First World’s mission to modernize, democratize, and civilize the Third World. Such missions are reminiscent of European colonialists, whose invasion in parts of Africa and Asia (for instance), were principally focused on
acquiring land as well as acculturating people who were deemed “savages.” The point was, and is, to lift up marginal people and places by incorporating them into the hegemony - thus reproducing hegemonic power - while also reaffirming their difference and supposed inferiority. The same can be said for the resocialization of Prep students. Prep exposes students to a middle class lifestyle so they will become familiar with it, cultivate a different class habitus, and thrive in their preparatory institutions. How this exposure happens and what kind of exposure it is will be the topic of my next section.

**Networking and exposure: marketizing and realizing our most valuable selves**

Prep academically prepares its students for independent schools, requiring them to take certain courses in “traditional” subjects (math, English, etc.) and evaluating them based on performance on standard testing techniques. Also integral to Prep’s goal is exposing students to different types of career opportunities, internships, and personal contacts that their independent school peers are likely to have. I refer to this package of career and future-oriented professionalization as *networking*. “Network” is a verb and a noun. One may network to expand one’s network. Oxford Dictionary defines the noun form as “an arrangement of intersecting horizontal and vertical lines.”30 It is substantial, systematic, and varied. To network means “to distribute widely.” More recent definitions are in line with how I think of networking in the professional context: “interact with other people to exchange

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information and develop contacts, especially to further one’s career.” Networking, then, is a continuing process of cultivating a group of people who can be helpful in the professional realm. For a person to be upwardly mobile professionally, they must have a network made up of other people who have already moved ahead, who are higher up on the ladder than they are.

“Network, network, network,” said Ariel, a Prep student, during our conversation. She clapped her hands together and raised her voice, imitating Prep staff members and her parents. She describes the whole networking process with frustration and exhaustion. She notes that Prep for Prep has workshops for parents where they talk about the importance of networking for the students. She continues imitating her family members: “I know that you’re starting to get really radical, [Ariel]...but I need you to watch the way you speak and to really watch the way you interact with people who might disagree with you because you never know when you’re going to need them in the future. Keep your ties with Prep and keep your ties with alums.” Prep, alums, and people in general become potential sites of economic gain, thus Ariel must ensure that she presents her most valuable self to these people and organizations. Her access to these powerful people and prestigious organizations elevates her status position because it gives her more cultural capital, presumably similar to her independent school peers.

Over the last few years, Prep has tried to expand its alumni association, for both donations and professional connections. Several students, in addition to Ariel, noted the importance of the alumni network in finding jobs and internships, citing it

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31 Ibid.
32 Interview 2015.
as playing a significant role in motivating them to stay with Prep during times when they struggled academically and emotionally and questioned their commitments to the program. Indeed, one of the worst parts about “getting dropped” from Prep is losing the connections within the alumni network. The emphasis on this demonstrates Prep’s broader emphasis on networking and ensuring that Prep students will have the connections necessary to work at prestigious institutions. Prep exposes students to this network, provides them entry into it, and expects them to be proactive in taking advantage of it and benefitting from it maximally. Ariel and her Prep peers have access to these networks, and their access parallels that of their independent school peers.

Networking, then, operates as a form of exposure for students because it gives them access to career-building and future-oriented professional opportunities. Any discussion of networking in this context would be incomplete without examining its implications in the current neoliberal moment by which these exchanges are influenced. Political scientist Wendy Brown provides a framework for understanding networking’s effects on individuals as participants in democracy and our democracy as a whole. She argues that every aspect of our lives has become marketized (Brown 2015). Similarly, the state and political realm are understood in purely economic terms: political decisions are evaluated based on their potential for economic profit. The hollowing of political life (read: the substitution of economic values rather than democratic ones in politics) by economization has its ripple effects on citizenry in this country:

...both persons and states are construed on the model of the contemporary firm, both persons and states are expected to comport themselves in ways that
Brown elucidates the idea that our decisions - whether they directly involve monetary exchange or profit - are increasingly influenced by the potential for them to be translated into future monetary gain. Education, for example, becomes less concerned with immersing individuals in an environment that will liberate and empower them to participate in substantive democratic action, and more focused on producing individuals who will participate in the capitalist market. Similarly, Prep’s notion of networking rests on the potential for future economic gain garnered from relationships with certain people.

This emphasis on economies forces us to confront an uncomfortable question that challenges the notion of democracy: “What happens to rule by and for the people when neoliberal reasons configures both soul and city as contemporary firms, rather than as polities?” (Brown 2015: 27). The capitalist system and neoliberal moment become a sort of machine, in which humans are input and *homo oeconomicus* are output. As such, we ask ourselves such questions as “can I add this to my resume?” and say to ourselves “I should introduce myself to *that person*, she will connect me to the boss of *this* company.” The success of networking rests on the participation of the *homo oeconomicus*. It would follow to say that the success of Prep partially rests on its ability to shape its students into *homo oeconomicus*.

Prep’s networking works to add to the hollowing out of our democracy by subliminally encouraging individuals to behave in ways that will maximize their future value. Indeed, the fact that the organization actively emphasizes networking...
works to elucidate how this is fundamental to the resocialization process, which is a principal, unspoken goal.

**Encounters of imitation: exposure to a different class habitus**

John*, a Prep student, was invited by his friend, Alex* from independent school to the Hamptons for a weekend. John was picked up by Alex’s driver and the two boys drove to the Hamptons together. When they arrived, there was a cook to make them whatever they wanted to eat; John decided to eat Lucky Charms for breakfast. Later in the weekend, he ate dinner with Alex’s whole family. They had lobster but John could not eat it. He had never eaten lobster before, and the process of deconstructing the hard outer shell to access the juicy inside was elaborate. As Bourdieu has illustrated in his book *Distinction*, tastes for food - and surely, ability to eat them - impact and delineate our social positions. Certain foods, for instance, are economically inexpensive and are far more valued culturally. Kale and quinoa are relatively inexpensive foods but are culturally valuable for their association with the healthy and active person. Lobster is both economically expensive and culturally valuable. The act of eating it - the “form,” to use one of Bourdieu’s term - enhances lobster’s value: “In opposition to the free-and-easy working-class meal, the bourgeoisie is concerned to eat with all due form. Form is the first of all a matter of rhythm, which implies expectations, pauses, restrains…” (Bourdieu 1979: 196). Emphasis on such stylistic eating - the stylistic eating of, for example: lobster - detracts from the material worth of food as sustenance and portrays eating as a luxurious act that has potential to increase cultural capital.
I do not know the end of John’s story; if he asked for help, if he pretended to know what he was doing, but upon returning from the Hamptons weekend, he asked a Prep staff member for advice about what to do in those situations. She responded by advising him to look at the people around him and see what they do and imitate them; to fake it ‘til he makes it. The act of imitation in this scenario is a cook process of learning to convey a different class habitus. Bourdieu’s notion of acquired habitus is useful in this context. Indeed, one is not born with a given habitus, rather, one is socialized and taught it. They subconsciously acquire certain dispositions that convey a class position. Lobster eating and imitating are social encounters during which John observes upper-middle class habitus and, perhaps, acquires part of it. Habitus that conveys higher socioeconomic class is prioritized; it has to be for the ideology of upward mobility to function. When John’s mentor advises him to imitate his peers, she positions their upper-middle class habitus as superior to his own within our social structure. John may internalize this guidance as a useful hint to ease his social anxiety, but it also functions as a reminder of what he is not, of what he lacks. The instruction further confirms Signithia Fordham’s notion that the Black student is “lacking.” Prep’s project is to resocialize students by filling these supposed gaps.

Additionally, students take trips to the Rockefeller ice-skating rink, Mets games, to galas and operas, even to different countries (during the summer). These encounters are supposed to provide Prep students with an opportunity to observe a higher class habitus and potentially cultivate that class belonging. In his expansion of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus within the context of education, Richard Harker writes, “For an individual from a non-dominant background to succeed, a shift from the
bottom cycle to the top cycle is required - the appropriate cultural capital has to be acquired, with the inevitable consequences for the habitus” (1984: 118). According to scholars of social work and women’s studies scholars, Elizabeth Cole and Safiya Omari, this is not unlike racial uplift ideology, advocated by Blacks and whites. The idea is that “...Black Americans would progress as a race when they adopted the values of the White middle class...upward mobility will follow from the attainment of middle class values and standards of behavior…” (2003: 788-789). The prioritization of middle class values, of whiteness, of the “top cycle” reaffirms what Prep students are not, serving as reminders of what students should change, and also perhaps more importantly, what they will be unable to change.

**Expectation versus reality**

Prep hopes that once students are placed in independent schools, they will feel well equipped with the cultural capital that will allow them to thrive alongside their white peers. However, to expect that this exposure is enough to ease the transition for students socially ignores the inevitable and continuing culture shock they will feel upon entering their independent schools. In addition, resocializing also reaffirms the very hegemonic structures that make some degree of assimilation necessary for upward mobility.

Prep students are not clueless to these problematic dynamics. One Prep alumna spoke damningly about the program with little exception, highlighting the

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33 I would like to reiterate that Prep for Prep does not explicitly claim to make the transition to preparatory school for its students easy. However, the form of social exposure to which I refer was cited as something that would soften the experience. In my analysis, I seek to problematize this presumption.
pressure to assimilate as one of her main qualms. Ariel spent her first year of
independent school at a boarding school in Connecticut, from which she transferred
despite Prep’s attempts to discourage her. When I asked why she decided to leave,
she told me that the “privileged, horseback riding assholes” at the school played a
significant role in her decision. She elaborated, adding “It’s all about assimilation,
and if you can’t assimilate then something’s wrong with you.” Ariel internalized
Prep’s implicit encouragements of assimilation. Such an emphasis on assimilation
translates into an emphasis on the action of the individual; should she fail in her
independent school, the responsibility is completely hers.

In his thesis on individualization, German sociologist Ulrich Beck highlighted
the increasing role of the individual in the current neoliberal free-market moment. I
return to Carol Vincent, who considers the impact of this turn on class identities
within higher education in her essay: “experiences are individualised in a process in
which setbacks and crises are viewed as personal failure even when they are
connected to processes beyond the individual’s control” (2003: 51). When Ariel’s
mother addressed Ariel’s struggles at her Connecticut school with Prep, Prep
responded with (Ariel’s imitation): “Well, everyone else figures it out so you guys
just need to buckle down, here are some psychiatrists to help you out.” This
response, and its emphasis on Ariel’s behavior as being central to her experience at
school, reflects neoliberal capitalist discourse that rests on a responsible and
empowered norm of market-oriented personhood. Such a framework disregards

34 Interview 2015.
35 Interview 2015.
hegemonic oppression that probably caused Ariel’s dissatisfaction because that is what sustains it.

Ariel shows how Prep’s attempts to resocialize its students are not always welcome and do not go unnoticed. While she did “assimilate” in some ways (which I will discuss further in the next chapter), she did not do it without resentment or recognition. Students’ resistance to resocialization is one example of how this project may be unsuccessful for Prep. They are not passive actors, acted upon and resocialized in the exact way Prep perhaps would like. It also fails because it is partially destined to; resocialization is inherently an incomplete process. bell hooks writes in her book about the intersections and ruptures between race and class, “the surrounding white supremacist world minded all of us through exploitation and domination that even the richest black person could be crushed by racism’s heavy weight” (hooks 2000: 91). Contextualizing this within Prep for Prep shows how even when students accumulate cultural capital from their Prep experiences, they are still outsiders in the preparatory school world. I will expand upon this topic in my next chapter, but for now it is important to integrate the paradoxical nature of resocialization into networking and exposure.

