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## A Review of *The Best of the Best: Becoming Elite at an American Boarding School*.

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It is hard to imagine a more bucolic setting than one of the most elite private schools in America. It is also hard to imagine that the ultra-rich students who attend this school would need any more attention than they already get. Yet these are the subjects of Rubèn A. Gatzambide-Fernández's ethnography, *The Best of the Best: Becoming Elite at an American Boarding School*. In this compelling and impeccably researched study, Gatzambide-Fernández seeks to investigate how students at an elite boarding school he calls "Weston" appropriate their privileged status. His specific and well-developed questions include: "What do students say about what it is like to attend an elite boarding school today? How do they negotiate the increasing diversity of the student body? And how do they make sense of the privileges afforded to them in these unique and rarefied educational contexts?" (p. 40). Although Gatzambide-Fernández's study does not fully realize the potential of his own premise that "[s]tudying the experiences of students in the most privileged educational settings sheds light on the social and cultural dynamics that shape inequality across the educational system," it does offer an important and oft-overlooked condition for understanding the inequalities in the American educational system.

Gatzambide-Fernández's research began while he was a doctoral student in anthropology at Harvard University. He was hired as a consultant by Weston administrators to explore the school's "hidden curriculum" by creating a "portraiture" in the tradition of Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot. After completing this study, and with the encouragement of several faculty members who had also done graduate work at Harvard, he expanded his initial findings and spent the next school year (2003-2004) in what he terms "deep hanging out," a concept borrowed from anthropology used to describe in-depth participant observation. During this time he developed a model that describes how students learn to make sense of the privileges an elite education affords them. He calls this model "the five E's of elite schooling: exclusion, engagement, excellence, entitlement, and envisioning" (p. 6).

Gatzambide-Fernández was both an insider and outsider in the Weston community: an outsider because of his ethnic status—he is of Puerto Rican descent—and because he wasn't a "Westonian," and an insider because he, too, attended elite schools. He also spent a great deal of time with the faculty, frequently dining in their homes and sleeping in their guest quarters. He does, however, acknowledge that these experiences contributed to his own elite subjectivities. According to Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre (2007), there are three expectations for the conduct of qualitative research. These include "A. Thorough description of design and methods. B. Adequate demonstration of the relationship of claims to data. C. Thoughtful considerations by the researcher of the strengths and limitations of the study." According to this definition, Gatzambide-Fernández's study succeeds in every way. He draws on a wide variety of sociological and anthropological works to inform his analysis and provide a theoretical framework. He writes that his ethnographic study is informed by "critical, postcolonial, and feminist traditions" (p. 222).

He also provides a thorough description of his methodology. He cites critical discourse analysis as his primary means of both collecting and analyzing data, which included participant observation, an online student questionnaire, narrative interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Gatzambide-Fernández also asked for feedback from the students he studied and from other researchers to help him corroborate his findings and ensure the validity of his interpretations.

Another important component of the quality of research, according to Freeman et al. (2007), is the

"systematic and careful documentation of all procedures" (p. 26) Gatzambide-Fernández goes to great lengths to provide this record, including a detailed appendix that contains the actual surveys and questionnaires he used. In addition, there are almost 30 pages of meticulous endnotes that provide the reader with more in-depth theoretical references.

Although Gatzambide-Fernández clearly articulates his research design and methodology, I feel that his study might have been strengthened if he had been clearer about his intended audience. Identifying one's audience is important because as LeCompte and Preissle (1993) point out, "standards for evaluation of research . . . vary with the audience for the fieldwork; different readers bring different sets of assumptions to their assessment of fieldwork" (as cited in Preissle and Grant, 2004, p. 177). Gatzambide-Fernández seems to be aware of this fact and writes that "academic readers will not find in this book a thorough discussion of theoretical concepts or substantive engagement with analytic problems" (p. 2). Yet, his book seems ill-suited to a general audience despite references to trade books and popular movies and his suggestion that the lay reader skip the more technical sections.

In Chapter One, "Totally Elite" Gatzambide-Fernández defines an elite boarding school as one that is typologically, scholastically, historically, demographically, and geographically elite. Gatzambide-Fernández provides a brief background of previous research conducted at elite private schools. He writes that most studies on elite schools have focused on social reproduction theories. He finds this theoretical focus limiting because of the focus on the linear process of the transfer of power solely through economic means. He critiques this theory because he believes it cannot explain how all students at elite boarding schools, regardless of socioeconomic status, learn to appropriate their elite status. He then applies and builds on sociologist Erving Goffman's concept of a "total institution" (p. 22) to analyze how students' experiences contribute to their identification as a Westonian. Here, he draws on James Gee's small "d/discourse" "to refer to the particular ideas and ways of understanding experience that students draw upon to make sense of their experience and construct Westonian identifications" (p. 13).

Chapter Two, "Getting In" traces how students' admission into Weston begins their journey of appropriating their privilege, such as the maxim that although "Weston is not for everybody, it is certainly for them" (p. 45). Gatzambide-Fernández writes that being admitted to Weston is the first indication students receive that they are worthy of the distinctions such admission implies (p. 49). They begin their journey of appropriating their elite privileges by being told that they are the "best applicants" at the "best school" (p. 59).

Chapter Three "Being Smart, Working Hard" further develops how students accept and justify the privileges of a Weston education because they are smart and work hard. Their commitment distinguishes Westonians because they believe that they, unlike public school students, are committed to academic excellence and rigor (p. 94). Gatzambide-Fernández writes that these notions are closely linked to the idea that the United States is a meritocracy—and that anyone who works hard enough can be successful—which echoes the idea of the United States as an ideal meritocracy. But this ideal is undermined by hierarchical relationships among groups. Not everyone (especially