Entry to what? The Bubble

Though I did not interview white students at Prep-endorsed independent schools, my own experience is similar enough to use to discuss what we call “the bubble.” Who is this “we?” In this case, I am referring to Westonites who refer to our hometown in this way. The term ‘the bubble’ carries a great deal of weight and is
used by many different people to describe a mostly homogenous environment. This is
the most simplistic way of describing the phrase. However, usually when I think of a
social bubble - and indeed, my thoughts have been influenced by my membership in a
predominantly upper-middle class, mostly white bubble - I think of a place mostly
occupied by people of privilege, and a place from which people who do not possess
racial and/or classed privileged are excluded or are constantly reminded of their
outsider status. Because this “bubble” - essentially a representation of hegemony - is
so central to this piece, I will briefly digress to interrogate it. To leave whiteness
untouched in this project would be to bypass the obvious and reaffirm its power.

I began reading Signithia Fordham’s, _Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race,
Identity, and Success at Capital High_, in a posh coffee shop in Westport, Connecticut.
I sat at the porcelain-colored counter, admiring the display of expensive whiskeys and
rums across from me as I drank a latte for which I paid $2.00 too much. I observed as
young couples came in and out of the store, ordering coffees to go or sitting down to
enjoy avocado toast or egg soufflés. The busy-bodies ordered quickly, mindlessly
slapping $20 bills on the counter, waiting for fancy overpriced drinks, ready to bolt
when they came.

Every now and then, I turned around from the counter to watch the people
eating at the tables. Almost every person was white. Women who were too old to
have blonde or brunette hair showed off dyed heads, their skin too tight for their ages.
This place, in all ways, encapsulates the bubble perfectly and for that reason, it makes
me oddly uncomfortable. Yet, I go to that coffee shop frequently. Maybe it’s because
I enjoy the overpriced coffee because it does taste crisp and fruity. Though it may be
easier, I cannot attribute my repeated visits solely for the good drinks and fun aesthetic. This crisp, neat, homogenous environment reflects my high school and my home. There is a comfort in sameness, and this place is utterly the same for me. The bubble, then, is strengthened by my continuing desire to return to it, even though I recognize its isolating and exclusionary elements.

I grew up in this bubble, but I always felt like an outsider within it. My outsider status was never oppressive, it never affected me to the point where I wanted to leave and never come back but it was a distinct marker of my middle school and high school years. I remember on the first day back from winter break in sixth grade, it felt like every girl in school was wearing a jean skirt trimmed with lacy white fabric, black leggings, and Ugg boots. I possessed none of these items but wanted all of them. However, even my lack of these particular markers of cultural and socioeconomic capital did not change the fact that I still existed within the bubble. I still benefitted from an exceptional public school, from my parents’ ability to purchase a house in Weston with little skepticism from real estate agents, neighbors, etc. Even though I may have felt isolated, I benefitted from all the structures that make the bubble possible, and this is at the heart of belonging to such an exclusive nucleus.

There was something particularly derailing about the time I spent in the coffee shop. I was reading about Black students’ experience at a public high school. It is a high school, not unlike the rest of them, that transmits exclusionary cultural norms that forcibly articulate how students of color are impeded by lack, how they must change should they want to navigate this environment. I read the words, but looked
around and felt incredibly far from the content of the book; not only because my high school experience was tailored to my existence, was molded from, and constructed my white privilege, but also because I was in an epicenter of such privilege.

Yale professor of law, Harlon Dalton, discusses the harmful effects of the absence of interracial discussions about race in his book, *Racial Healing: Confronting the Fear Between Blacks & Whites*. He writes, “...in settings where Whites dominate, being White is not noteworthy. It is like the tick of a familiar clock, part of the easily tuned-out background noise (Dalton 1996: 6).” Dalton highlights the putative normalcy of whiteness that maintains the comfort and power of white people. Indeed, this coffee shop was normalized whiteness. I noticed it upon walking in, but as I read Signithia Fordham’s book, it became increasingly clear. Such a change in vision reflects my own privilege, my own inability to see the power of such homogeneity.

The bubble is protected and constantly reinforced. Its reinforcements take several form – like, for example, my desire to constantly return to it – some tangible and visible and others invisibilized and mystified. In a formulation of structural violence, anthropologist David Graeber discusses the protection and invisibilization of social inequity, using bureaucracy as his starting point:

...situations created by violence - particularly structural violence, by which I mean forms of pervasive social inequality that are ultimately backed up by the threat of physical harm - invariably tend to create the kinds of willful blindness we normally associate with bureaucratic procedures. (2012: 57).

The bubble, like bureaucratic procedures, is created by structural violence and protected by the invisibility of this violence. Within the bubble, people rarely think about how their belonging to it means someone else’s exclusion; about how the
“fortune” and “blessing” of living in such a homogenous, safe, well-funded, well-protected town requires that there is another town that is the polar opposite. To think about these things is not easy because it places one’s privilege in the broader context of oppression. It is also rare for people to think of these things because they are rarely confronted with them. Homogenous stimulus breeds homogenous thought.

To deconstruct all the ways the bubble is preserved and protected would be an almost unending project. For this reason, I will only mention two preservation measures that I have found to be significant. As I have said, conversations about race and class are limited in the bubble. Oftentimes, comments like “We are so lucky we have these resources” and “How fortunate we are to live here” allude to classed inequality that secures our positions. However, this inequality is rarely seen as integral to our own social positions. It is a separate, far off notion; such a distance further invisibilizes inequity. This connects to understanding of race within homogenous environments. The reliance on ignorance and on a lack of exposure as explanations for racist and classist systems of thought within white environments excuses the owner of such thoughts at the same time as it preserves the bubble that shapes these thoughts. In her book, Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege, Shannon Sullivan, professor of philosophy, discusses the construction, reproduction, and protection of white privilege. She cites the explanation of ignorance as an example of superficial and incomplete explanations for racism among white people.

This view of ignorance problematically softens the ugly realities of white domination by presenting simultaneously a positive image of white people and an optimistic outlook on the prospects for eliminating racism. The only obstacle to the elimination of racism and white privilege, on this view, is the
Sullivan continues to argue that racist prejudices form part of the unconscious, thus rendering white privilege an unconscious habit. They are the result of years of explicit and implicit cultivation of superiority. And that inclination – to feel superior – is fundamentally American. Alexis de Tocqueville spoke of this influence of the unconscious in his 19th century discussion of slavery: “The citizen of the Southern States becomes a sort of domestic dictator from infancy; the first notion he acquires in life is, that he is born to command, and the first habit he contracts is that of ruling without resistance” (Tocqueville 1870: 507). Explaining racism by citing the ignorance of white people belies the real ways that individuals produce, reproduce, and benefit from prejudice. It suggests that the right kind of education - one that fills the voids of racist ignorance - is enough to eliminate racism. Erroneous as it is, this rhetoric is quite common in the bubble. There is little consideration that racist prejudices may exist within the unconscious of the bubble because to think this would be to implicate all of the bubbles’ residents in the perpetuation of systemic, racial oppression.

I have already spoken of the dangers of Third World Development projects and their tendency to recreate and reproduce geopolitical, raced, and classed violence that position the Western world as exceptional, admirable, and attainable for developing countries. It is necessary to ground this discussion in the inner workings of the bubble and elucidate how these projects are understood by people who fund and complete them. These projects provide “bubblers” with a semblance of access to
an experience that will better them because of its strangeness and drastic difference to their lives at home. It is valuable for the exposure it gives to students to life that is not privileged by whiteness and wealth. At the same time, it also suggests that inequity is something that is far off, in another country, rather than something existing inside and outside our doorsteps. The difference students experience is shaped for their comfort. It is consumable and not too different from their own lives to be too painful or shocking. The Third World-First World confrontation is tailored to the First-Worlders.

These trips give bubblers the sense that they are aiding a problem and making changes that will eventually change the world. This is how they come to believe that despite living in a racially and socioeconomically homogenous area, they still make changes and trouble the structures that allow them to have such privilege; they are penetrating the bubble. However, though bubblers are leaving the material world of the bubble, its influence stays with them. The difference they observe is sanitized. They return home after exploring these places. bell hooks describes the underpinnings of trip-goers in her experiences with wealthy white students who went on similar volunteer type trips: “Sometimes these trips were about ‘eating the other,’ about privileged Westerners indulging in ethnic cultural cannibalism. A other times they were about individuals trying to learn about the experiences of people unlike themselves, trying to contribute” (2000: 147). I would argue that the Builders Beyond Borders trips, and trips similar to it, are about both ethnic cultural cannibalism and experiencing something different. Travelers consume the difference of the Other.
Even when its foundation appears challenged or destabilized, the essential elements of racial and classed power are reaffirmed. Though my experience does not completely match that of the privileged prep school student, our privileges rest on the same structures that allow us to have an exceptional high school education (among many, many other things). Our exclusive bubbles are supported and sustained in the same way. Therefore, my reflection of this homogenous nucleus has, if anything, shown that it cannot be traversed easily if at all. Prep attempts to help students understand the world of this bubble, and to identify with it in distinct ways. Full understanding and full identification with the bubble is not possible and the project remains incomplete while it strengthens the power of white and classed privilege.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the intricacies of Prep’s resocialization process for its students prior to their entry into independent schools. This component is integral to their larger project of upward mobility. Prep attempts to give its students opportunities to achieve success prior to, and during, their time at private school. I have also shown the importance of networking as one of the key elements to such a project. This, I argue, is in part to ensure Prep students will become the “leaders” the organization expects them to be, and also ensures they will be able to match their prep school peers in networking experience.

How does exposure to these networks relate to upward mobility? These particular networks – the ones Prep students are exposed to – are high-powered, consisting of wealthy people who are very successful in their fields, the epitome of
The American Dream. Thus, connections with them would probably result in prestigious opportunities. This is true. However, this exposure is also about cultivating a distinct classed habitus that comes from having access to such networks. This access, coupled with the experiences Prep students acquire attending fancy social events, breeds the types of behaviors and dispositions that hold the most cultural capital in private schools. Prep hopes that with this cultural capital, students will be able to better relate to their peers. However, as I have related, most of their peers live in a well-protected and highly exclusive bubble. This bubble is one that maintains the comfort of white people: a comfort in sameness that leaves little opportunity for true engagement with, and welcoming of difference. White privilege is accustomed to supremacy, and the bubble ensures that this is protected and maintained, making it virtually impossible for outsiders to gain entry.

In my next chapter, I will discuss what happens post-placement, when Prep students attend independent schools. This chapter will expand upon the failure of Prep’s resocialization project, and the culture shock that students feel upon entering school. This chapter will also provide further reasoning for my claim that the American secondary schools - in this case private, but I also am referring to public secondary schools as well - are racialized and classed spaces.
Chapter Three:

Where “Refinement” Fails:

Within the Halls of the Independent School

Introduction

In this chapter, I will focus on the ways that Prep’s resocialization falls short. I begin by addressing the historic exclusion of different in preparatory schools, demonstrating how it remains influential and harmful in these environments. The exclusion of difference is a tradition at prestigious preparatory schools. During the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, new efforts to desegregate and the government’s failure to address the Black-White achievement gap led many Black families to search for better school options than the public schools that were, perhaps, more pragmatic (Slaughter-Defoe and Stevenson 2011). It is no wonder, then, that much of the literature that addresses the exclusion of racial difference in elite educational institutions (by this I refer to both private secondary schools and prestigious colleges and universities) came after the 1960s. A number of scholars, including Signithia Fordham, John Ogbu, Elizabeth Chin, Pierre Bourdieu, Peter Cookson, Suzanne Mettler, and Philip Atbach, Lee Baker, bell hooks, Jonathan Kozol, Sara Ahmed, and Pedro Noguera, among others, have addressed the power of whiteness and wealth in the educational institution and its exclusionary effects on people of color.

First, I consider the dynamics within the classroom where the dominant pedagogy rests on a Eurocentric script that reinforces the position of white men as the exemplars and founders of history and academia. This trope is common in both public and private high schools throughout the country, and I will also include some
reflection from my experience at a high performing, mostly white, moneyed public high school to exemplify this universality. Eurocentric curricula are not confined to the walls of the state-funded public high school, but pervasively appear in private school curricula as well. Second, I will explore the halls of the prep school to consider and emphasize the various ways that dress operates as a site of difference-making and difference-reproduction. Dress in private schools becomes a marker of wealth, and contributes to traditions of classed and raced exclusion in these environments. As such, it becomes part of the culture shock that many Prep students experience upon matriculation.

**Historic homogeneity versus current diversity at preparatory schools**

At a career event I attended at Wesleyan for female athletes, I met a woman who is headmistress of a preparatory high school in New England. She was dressed in a beige pantsuit, her hair was pulled back in a neat bun, and she wore bright pink lipstick on her thinly pursed lips. She had impeccable posture, and she kept her hands folded neatly in her lap throughout most of our conversation. I felt like an incompetent and unkempt college student; this event took place right before track practice, and I expected the employers would understand my casual athletic appearance at an event for female athletes. Still, I tried to overcompensate for being underdressed by being overly prepared. I spoke with her about my aspirations of working in education, and specifically about my interest in race and class dynamics at prep schools and public schools alike. When I commented on the lack of diversity at private schools, she perked up, unfolded her hands from her lap and responded
eagerly: “What’s ironic is that preparatory institutions are usually more diverse than many public schools. Depending on the area, public schools are mostly white or mostly black.” It’s true; my own public high school is 90% white. Though statistically misinformed, my comment about diversity holds some qualitative weight.

First, it is important to explore another buzzword: “diversity.” This word is so frequently overused especially within the context of education that its meaning is devoid of any sincere substance. In her book, *On Being Included*, Sara Ahmed explores racism and diversity within institutional life, dedicating an entire chapter to discussing the word that has become a selling point for schools. It is, she says, a positive term, one that we have come to understand as indicative of an “enriched multicultural society” (Puwar 2004: 1). As such, preparatory schools and universities use it to attract students to these institutions. Many prep school websites have a specific page dedicated to the topic of diversity, demonstrating how their institution will welcome, and has welcomed, students of color. These pages are for both interested students of color to see that they are not as alone as some may think, and also to show white students and parents that this particular school will provide their child with an enriching, multicultural experience. Ahmed writes, “...diversity has a commercial value and can be used as a way not only of marketizing the university but of making the university into a marketplace” (2012: 53).

Diversity can increase the value of the university and therefore must be bureaucratized and managed. Here, we are reminded again of Wendy Brown’s theory on the marketization of the neoliberal individual. The individual’s inclination to

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marketize themself to increase their future value is not unlike the university that must measure all its actions in terms of potential for profit. Increasing “diversity” is just one of the ways the university can increase its market value. Ahmed succinctly captures the troubling aspect of such hallowed language of diversity in asking us: “What does it mean to have a body that provides an institution with diversity” (2012: 49).

Ahmed’s critique elucidates the way that the word ‘diversity’ is used as a marketing technique, instead of as a term that genuinely evaluates an idea, entity, etc. That people have come to believe institutional diversity betters the environment and its people has created such overuse that the term loses meaning. Preparatory schools, as I have previously stated, use this term liberally to describe the demographic makeup of the student body. Indeed, the diversity numbers do reflect what they intend to. The dissonance lies where Ahmed’s argument becomes operative. When we look at what these diversity numbers actually mean for the student body: do schools with high percentages actually become enriched multicultural environments?

The Trinity School, a popular high school for Prep students, is 41% students of color and 19% students on financial aid.\(^{37}\) The Hotchkiss School, a boarding school in Connecticut, gives 35% of its students financial aid.\(^{38}\) Both are schools attended by Prep students. On the other hand, 90% of the students at my high school are white, and 2.7% of the students are on free and reduced lunch.\(^{39}\) It follows that


preparatory institutions such as Hotchkiss and the Trinity School, are among the most diverse high schools in the country. Is it paradoxical, then, to say that these schools are breeders of whiteness; to refer to them as “rich, white environments” and seemingly ignore, or forget, the presence of students of color at these schools, as I and many of my research participants have done? This is where we see that “diversity” does not sufficiently describe the student body.

The years, consistency, and force with which these traditions of whiteness and wealth have been engrained within the fiber of the prep school atmosphere has cultivated a particular “organizational habitus” that reflects dispositions and classed embodiments of this racially and socioeconomically homogenous group. In their study of Black girls at an elite preparatory school in California, Erin Horvat and Anthony Antonio introduce the notion of “organizational habitus” to explain why preparatory schools are relatively diverse but understood as otherwise. More specifically, they wrote: “The organizational habitus is the set of class-based dispositions, perceptions, and appreciations transmitted to individuals in a common organizational structure” (Horvat and Antonio 1999: 320). Cultivating organizational habitus is a cyclical and dynamic process of becoming and transmitting between the institution and the individual; the institution transmits the organizational habitus to the individual while the individual - that is, the individual who reflects the habitus of the organization - also constructs the organizational habitus. Thus, when we refer to preparatory schools as white and rich, we do not mean to say that every individual is white with money. Rather, we refer to the traditions of these schools - their histories
of racial and socioeconomic homogeneity - that have cultivated an atmosphere that
creates, thrives on, and maintains these structures. They explained this in detail,

While it may seem odd that a school with a 30 percent nonwhite population is
described as having a dominant habitus that is marked by whiteness, it must
be remembered that diversity in the student body is a relatively new feature of
the school. Furthermore, the organizational habitus is one that has been
developed over time by the dominant players in the school community - a
group consisting of white, wealthy families that historically has exercised
great control over the development of the school and continues to participate
most forcefully and powerfully in its governance. (Horvat and Antonio 1999: 327)

Thus, while the demographics of these schools may suggest diversity and inclusivity,
their histories, which remain influential today in organizational habitus, belie these
suggestions. Those white and wealthy students are more likely to thrive in these
environments, and those students who do not fit the ideal model will be forced to
integrate as much as they can or be ostracized. In his study of race and class at
America’s elite boarding schools, Peter Cookson highlights the difficult positions of
African American students - and I will suggest this applies to students of color in
these environments - in preparatory institutions that were not built for them:

Little in prep school life is forgiving - all students must learn to control
themselves, especially in stressful situations - yet this sense of having to
control oneself is dramatically increased for African American students who
because of their class/race position, are doubly marginalized within the

In a recent New York Times article, “At New York Private Schools,
Challenging White Privilege From the Inside,” reporter Kyle Spencer addresses the
tension between diverse student bodies, but homogenous histories, and suggests that
independent schools in New York are deconstructing notions of whiteness by
encouraging conversations about race and class. The article outlines how these private schools are fostering conversations about whiteness among white students, asking them to think about their racial identities and the significance of white privilege. Students did an activity, “Things I don’t want to be called,” and one girl wrote “privileged:” “It’s just a very strong word to use...I don’t want to be identified with that just because my parents can afford things.”40 One of the images that accompanied the article showed students holding up signs that read “I need justice because…” One student’s sign reads, “I need justice because I’m sick of having to explain privilege.” These stories are extreme examples of the white and privileged culture of the private schools described in this article. Though these conversations may indicate an attempt at increasing racial awareness and social (in)justice, they do not interrogate privilege or race and they exemplify how these schools are constructed and ruled by whiteness.

**Pedagogy and curriculum: exclusion and silencing**

That the typical secondary school was built for the upper-middle class white student is not a new concept. Though diversity and inclusion rhetoric - especially at preparatory schools - may work to invisibilize this tradition at these institutions, such exclusion and continuing marginalization of students of color cannot be entirely hidden. In his historic study of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Friere discusses the dangers of pedagogy as an oppressive tool to force assimilation and conformity:

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world. (1970: 15)

Though curriculum and its institutional regulations differ at public and private schools, its tendency to facilitate integration and reflect the culture of the dominant class remains consistent. In recounting her experience as a poor student of color at Stanford University, bell hooks describes the classroom as a space where “social order was kept in place” (hooks 2000: 36). In my 7th grade history class, one of our study units was religion and we discussed mostly Christianity and Judaism, the two dominant religions in my town. Upon introducing this unit, my teacher said (paraphrase), “We’re really lucky we are able to study religion. Most places don’t allow their school to teach it.” More generally, history courses offered at Weston High School often reflected an interest in Western-centric knowledge. There were classes on “American History” and “European History,” but none about the history of Africa or Asia. Discussion about these countries was covered in world history courses. The curriculum reflected the dominant social atmosphere present at Weston High School, the town, and our country. As such, the curriculum “…silences multiple voices and perspectives, primarily legitimizing dominant, white, upper-class, male voices as the ‘standard’ knowledge students need to know” (Swartz 1992: 341).

41 Public schools are allowed to teach religion, as long as the curriculum is secular, reflects religious pluralism, and does not prioritize any other religion. This is likely difficult to do in practice and perhaps most public schools avoid the material completely to avoid potential conflicts.
The presence of master scripts in private schools illustrates how the singular and hierarchical American doctrine of success percolates into curricula and pedagogy. A student of the Hotchkiss School, an elite boarding school in Lakeville, Connecticut, when reflecting on her high school, said, “...[The curriculum definitely was [Eurocentric]...[especially] in humanities...English, history, and philosophy. I learned nothing about Africa or Asia unless it was directly connected to colonialism and even then it was, of course, told from the Eurocentric perspective.”\textsuperscript{42} The lack of pluralism in the curriculum is rooted in the hegemonic notion of success that leaves little room for anything or anyone who is “different.” However, “People don’t question it” and they are not taught to.\textsuperscript{43}

As this student mentioned, people do not question the logic of the present system because it is perceived as a legitimate and powerful authority. Bourdieu discusses this troubling passive acceptance of hegemonic curriculum in his book, \textit{Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture}:

\textit{Insofar as it is an arbitrary power to impose which, by the mere fact of being misrecognized as such, is objectively recognized as a legitimate authority, PAu [pedagogic authority], a power to exert symbolic violence which manifests itself in the form of a right to impose legitimately, reinforces the arbitrary power which establishes it and which it conceals.} (1997: 13, italics in original)

Master scripting must be understood as a microcosm of the perpetuation of white power. Racism and classism in the classroom is particularly concerning because the classroom is where the cultivation of young knowledge occurs. Thus, when we take a step back and critically engage with the classroom and its main production, we see how it is an especially insidious place where socioeconomic and racial hierarchies are

\textsuperscript{42} Interview 2015.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
reproduced. As a privileged student, I had to learn to question curriculum and academia and I did not until I arrived in college. The master script that I learned in middle school and high school accommodated me; I never questioned it because I was never excluded by it. It wasn’t until I began to think very critically about my middle education that I realized what is wrong with a “World History” class.

Students of color, on the other hand, on the onset, are much more likely to view curriculum skeptically. In one of his studies of minority education, anthropologist John Ogbu writes,

“...it is difficult for involuntary minorities to separate the issue of school curriculum and language from that of their overall and historical relationship with White Americans. Under this circumstance, they view with suspicion what is taught, and they question the motives of White Americans who control their education.” (2003: 174)

Ogbu elucidates the idea that minorities cannot simply accept curriculum, believing it to be absolute truth, because it continually marginalizes these students, thus causing their skepticism and suspicion. When I asked Ariel about the curriculum at the two different schools she attended over the course of middle school and high school, and whether or not she felt it was Eurocentric, she responded by saying that white supremacist, Eurocentric scripts are inherent to all school curriculums, even if there is some variety between them. Her first residential private school emphasized feminism, but only white feminism. Though the master script may include one marginalized voice, it excludes others and still abides by a racial and gendered hierarchy; “let’s be real, even at progressive [schools], you’re still reading old white

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44 Ogbu defines involuntary minorities as nonimmigrant minorities.  
45 Interview 2015.
Ariel, unlike me, could not ignore the hierarchical nature of curriculum because marginalization, unlike privilege, cannot be invisibilized for the people it affects.

I have come to see the phrase “Eurocentric curriculum” as redundant. The privileging of white, middle class voices is enmeshed in pedagogy and interwove within our social fabric. Even that image does not quite suffice because such privileging is not merely attached to our social fabric; it is our social fabric. Reproduction of these ideologies happens so frequently and invisibly because it merely reinforces what is already in existence. For the marginalized students, the curriculum’s symbolic violence may not be as invisible, because it abuses them and excludes them directly as Prep implements a time-consuming and rigorous academic schedule. As I have previously noted, Prep’s logic is to over-prepare its students academically to leave room for a, perhaps, more difficult social transition. However, this logic ignores the potential for exclusionary curricula, which belies the apparent separation between the academic and the social. The preservation of hegemonic social norms in curriculum is a product of knowledge production controlled by the dominant classes. In this next section, I will explore how social norms are preserved by students who perform their upper middle class status in the halls of the preparatory school.

Cultivating Taste in Dress

My first year in that preppy private liberal arts college I was often excited and anxious about my appearance. I tried on different outfits in my room at home as I

\footnote{Ibid.}
packed for school, outfits that communicated to my peers that I was hip, trendy, but also chill and down to earth. I looked in the mirror and tried tirelessly to evaluate myself the way a stranger or a peer would. I decided an outfit was wearable only if I imagined a scenario in which my peers approved of it.

Arriving on campus, I felt overwhelmed by the blonde girls who wore Tory Burch flip-flops and carried around Longchamp bags. The pristinely manicured quadrangle surrounded by the timelessly beautiful red brick academic buildings reflected the unfamiliar, ostentatious aesthetic I would soon learn pervaded the school. I quickly realized that my wardrobe was not as hip - not aligned to this school’s trends - as I thought it was, and I felt an isolating feeling of disappointment and failure.

The uniformity of the Trinity student normative dress was often a topic of amusement and ridicule, even while it was highly sought after by students. I spoke with my basketball teammates, attempting to gain some sense of understanding for why everyone wore the same, expensive wardrobe, hoping that someone else would share my same feelings of alienation and group non-belonging. One of my teammates said,

My roommates and I all dress them same. It was hilarious, the other day it was raining and we all stepped out of our rooms to go to class at the same time. We were all wearing Hunter boots, Lululemon leggings, a rain jacket, and baseball hat. We just looked at each other and started laughing.47

I laughed along with my teammates, feeling a strange mixture of distaste and jealousy: I hated that everyone looked the same on this campus, but I wanted to be a

47 Paraphrased.
part of the uniformity. Any desire for uniqueness was crushed by my greater desire to fit in and to free myself from alienation and inadequacy. To be the same - even if it meant dressing in a way I thought was ridiculous or unappealing - was more seductive than to be different and myself.

In their study on youth consumption and style failure, Croghan et al. highlight the relationship between the construction of a style identity as a means to gain social acceptance: “The ability to maintain a style identity that other young people accepted as authentic could mean the difference between being popular and being socially ostracized…” (Croghan et al., 470-471). My style identity was not incomplete, but it was defined by my inability to consume and dress in a way that matched my peers at Trinity. It was “inauthentic” because it wanted to be something it wasn’t. Even if I possessed some of the items of my peers, I did not possess the same disposition and the same social power that they did. In his ethnography, Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity, anthropologist John L. Jackson complicates perceptions of authenticity by introducing a more ample notion of sincerity as it relates to racial subjectivities and intersubjectivities. Jackson asserts,

Where authenticity lauds content, sincerity privileges intent - an interiorized intent that decentralizes the racial seer (and the racial script), allowing for the possibility of performative ad-libbing and inevitable acceptance of trust amid uncertainty as the only solution to interpersonal ambiguity. (2005: 18)

To that end, my inauthentic wardrobe at Trinity said little about my person, but I was still felt inadequate and socially ostracized.

In most ways, I fit in at Trinity. I am a white, upper middle class woman from Fairfield County, Connecticut. Like many of my Trinity peers, I had benefited from
attending a public school that rivaled private schools, allowed us to selectively apply to several colleges, and ensured our social inclusion once we matriculated into these institutions. Still, the differences in clothing - my inability to have the expensive brands - was isolating and almost painful. I could not cultivate a feeling of belonging, and felt depressed and alone.

In retrospect, I know my feelings of loneliness and loss were privileged and at times dramatic; I was socially included at the institution racially and economically. My “aesthetic” exclusion and inability to fit in with my attire was one of the few instances where I could not pass socially, and I let it affect me in ways that show my history of fitting in and inclusion. I was surprised, saddened, and frustrated by my outcast status to a degree that illustrates my history of constantly feeling comfortable and the same. Still, even with the dramatic elements of my story, the feeling of not fitting in can be crippling. This leads me to wonder: What occurs when an individual who does not “fit in” – both racially and economically - enters environments like that of Trinity College’s? How do they see dress?

Prior to responding to this question, I will briefly historicize perceptions of dress in America, and highlight how it has served as a method of class articulation and performance. We tend to feel that the items we place on our bodies - whether they are shirts, dresses, shoes, necklaces, scarves, sashes, pashminas, etc. reflect something about our inner, and perhaps more private selves. American mode of dress is a culturally produced phenomenon that suggests that we must cover our genitalia and breasts while in public. It is also a way to keep ourselves warm during the winter, and cool during the summer. For those people who possess the financial flexibility to
selectively consume clothing, dress has evolved from serving these practical purposes to being a method of artistic and personal expression. In my discussion of clothing, I address those people who have this distinct financial privilege that allows for aesthetic creativity, while also acknowledging that this group does not, and cannot, reflect a universal approach towards clothing in this country or the world.

Not all people view clothing as a means to create and cultivate an artistic or expressive image of themselves, regardless but in all cases clothing makes a statement. Flamboyant dressers and simple dressers alike make statements about taste, habitus, and self-expression with their style choices. In her book, *Dress Casual*, Deirdre Clemente traces the history of fashion on American college campuses, giving special attention to the rise of casual attire. She emphasizes the importance of clothing consumption in making identity, and introduces the idea that casual dress is a form of self-defining and identity articulation that transcends class. Clemente writes, “What we wear is simultaneously our most private self and our most public self. Clothing is how we cover our bodies and how we present ourselves to the world” (2014: 35).

American dress serves as a clear example of how practicality meets personality in aesthetics. Dressing casually was popularized in the same era of suburbanization, rising consumerism, a growing middle class, and the Women’s and Civil Rights movements. Over the decades, it has become the normative mode of dress in this country: “to dress casual is quintessentially to dress as an American and to live, or to dream of living, fast and loose and carefree” (Clemente 2014: 16). Even beyond this, dressing casual is essentially American, because it reflects
middleclassness, which is the classed category with which most Americans identify because of its inclusive nature (a “nature” that has surely been cultivated). In “Identities: The Hidden Life of Class,” anthropologist Sherry Ortner highlights the importance of understanding class, race, and ethnicity as categories that intersect in intimate ways that make it nonsensical to try and divide them. Her discussion of middleclassness in America is particularly prominent because it further strengthens the inherent inclusivity of the category:

...indeed, it is almost a national category. In many usages it means simply all those Americans who have signed up for the American dream, who believe in a kind of decent life of work and family, in the worth of the ‘individual’ and the importance of ‘freedom,’ and who strive for a moderate amount of material success. It is everybody except the very rich and the very poor. (Ortner 1998: 8)

The notion that casual dress is quintessentially American because it can create the same inclusivity that American middleclassness represents the importance of consumption as a method of class belonging. An individual can wear a t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers, and thus appear middleclass. Inclusion through consumption echoes Marx’s suggestion that “…money is ultimately a democratizing force” (quoted in Chin 2001: 32). Marx continues, “[As] worker...as consumer and possessor of exchange values, and that in the form of the possessor of money, in the form of money he becomes a simple entry of circulation - one of its infinitely many entries, in which his specificity as a worker is extinguished’ (Marx 1969: 420-21).” As a possessor of

48 While it is true that individuals may have more flexibility to move between class lines using clothing as cultural capital, there are limitations. bell hooks and Gina Athena Ulysse are two Black feminists who highlight that class crossdressing has its limits for Black Americans and Jamaican women, respectively. As hooks writes, “…no amount of money could change the color of one’s skin” (hooks 2000: 22).
money, then, the consumer has the agency to become exactly that - defined not by their status as a worker but as their ability to participate in the exchange of capital.

There are several issues that problematize the notion of money as a democratizing force, the first and perhaps most significant being that the ability to accumulate financial capital is unequal and discriminatory. Without delving entirely into this concept, we must note that democracy cannot function within a socio-economic infrastructure that selectively privileges and marginalizes. But I digress. While it may be true that the accumulation of financial capital allows us to consume in distinct ways, is it right to say that it also allows us to move between different classes? Pierre Bourdieu asserts this by insisting on the importance of habitus, or the “...system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as being the organizing principles of action” (Bourdieu 1990: 12-13). Bourdieu reconfigures the notion of class as more than just a financial category by highlighting the tastes, dispositions, and behaviors that are characteristic of certain classes. Class is something embodied by an individual. In her book, *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*, Elizabeth Chin explores the disjunction between Marx and Bourdieu’s notions of class:

So while Marx’s observation that the possession of money can, for a time, erase the appearance of class difference, creating spaces and situations where ‘specificity as a worker is extinguished,’ Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and cultural capital are helpful in understanding the limits to extinguishing such specificity. Differences in consumption are not simply differences of style determined largely by economic limits (Chin 2001: 34).
Chin underscores the notion that certain class habitus emphasize certain tastes for dress. Class, then, becomes as much about behavior, disposition, and – in this discussion – attire, as it is about accumulating financial capital.

How are certain behaviors, tastes, wardrobes classed? How is middleclassness performed and embodied through unique modes of dress? What are the encoded social meanings of certain styles of dress? The stereotypical prep school - characterized by whiteness and wealth - is a site for experimentation and analysis in class embodiment through dress. Though historically associated with only the incredibly wealthy, preparatory schools currently are more socioeconomically diverse than many public schools. These institutions are also exemplars of habitus functioning on a wider, organizational scale that not only applies to the persons within it but to the institution itself: organizational habitus. Preppy dress exemplifies organizational habitus tangibly and directly. Students, like my peers at Trinity, dress in similar ways that are culturally recognized as valuable.

“Was I trying to fit in or did I actually like it?”

Minority students at these schools who deviate from the organizational habitus of these institutions are explicitly and implicitly encouraged to cultivate different habitus that fits the hegemonic, normative model. The pillars upon which the ideal was built are not questioned, the mold itself remains intact and fortified, and perhaps all that changes - and it is slight change - are some of the individuals within it. When an individual does not reflect the organizational habitus of a given environment, they experience dissonance. Many Prep students described this disconnection as “culture
shock.” According to Sarah: “It was very much a culture shock: the clothes that they wore, the things that they prioritize, like even from the Hunter boots to the Bean boots to the Barbour jackets, the Patagonias.” Ariel confirmed this with her experience. She noted, “I showed up at my middle school, and there were all these girls in Uggs, Cartier bracelets, Tiffany bracelets… I literally didn’t know how to cope. My mom called Prep and said ‘My child doesn’t know how to interact with these people because it’s a completely different culture…” Both of these women experience their culture clash materially (but it is not limited to materiality), and highlight the visibility of classed differences at their schools; clothing becomes a representation, reminder, and marker of difference. In their recounting of their stories, Sarah and Ariel relate clothing choice to a lifestyle, a culture, a set of values; Sarah underscores how consumption practices (consuming certain brands) reflects something about the consumer’s priorities, and in a similar way, Ariel rightfully intertwines clothing (jewelry) choices with a given group’s culture.

Sarah attended a school made up of nearly a third students of color, and Ariel’s school’s student body was over a third students of color. These numbers are not insignificant, and the intensity of Sarah and Ariel’s culture shock underscores the strength of the organizational, white, normative habitus present at these preparatory institutions. Anthropologist Kalervo Oberg highlights the emotional discomfort and anxiety that one may experience from what we call culture shock: “Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (1960: 1). Oberg’s discussion of culture shock is derived from

49 Interview 2015.
50 From field notes.
his experience as a neocolonialist-anthropologist, and his definitions of culture shock pertain mostly to the experiences of white anthropologists studying mysterious, Black and Brown “others.”

Oberg’s insights demand this digression about otherness and anthropology’s relationship with its subjects. In his book, *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World*, Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot examines the discipline’s broader history to argue that the “savage” is the reason for the creation of the discipline, which in turn, continues to recreate this category. He calls this singular construction of difference the “Savage slot” (2003). Trouillot writes, “Anthropology fills a pre-established compartment within a wider symbolic field, the ‘Savage’ slot of a thematic trilogy that helped to constitute the West as we know it” (2003: 9). He emphasizes the dual purpose of the so-called “savage,” which is to marginalize the Black or Brown Other (emphasis here on the idea that there is only one Other) and also to reinforce white domination. He calls on anthropologists to complicate this notion and to conceptually “…pluralize the native” (Trouillot 1995) in order to deconstruct the “savage slot.” Indeed, it is this conceptual “savage” that is being continually resocialized to become the ideal student to succeed in these schools.

I return to Oberg whose definition amplifies our understanding of Sarah and Ariel’s experiences; their shock arises from unfamiliarity - and subsequent discomfort - with modes of dress (which are, undoubtedly, symbols) that are representative of a foreign social intercourse. bell hooks experienced a similar culture shock when she entered Stanford as a young adult. She recounts her experience in her book, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, she writes “When we do cross the boundaries there is
usually a clash in etiquette, values, the way we do things” (hooks 2000: 152). Unlike Oberg, Sarah, Ariel and hooks must confront their culture shock and navigate an unfamiliar environment in which they are deemed underprivileged and marginal; they do not have the comfort of feeling superior amidst difference and strangeness.

Sarah and Ariel navigated through their environments by dressing in certain ways that would allow them to, at the very least, “look the part.” Ariel recalls the first pair of Ugg boots she bought shortly after matriculating into her private middle school: “...when you got to private school, you bought Ugg boots, I know I did…”51 Sarah received some prep school clothing staple - such as a Barbour jacket, Hunter boots, Bean boots - each Christmas. The shift in attire of both of these women represents their adaptation to the organizational habitus in their given environments; clothing and dress, for Sarah and Ariel, becomes a method of confronting and reconciling culture shock. Ultimately, dressing in this way is an attempt to gain entry into the bubble by minimizing visible material difference.

Sarah reflects on the meaning of her accumulation of trendy prep school items now and asks herself: “Was I trying to fit in, or did I actually really like it? Did I like it because I wanted to fit in.”52 Sarah’s questions highlight the ways in which environments affect the way a person dresses because of the desire to ‘belong’ in distinct atmospheres; how the bubble shapes certain tastes by simultaneously excluding and selecting. In her book, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas*, sociologist Diane Crane examines the coded meanings of clothing and how these construct identities. She writes, “clothes as artifacts ‘create’ behavior through their capacity to

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51 Interview 2015.
52 Ibid.
impose social identities and empower people to assert latent social identities” (2000: 2). Thus, assuming our identities are not fixed and interact and react with and to our environments, it would follow that clothing becomes a tool for articulating our identities. Sarah, for instance, shows how her taste for certain clothing items, such as Barbour jackets and LL Bean boots, may well have been because she was at a school where these items implied a great deal of social capital. Indeed, she expressed some discomfort in wearing these clothing items on Wesleyan’s campus, where they do not carry as much cultural capital as they do at a place like her boarding school: “Here, I stick out like a sore thumb.”

Keeping up with the trends at these schools is a tiresome and expensive process. At Trinity, as temperatures dropped and snow quilted the ground, a new uniform appeared on campus; LL Bean Boots, Canada Goose parkas, and Patagonia sweatshirts. Unequipped and overwhelmed, I helplessly tried to pass with other non-branded clothes, failing to do so despite my resilient efforts. It was doomed from the start; the brand names were the most fundamental part of looking the part in this environment. Reaching the ultimate point of desperation and desire to fit in, I spent an unreasonably hefty amount of money on a Patagonia sweatshirt, and used all the LL Bean gift cards I had accumulated over three Christmases and bought Bean Boots. Was it too aggressive to wear the two things together as soon as I bought them? Probably, but I did it anyway, and I felt a comforting sense of safety and belonging. It was addicting, and had I had the money to buy more of the staple items, I would have. My Patagonia sweatshirt and my Bean Boots were impositions of a social identity;

53 Interview 2015.
they allowed me to at least feel like I was cultivating a public identity that matched those of my peers (Crane 2000: 2). After feelings of alienation and loneliness, these feelings of belonging and integration - though they were incomplete and fleeting - were soothing.

Classlessness in uniforms?

School uniforms are a popular clothing policy in preparatory institutions that provide insight into how notions of classlessness may not always hold true in these spaces. Renee attended an all girls school in New York City that imposed a uniform policy that only allowed for certain shirts and bottoms, and restricted students from wearing shirts with brands or logos. Below I paraphrase Renee who explained the policy to me and recalled the complex role of uniforms at her school. “I have to be appreciative. [The school] had a skirt but they allowed you to wear whatever shirt you wanted with no logo. They didn’t want socioeconomic divisions. The idea was everyone is the same, it’s not color blind but...class blind.” Indeed, Renee did seem genuinely grateful for her school’s attempt at class equality, or perhaps, classlessness. But it was exactly that: an attempt: “It’s not a utopia. People wore Tory Burch shoes. Like I can tell you have money if you wear a solid gold barrette in your hair everyday.”

The ability to recognize a Tory Burch logo and to distinguish between real and fake gold implies a certain cultivated habitus that Renee possesses. What is most notable about her observation is the paradoxical nature of the uniform rule at her

54 Interview 2015.
school; in the attempt to discourage students from performing a certain class habitus, the uniform actually provides students with subtle, but salient, opportunities to reaffirm their upper class status in other ways, for example: wearing expensive jewelry or leather shoes. Although many people argue that growing capitalism increases opportunities for varying consumption among different class lines, consumption, and thus dress, is can still be mediated to remain a highly exclusionary practice.

I return to Dierdre Clemente’s discussion of casual dress, in which notes, “Today, T-shirts, sweaters, jeans, sport shoes, and the occasional sweatpants make ‘middle classness available to anyone who chooses to put them on’ (2014: 18). Though my discussion is not necessary limited to or centered on casual dress, it still parallels Clemente’s in that there is some suggestion that these styles of dress (casual and uniform) create a classless environment. Clemente reinforces Marx’s suggestion that money is a democratizing force, which affirms the false notion that there is indeed a “level playing field” or that classlessness can be achieved through dress. However, we must consider the ways in which upper class and upper middle class dressers both strive to and possess the capital to differentiate themselves from the middle class, to ensure that dressing is not an inclusive practice, and thus to maintain their superior status. Such actions include wearing a gold barrette and dressing in the highest quality fashion. Indeed, wearers of these uniforms are not all the same. In her research on independent international traders in Kingston, Jamaica, Black feminist anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse underscores the importance of quality clothing as something that ensures that dress is not classless:
...despite the fact that [ICIs] wear various styles and that these clothes are of a middle-class conservative standard...they are often of lesser quality. That itself is another signifier of class. The texture and denier of the linen from the free trade zones in Panama are quite different from the finer versions, such as the costlier handkerchief linen popular with the upper middle and upper classes. The clothes that ICIs wear remain but a version of a higher class style. In that sense, they retain a capital sign, since upper classes can read them as less expensive items consumed by lower classes (2007: 231).

While discussions of casual dress and uniforms connote the possibility for classlessness and deconstruction of the bubble, such notions cannot be realized. Class carries with it the economic means and social capital to both enact and perform an aesthetic embodiment that renders a classless aesthetic unlikely.

**Acting White?**

Much of the literature about students of color in preparatory high schools and colleges addresses the notion of these students are being told that they “act white.”

While this theme was not so prevalent in my ethnographic research, I will touch on it briefly given its saliency in general conversations about educational inequity. The phrase “acting white” refers to students of color who are perceived as assimilating into the dominant culture by dressing and talking in certain ways, or performing well academically. In her exploration of Black student academic performance in an urban high school, Signithia Fordham notes,

‘Acting white’ implies both Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemony plus impersonation, the power and ability to act buttressed by the assumption of an image external to the Black Self, an image that is not bloated by a perception of ‘lack.’ (1996: 237).

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56 These, of course, are not the only characteristics of a student who is perceived to “act white.”
Acting white, then, is a way for students of color to confront and manage stereotypes of their social identities. However, acting white is also prescribed to students who are behaving in a way - intentionally or unintentionally - that is associated with whiteness; it may not be a purposeful management of identity. Academic excellence and trying hard in school are two of these behaviors. Because Black students are assumed to be lazy or underperforming, when these students perform well academically, or work hard in school, they are said to be acting white:

School learning is therefore consciously or unconsciously perceived \textit{as a subtractive process}: a minority person who learns successfully in school or who follows the standard practices of the school is perceived as becoming acculturated into the white American cultural frame of reference at the expense of the minorities’ cultural frame of reference and collective warfare. (Fordham 1996: 182-183)

The notion of acting white rests on essentialist notions of Blackness. At her prestigious boarding school in Connecticut, Sarah was told “You don’t act like a typical Black girl,” by a female staff member at the school.\footnote{Interview 2015.} She reflects on this comment and tells me, confused, that she thought it was a compliment at the time. She, like the staff member, had internalized the supposed superiority of whiteness, or the supposed superiority of not being Black.

Ariel spoke of her ability to code-switch: “[I could go from] speaking about Lacan to speaking about DMX.” She says that Prep even “weeds some of that out of you...once you’ve learned proper English you’re so articulate now and you value that articulate quality…”\footnote{Interview 2015.} Simply put, ‘code-switching’ is a mode of cultural adaptation that describes an individual’s ability to contextually alternate between language...
varieties in one conversation. This also refers to the ability to successfully navigate different cultural milieus. What Ariel refers to is her ability to switch from language that is valued to language that is not. Ogbu and Fordham highlight that the use of valued language among Black students as a way that these students are said to act white. Ariel says this with a hint of mockery and sarcasm, seemingly making fun of the notion of “proper English” versus improper English.

“Acting white” is both a method of confronting and managing negative stereotypes while also a prescription given to Black students for behaviors that are typically associated with whiteness. That the phrase “acting white” is as common as it is within preparatory schools (and public schools, like the one studied in Signithia Fordham’s study and John Ogbu’s) reaffirms that these schools are white-dominated spaces where students of color must undergo some degree of assimilation and integration.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have highlighted the various ways in which difference is excluded and managed in these preparatory schools. Prep’s attempts to minimize cultural shock through exposure to sports games, operas, galas, and other social events act as mediators for students to have familiarity with experiences that are normative for their prep school peers. However, all of that resocialization cannot eliminate racial and classed differences that affect the way Prep students are perceived and treated in their independent schools. Private high schools in general have an organizational habitus that positions whiteness and wealth as the most
intellectual and the most motivated demographic. This culture of white supremacy permeates curriculum and pedagogy. More often than not, curricula are Eurocentric scripts that silence marginalized voices.

When students of color violate social norms cultivated by organization habitus in these preparatory schools, people notice. Students who behave in these ways are often perceived to be acting white because those behaviors have been claimed by white people. Thus, when Black students dress preppy, for example, they are violating the expectation that only white people dress preppy because preppy style connotes wealth. These confrontations clarify how difference is managed and brought under control in private schools.

In my next chapter, I will discuss this process of “control:” the process of integration into an oppressive and hegemonic system. As I have demonstrated in the previous two chapters, Prep for Prep accepts the hegemonic structure that marginalizes students of color. It subsequently navigates this system – that is, works within it – to ensure that students can “integrate” in preparatory schools. I will illustrate how this enacts structural violence. Integral to this is the role of the nonprofit more generally: social service nonprofits like Prep for Prep must navigate within a capitalist system to try and soften its harmful effects on marginalized populations. This mission is paradoxical, and in the end, reproduces the power and oppression of capitalism.
Chapter Four

Fitting Into Hegemony: the Non-Profit

Stitches Are Better

When I was in seventh grade, I banged the side of my face into a window and shattered the whole window (through no one’s fault but my own). I raised my hand to my face, horrified at the moist, warm feeling of blood on my hands. My mom drove me to the hospital. I was terrified when the doctor uttered the word stitches - I am a wimp when it comes to needles - hoping instead a Band-Aid or gauze would suffice. Regardless of my fear and complaints, the doctor would not budge because, he insisted, the stitches were absolutely necessary to heal the lesion. He sewed a few, millimeters away from my left eye, and I survived. To a doctor, my request for a Band-Aid was likely laughable at best, and misguided at worst. I was, after all, gushing blood. A Band-Aid would have stopped the bleeding temporarily, covered the lesion so not to horrify my friends and family, but it would have been a palliative fix. The stitches stopped the gushing but they didn’t look too great. Today, I have nothing more than a little, barely noticeable scar on my face.

More often than not, nonprofits are like Band-Aids; they solve a problem temporarily, as it exists in a contained moment in time, without addressing the historical conditions that created the problem. They do not pursue sustainable change. I argue that Prep for Prep lacks a multidimensional approach that includes both preventative and management elements. With emphasis on increasing educational opportunity, their efforts do not consider what lies at the heart of educational inequity. Activist and founder of Oakland Men’s Project Paul Kivel calls it “social
change work” - work that addresses systemic inequality at its root. The root-cause is absent, or at the very least, lacking in Prep’s mission.\textsuperscript{59} The program must operate cyclically in conjunction with the schedule of normative education - four years in a preparatory school and usually four years at a college or university. The very process is its own timeline, which requires an input and an output. As students are admitted to the program, Prep must continue its practice of resocializing them in their process as the organization prepares for the latest incoming class. While alumni of Prep often use the phrase “Prep for life” to connote the program’s life-long commitment post-placement, the majority of the work actually happens within a few years’ span.

Cycles, by definition, do not disrupt; they are designed to maintain and repeat. In this chapter, I will explore how Prep for Prep, and nonprofits more generally, have been designed cyclically to maintain and sustain, rather than to rupture and change.

Before I begin, I will briefly reflect on my positionality and its impact on this critique. More often than not, people with privilege who learn about organizations such as Prep for Prep applaud them for “uplifting” people lacking access to opportunities they would not otherwise have without intervention. Another response, typical of the overly-critical and also privileged white Wesleyan student like myself, is to dismiss the nonprofit for failure to enact lasting change. Indeed, both of these reactions actually reveal race and class benefits that involve the ability to observe and evaluate such programs from a great distance. The truth is, they, I should say, we will never need programs like Prep for Prep. Moreover, such stances especially when

\textsuperscript{59} Oakland Men’s Project is “a community education and prevention organization devoted to stopping male violence” (Paul Kivel).
unconsciously avowed tend to evoke more structural violence on the marginalized that is predicated upon a history of privilege. It is my goal to react in neither way.

Thus, my evaluation of the nonprofit is that it should have a multi-faceted approach to address and redress social problems as they exist both in the current moment as well as historically. Without this method, any attempt will simply maintain the inequality that created the need for these programs in the first place. Simultaneously, we cannot focus on the core issues alone as that would leave marginalized students without the help that they need. Some fusion of the two must exist.

Therefore, it is crucial that I acknowledge some of the ways that Prep has made positive change in the lives of its students. With the exception of one of the women with whom I spoke, they all remained thankful for what they have gained despite their generally critical stance on the organization. Renee, for example, opened up our conversation by questioning whether she would have her children participate in Prep for Prep. She remained unsure, and expressed anxiety about the thought of her children undergoing the same stress she did. In assessing her own reluctance, Renee noted that she could pass on the networking benefits she gained to her children, without them being directly involved with the organization. Though Renee did not explicitly state her full support or her gratitude towards the organization during this particular part of our discussion, it is clear that she reaped considerable benefits that have changed the course of her life. She also knows that they are significant enough to also change the course of her children’s lives. Renee also applauded her preparatory school and the mentorship programs engrained in Prep’s mission for its
students. Similarly, Sarah expressed a great deal of appreciation for the boarding school she attended throughout high school. She appreciated it for its diversity and open-mindedness; she said she had met people from all over the world while going there. Sarah started an annual event day that celebrates diversity and also gives students a chance to converse about difference.

Many of such Prep for Prep accounts are documented in *Be The Dream*, a compilation of alumni’s stories about their transformative experiences with the organization. Below, I present a few excerpts:

Like the Preparatory Component, life demands that we work, that we meet challenges head on, that we be committed to completing any endeavor as best we can. Deciding to meet those demands determines success, and Prep was not only where but also why I made the decision. (Billings-Burford 2003: 243).

I think Prep has been throughout my life a moral compass that is always with me, but that I only inspect closely from time to time. It guides me to my destiny. (Billings-Burford 2003: 249).

I was able to see, very concretely, what life had to offer beyond the four walls of that studio apartment my family lived in when I first began the Prep program. The possibility that had been birthed and strengthened in me through my family, my faith and my own striving blossomed and was made manifest in the opportunities Prep gave me. (Be the Dream, 269).

To be sure, Prep for Prep is incredibly efficient at satisfying the immediate need of excellent education for its students. The preparatory schools and colleges Prep students attend are among the best in the country. The program has cultivated a trusting relationship with these schools, ensuring students fair and generous financial aid packages. In this way, Prep excels at what Kivel calls “social service work,” that is “…it addresses the needs of individuals reeling from the personal and devastating
impact of institutional systems of exploitation and violence” (2006: 2). As the insights above show, Prep’s approach to exploitation and violence, then, is characterized by processes of prevention and management that I believe makes significant contributions at the personal, rather than structural, levels. In my next section, I will highlight how this approach, while solving immediate problems, does not address the roots.

**Sell yourself/sell your soul: operating within and as the state**

What had happened to the great civil rights and Black power movements of the 1960s and 70s? Where are the mass movements of today within this country? The short answer - they got funded.

Adjoa Florencia Jones de Almeida 2007: 186

This aversion of the structural is particularly problematic because over the years nonprofit organizations such as Prep have emerged as primary providers of solutions where government continues to fail; they have become extensions of the state: “the shadow state” (Wolch 1990). Urban planner expert Jennifer Wolch uses this term to describe the nonprofit industry and underline its connection to, and alignment with, state interests. The nonprofit industry is not apolitical or aeconomic, and instead is subject to the logic and culture of the United States neoliberal and corporate economy. It became a shadow state precisely because the sector provides citizens with what the government had previously provided during the Great Society, launched by Lyndon B. Johnson, and by the New Deal, launched by Franklin D. Roosevelt (Gilmore 2007: 45). Therefore, it is important to note that the nonprofit industry not only represents the shortcomings of the state, but, despite seemingly
depoliticized elements of the industry, is in fact deeply tied, managed by, and dependent on it.

Like the state and corporate entities, the non-profit is bureaucratic and hierarchical in its structure. Prep for Prep, for example, has a CEO and a Board of Trustees, the two bodies that hold the most power within the organization. The staff positions are governed by the Board and the CEO. This normative organizational structure ensures that those in power maintain their empowered position by reinforcing this hierarchical structure. Sociologist Max Weber’s theory on management is helpful here. He writes: “...as an instrument of rationally organizing authority relations, bureaucracy was and is a power instrument of the first order for one who controls the bureaucratic apparatus. Under otherwise equal conditions, rationally organized and directed action (Gesellschaftshandeln) is a superior kind to every kind of collective behavior (Gemeinschaftshandeln) opposing it” (Weber 1978: 993. Bureaucracy is a threat to democracy because it prioritizes the power of one over the collectivity of many.

The nonprofit’s bureaucratic structure takes the same form as the hierarchical nature of the United States government, and this becomes integral to how the nonprofit mission is carried out. It is this machinery, in part, that earned such organizations classification as the nonprofit industrial complex. Scholar and professor of Ethnic Studies Dylan Rodriguez coined the term in his article “The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex.” In this critique, he writes: “...the US state has found in its coalition with the NPIC a far less spectacular, generally demilitarized, and still highly effective apparatus of political discipline and repression that (to this
point) has not provoked a significant critical mass of opposition or political outrage” (2007: 29). As an apparatus of discipline, the NPIC must produce “docile bodies,” to invoke Foucault (Foucault 1995: 138). The nonprofit satisfies the needs of the people it serves. When urgent needs are satisfied, the necessity to address the root cause is often dulled. Discipline, then, is a method of maintaining the temporarily ameliorative elements of the nonprofit organizations.

As a bureaucracy operating within and as an extension of the state, the nonprofit must concern itself principally with accumulating capital to be competitive within such a cut-throat system. Needless to say, the organizations that are able to thrive must have some advantage. Prep for Prep is notably exceptional at this. Its annual budget of $10 million is entirely privately funded. Maria, a staff member of Prep, noted the impact that Prep’s New York City location has on fundraising efforts. Proximity to Wall Street and the crux of corporate America is a lucrative place to be.

Commercialization and competition, which are inherent to the capitalist bureaucratic framework, become integral to the inner workings of the nonprofit, especially in regards to fundraising. I return to Wendy Brown, whom I mentioned in earlier, to demonstrate how marketization has affected and constructed the neoliberal individual. Brown writes,

...both persons and states are construed on the model of the contemporary firm, both persons and states are expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value, and both persons and states do so through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors. (Brown 2015: 22)
Something similar has happened in the nonprofit world. As noted earlier, one of a nonprofit’s principal concerns must be fundraising should it want to persist, and as such, the organization must demonstrate behavior that will maximize capital value in the present and enhance its value in the future; every sphere of the organization becomes economized as it attempts to do this.

Founder of anti-violence feminist movement, “INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence” Andrea Smith demonstrates this development specifically within the sphere of nonprofit organizations’ work against domestic violence: victims are imagined not as capable survivors, but as “clients in need of services” (Smith 2007: 11). Economization of this organization hollows its original mission, rendering it no different from a corporate bank that is evaluated solely by its capacity to transform input into output.

Prep shares similar contradictions. The Lilac Ball is their annual fundraiser and graduation ceremony for the senior class. Fundraise, it does: tickets for attendees range from $1,000 to $100,000 and the money raised during the event contributes directly to Prep’s annual $10 million budget. During discussions of the Lilac Ball, four of the research participants I interview laughed, rolled their eyes, or scoffed. Whatever these reactions conveyed, it was not primarily positive. Renee, for example, referred to the Lilac Ball as the “Prep Pageant,” by this she means that the ball is a time when the organization shows off what it “produces” to donors. Interview, 2015.

61 Interview, 2015.
with a particularly poignant “struggle story.” She seemed disturbed as she recalled these trends, and we spoke of what appears to be the commodification of a student’s true, lived experience by Prep for Prep. We are reminded of Brown and her discussion of individuals construed as stocks or firms to enhance their capital value. However, this goes one step beyond that; this student’s life is commodified, not primarily to increase her value for herself, but to increase it for donors. These stories, treated by many as a selling point, appeal to the pathos of the donors in the audience, stirring respect and admiration for students, and ultimately (and hopefully, for Prep), a desire to be a part of such an experience within them. Therefore, Prep’s marketization of its students and of the organization as a whole becomes integral in its ability to raise funds.

A second element of Prep’s marketization is its ability to demonstrate to independent schools that its students are literally acceptable. Because it has existed for nearly 50 years, Prep for Prep has already established relationships with independent and boarding schools around New England, which ensure Prep students will be accepted. However, this pipeline is not a guarantee. Prep must continue to show these schools that its students are among the brightest and most competitive. This, like the private donations I mentioned above, is a form of gifting and exchange, if you will: independent schools set aside spots and aid specifically for Prep students, and in return, they can increase their diversity numbers while knowing they have

62 Ibid.
made a “safe” investment. Ariel puts it most succinctly: “We are much less risky than other students of color…[Prep] teaches you not to be a liability to the school.”

Marketization for Prep for Prep, and for other nonprofits, is an inevitable and desirable approach to fundraising because it is the most pragmatic and effective. What does it mean when nonprofits become overly concerned with attracting funders? Is it possible to marketize an organization while also staying true to its mission? Smith provides more insight that is applicable here. She writes,

...As we become more concerned with attracting funders than with organizing mass-based movements, we start niche marketing the work of our organizations. Framing our organizations as working on a particular issue or a particular strategy, we lose perspective of the large goals of our work. (Smith 2007: 10-11)

An organization’s success is dependent on its capacity to remain competitive, rendering nonprofits no different from for profits. Capitalism constructs businesses and organizations in such a way that forces people to understand problems economically. If we perceive victims of domestic violence as clients in needs of services, what do we lose in our understanding of patriarchal violence? Similarly, if Prep students are “stocks” - as Ariel said - how does this oversimplify our understanding of educational inequity? We analyze these problems quantitatively - creating the notion that inputs and outputs are the best method to enact and observe change - rather than starting from the origin and addressing these problems.

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63 While it is true that independent and boarding schools “accommodate” Prep students, I do not wish to imply that Prep students did not work for the spots they earned at these schools. Indeed, I will briefly address the academic rigor of the Preparatory Component of Prep for Prep below.

64 Interview, 2015.
systemically. Unsurprisingly, this concern with marketization and competition affects Prep’s ability to work collaboratively with other nonprofits that have similar goals.

Renee told me a story about another Prep student who wanted to apply for a QuestBridge scholarship (one that would cover the cost of tuition and room and board, loan free) who was told she would be “dropped” from Prep if she pursued this option.65 Thus, the nature of the neoliberal, capitalist nonprofit does not lend itself to lasting change because of its palliative, fund-focused approach. Band-Aids, not stitches, are the inevitable method.

**Good Intentions/Hidden Violence**

It may seem unfitting to follow my chapters about Prep students’ cultivation of middle class habitus by situating Prep for Prep in the larger world of nonprofit organizations. However, what Prep for Prep does for its students is not unlike what this particular NPO does in society in general. Prep for Prep, as I have demonstrated, attempts to resocialize its students into a middle class habitus; a hybrid lifestyle that, in theory, makes it easier to exist in wealthy, white environments for people who are not white nor wealthy. This process is part of a larger narrative expounding racial uplift or uplift ideology as a cure for structural racism: “…upward mobility will follow from the attainment of middle class values and standards of behavior…” (Cole and Omari, 2003: 789). I reinforce this point with another definition from hooks “…racial uplift meant that black folks on the bottom of the class hierarchy were encouraged to regard with admiration and respect the peers who were gaining class

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power” (2000: 90). The pursuit of elite education is integral to the uplifting process because of belief in the American Dream and general tendency to inextricably link upward mobility with education. Since normative education has always been constructed for white elite students, students of color of lower classes are usually excluded in several ways. Prep tries to avoid such exclusion by resocializing students so they will have experiences and dispositions typically associated with middle and upper class whiteness. Therefore, this process of resocialization reinforces the dominance of whiteness.

The structural violence caused by the resocialization process at Prep is deeply connected to the structural violence created by the capitalist nonprofit. As I have previously stated, the nonprofit is an extension of the state. It was initially created to assist those people who were literally abandoned by the government. Rodriguez encapsulates the state’s relationship with the nonprofit sector succinctly in saying:

...the US state has found in its coalition with the NPIC a far less spectacular, generally demilitarized, and still highly effective apparatus of political discipline and repression that (to this point) has not provoked a significant critical mass of opposition or political outrage. (Rodriguez 2007: 29)

Thus, the nonprofit sector - in addition to being an extension of the state - is a weapon used by the state to keep abandonment invisibilized. Prep for Prep, for instance, helps “...persons who are in the throes of abandonment” to create a semblance of actual change. However, as I have demonstrated in my last chapters, it does not assist in fully incorporating these people into the “body politic” as Ruth Gilmore would put it

[66] Here, I invoke Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s concept of abandonment: “What also distinguishes the expansion of social-service non-profits is that increasingly their role is to take responsibility for persons who are in the throes of abandonment rather than responsibility for persons progressing toward full incorporation into the body politic” (Gilmore 2007: 45).
This is a futile effort. Because the nonprofit is so deeply intertwined within the state, it cannot incorporate people into the body politic or create systemic change because that would involve rupture and revolution.

Working towards and within a hegemonic system reproduces hegemony. Similar to how resocialization reproduces white supremacy and classed domination, the social-service nonprofit reproduces the very structures against which it fights by operating within them. Prep for Prep, for instance, is an exemplar for similar nonprofits; it fundraises effectively, fulfills the immediate needs of its students, and is known by prestigious secondary schools and universities. To realize this success, Prep had to manage, navigate, and reproduce the same system that marginalizes its students of color. I return to Gilmore again whose analysis of nonprofits illustrates how destructive capitalism is to the execution of their missions. She writes,

...if forms do indeed shape norms, then what’s wrong is that the work people set out to accomplish is vulnerable to becoming mission impossible under the sternly specific funding rubrics and structural prohibitions that situate grassroots groups both in the third sector’s entanglements and in the shadow of the shadow state. (Gilmore 2007: 47)

Gilmore highlights the cyclical nature of the nonprofit that make it near impossible to cause some sort of lasting change. While Prep for Prep does not receive any governmental funding and may not have to comply with the government’s rules more directly, it still must compete against nonprofits that do. It is a reflection of the system within which it operates. It still is neoliberal and capitalist. It still must be systemic. As difficult as it is for me to admit, perceiving it as, “mission impossible” does not seem erroneous.
I believe that Prep’s resocialization project and its role as a social service nonprofit exemplify forms of structural violence. I use the term “violence” with some caution, fearful knowing the problems inherent to hierarchies of oppression. Indeed, how can what Prep for Prep does be violent? Violence, to me, implies an aggressive and purposeful attack, one that may not be physical, despite what I am inclined to think. Anthropologist David Graeber, however, complicates this notion of violence by addressing its most insidious and frequently invisible nature:

By ‘violence’ here, I am not referring to the kind of occasional, spectacular acts of violence that we tend to think of when the word is invoked, but again, the boring, humdrum, yet omnipresent forms of structural violence that define the very conditions of our existence, the subtle or non-so-subtle threats of physical force that lie behind everything from enforcing rules about where one is allowed to sit or stand or eat or drink in parks or other public places, to the threats of physical intimidations or attacks that underpin the enforcement of tacit gender norms. (Graeber 2012: 105-106)

In her post-colonialism studies, Gayatri Spivak decodes the notion of structural violence. She highlights the implicit violence in the construction of the subaltern female Other who is dehumanized by the white man. In conversation, Spivak and Graeber demonstrate that structural violence is harmful precisely because it is normalized in the “conditions of our existence” and invisibilized; it is quotidian, forming part of the social and cultural fabric we collectively sew. Prep for Prep - founded on the belief that education is a right that many students are disproportionately denied in this country - seemingly levels the playing field for students of color rendering the effects of educational racism and classism less severe. But is the metaphor of the level playing field a sufficient depiction of what Prep for
Prep does? Is education, as Prep conceptualizes it, truly the “great equalizer”? Positioning as such perpetuates the violence that normalizes racism and classism that persists during and after the pursuit and completion of education. To invisibilize this fact is to abuse marginalized students whom this violence affects most severely.

As I have noted before, ultimately Prep satisfies a significant need of the students it serves. It is important to highlight this fact repeatedly to counter my continuous critiques of the organization for what I believe is their perpetuation of structural violence. Hence, it is important to discern the enactment of structural violence and its perpetuation. Prep for Prep is a product of the enactment. It is erroneous to suggest that the organization itself creates such violence; rather, it perpetuates it by accepting the structures as they exist currently and molding the organization within, and because of these violent systems. Paradoxically, these structures perpetuated by the organization are precisely the ones that create a need for programmatic intervention in the pursuit of higher education for students of color.

**Conclusion**

I will conclude this chapter with a quote by activist Adjoa Jones de Almeida about the tensions of working for radical change within a hegemonic and oppressive system:

> If we think of our world as a garden, then radical change is when we are able to pull out the weeds that choke our existence by their roots - preventing them from being born again. Of course, one woman’s weed is another one’s medicine, so it’s important that we seek to fully understand and define the nature of our oppression. What chokes our existence is not just about money. It is about the kind of values, culture, and everyday interactions created by

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67 In his annual report to the Board of Education in 1847, Horace Mann writes “The spread of education, by enlarging the cultivated class or caste, will open a wider area over which the social feelings will expand; and, if this education should be universal and complete, it would do more than all things else to obliterate factitious distinctions in society” (Mann 1847: 78).
capitalism, heterosexism, imperialism, racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression. (Almeida, 2007: 185)

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how both Prep for Prep and social-service nonprofits work within a highly competitive and inherently oppressive capitalist system that recirculates itself. Prep, seeking to empower students of color through education, encourages them to assimilate into independent schools that marginalize them. Similarly, non-profits reproduce the capitalism they wish to interrupt by being capitalistic in nature.

This chapter was particularly difficult to write because of the hopelessness I felt while writing it. Capitalism’s strength and force make it easy to believe that radical change is not possible. In my conclusion, I will briefly explore the notion of radical change and how my definition of it has been reshaped throughout this project. Focusing on recent events on college campuses, I will emphasize the importance of and potential in small moments of rupture.
Conclusion

In September, I approached this thesis with what was perhaps naive excitement. I did not fully grasp the magnitude of this undertaking. It was easy for me to discuss educational inequity in the United States from a distance that was produced and maintained by my race and class privilege. This same privilege sheltered me from examining inequity in a more critical manner, one that implicated me and my position and lack of knowledge that, in turn reinforced oppressive structures. Even though I have always felt a drive to deepen my understanding of racial and classed injustice, learning about it has been quite different than writing about it. Over time, it became clearer to me. I was trying to comprehend something that required a lot of work, inevitably a great deal of self-doubt, and endless commitment. I still question this thesis and its purpose. I regret I did not write an auto-ethnography, which would have forced me to further explore my privilege in-depth, and to fully examine how I, as white upper class woman, am implicated in structural oppression. However, what I have realized upon the completion of this project is that it is, in fact, saturated with my perspectives. When I began every chapter, section, paragraph, and sentence, I grappled with my position. These moments of reflexivity grounded me to do the more difficult part of the work.

I have shown that American secondary education is an exclusionary, unequal, and meticulously structured system that continues to reproduce race and class hierarchies that remain central to this country’s ethos. While I focused mostly on private schools, the public school examples that I provided amplify this claim.
Curriculum, pedagogy, institutional habitus, and class performativity render educational institutions exclusionary places. Students who do not fit the hegemonic ideal required to achieve the American Dream are implicitly and explicitly pressured to “assimilate.” The path to success, it seems, as we are repeatedly told, is a singular one.

While educational inequity is as much a part of this nation’s history as freedom of speech or the right to bear arms, this academic year these issues became part of popular discourse even more so than in years past. Protests at University of Missouri, Yale University, Wesleyan and a slew of others, have revealed persisting and crippling racism on college and university campuses.

At Missouri, students protested institutional ignorance and failure to recognize ongoing racism on campus. The passivity of the administration became obvious when students addressed the drawing of a swastika on the wall of a residence hall, and the continuing use of racial slurs by white students with little response from the president. After several different acts of protest - including one in which Black football players announced that they would not participate in practice or in games until the president was removed - Missouri’s president, Tim Wolfe, actually stepped down. Yale’s protests came after a series of events that revealed exclusion of Black students on campus. The associate master of the college, Erika Christakis, sent an email to students in regards to offensive Halloween costumes, urging students to interpret these costumes as forms of expression and not offensive acts of cultural appropriation or insensitivity. Rumors of a “white girls only” party added to the impetus for protest.
To be sure, the unrest on Yale’s campus cannot be reduced to these individual events.

A Yale student, Aaron Lewis, addressed this erroneous assumption:

the protests are not really about Halloween costumes or a frat party. They’re about a mismatch between the Yale we find in admissions brochures and the Yale we experience every day. They’re about real experiences with racism on this campus that have gone unacknowledged for far too long. The university sells itself as a welcoming and inclusive place for people of all backgrounds. Unfortunately, it often isn’t.\(^\text{68}\)

Such events have ignited polemical discussions about race on campus, free speech, censorship, and safe spaces. Professor of African American Studies at the University of Connecticut Jelani Cobb responded to tensions between students of color who are continually excluded by universities and institutional racial blindness:

The unrest that occurred at the University of Missouri and at Yale University, two outwardly dissimilar institutions, shared themes of racial obtuseness, arthritic institutional responses to it, and the feeling, among students of color, that they are tenants rather than stakeholders in their universities.\(^\text{69}\)

Cobb highlights the institutions’ inability to adequately respond to students’ feelings of exclusion and non-belonging. Students have had to force the institutions to recognize racism by situating it in a context that directly affects the administration. Had Missouri’s football team not given the ultimatum to the president, his resignation may not have happened: the school could have lost $1 million had the players not participated in a game. Recognizing racism and hearing students demands became an economic interest to the school, thus making it one that deserved attention. This posit


further affirms that racism, though pervasive on college campuses, is not a priority of administrations until it affects their budget.

The protests on campuses have also underscored the overwhelming of whiteness at the American university. The desire for safe spaces among many students of color on campuses demonstrates how educational institutions can be—more often than not, they are—unwelcoming, not inclusive, and thus, deemed unsafe by underrepresented students. Given the differences upon which these schools are built, the question then becomes, what is a safe space? Can we respond to this need? More importantly, can we adequately address these issues given the long history of educational inequity?

I turn to UCLA Professor of American History, Robin D. G. Kelley for a response. In his essay “Black Study, Black Struggle” published in the Boston Review earlier this year, Kelley problematizes the obsession with diversity and belonging in universities. He offers deeper insights into the history of racism that continues to manifest in educational institutions and impede Black liberation:

We must go to the root - the historical, political, social, cultural, ideological, material, economic root - of oppression in order to understand its negation, the prospect of our liberation. Going to the root illuminates what is hidden from us, largely because most structures of oppression and all of their various entanglements are simply not visible and not felt.\textsuperscript{70}

Understanding oppression in its most insidious and complex manifestations opens a door to what has been hidden. To make visible what has been hidden from us is disarming, and often leads to ambiguity.

I have been susceptible to the naive idealism that has led me to believe in the likelihood of revolution. My naiveté has not been eroded by salient and persistent attacks against my being. That is partly why I did not expect this thesis to be as emotionally draining to write as it has been; I thought that the hope of radical change would allow me to add endless mental footnotes to disheartening facts that told me that radical change was possible so long as we do A, B, and C. However, as the realities of the situation became clearer to me - that is, as I better understood the history and persistent power of racism and classism - I faced the crushing realization that revolution and radical change are unlikely, if not impossible. Still, in grappling with these questions of the future and possibilities for change, I use revolutionary logic to help conceptualize how radical moments that demonstrate potential for betterment can occur.

My hope led me to admit that while revolution may not be possible, perhaps we can still draw from groups that engage in revolutionary practices. I found the EZLN. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) is a revolutionary leftist political group based in Chiapas, Mexico. The Zapatistas fight for indigenous autonomy and resist the state’s attempts to take land from various indigenous groups throughout Mexico. I use the Zapatista revolutionary framework to demonstrate how the Zapatistas respond to global capitalism’s forceful attack on people of color who are positioned peripherally in this society. Though EZLN and Prep for Prep exist in different geopolitical contexts, the histories of these organizations are not entirely dissimilar; both address deeply historical and pervasive racial and classed injustice that is directly created and reproduced by capitalism. Their responses to such
structures differ immensely, and I hope to demonstrate how the EZLN, as a radical revolutionary organization, provides us with a framework for imagining revolutionary moments.

In their fight against global capitalism and neoliberalism, the Zapatistas emphasize the importance of a horizontally led movement that encourages individuals to look inwards to deconstruct capitalist and globalist power structures that have created the Fourth World War. Reminiscent of Wendy Brown, the Zapatistas argue that the Fourth World War marketizes all spheres of life, rendering individuals indifferent consumers and producers and erasing the importance of and potential for collective welfare (El Kilombo Intergaláctico 2007). To resist, zapatismo encourages participants to look inwards; “to relieve ourselves of the positions of ‘observers’ who insist on their own neutrality and distance” (El Kilombo Intergaláctico 2007; 9). Having this insight and seeing ourselves allows us to disentangle power; we will enable ourselves to exercise power through people so that all rule. When everyone rules, we rupture the dichotomy between the ruled and the rulers (El Kilombo Intergaláctico 2007: 14).

The complete disentanglement of power is an unlikely project in the context of the United States. Power has been controlled by so few for so long that this structure has become an unbreakable tradition. Still, the revolutionary rhetoric and practice of zapatismo helps us to think about the possibilities of space for rupture; space to resist structures that exclude and subjugate. Zapatismo calls us to look

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71 The Fourth World War, according to the movement, is a war with no front: “It is instead a war for the imposition of a logic and a practice, the logic and practice of capital, and therefore everything that is human and opposes capital is the enemy; we are all at all times potentially the enemy, thus requiring an omniscient and omnipotent social policy...this is not a war on all fronts; it is the first world war with NO front.” (El Kilombo Intergaláctico 2007: 4)
inwards. Can we utilize this practice within educational institutions that marginalize students and faculty of color? Could it provide a space of resistance?

Black students at Yale, Missouri, and Wesleyan have taken an inward look, and negotiated their positions by collectively joining and indicating spaces for rupture. Although there were other factors at play, Missouri’s president resigned in accordance with demands from students, a center for race, ethnic, and social identity is in the works at Yale, and a similar center for “intercultural development and literacy” is being discussed at Wesleyan.72 These examples highlight the possibilities students and faculties have made within the institutions. These are moments of disruption: students have brought issues of racial, classed, and other exclusion to the forefront of public dialogues. They are challenging colleges and universities to engage with their problematic history, something such institutions too often desperately want to avoid.

Racism cannot be reversed. Indeed, there are still buildings on college campuses, like Calhoun College at Yale University, that honor white supremacists. There are less overt signifiers of these histories that reaffirm non-belonging of students of color. Colleges cannot keep denying their histories in the same ways that nonprofits by definition cannot be revolutionary. However, the above examples show that the potential for change is certainly not absent. It lies with all students. They must recognize their power. Programs such as Prep for Prep have their goals, their students can benefit from these and still have another. They, too, can collectively disrupt. They can consciously and critically engage with their own positions as

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participants and actors even in these exclusionary spaces. They also have potential to become active change-makers. These changes may be small but they are where we must begin.
List of Figures


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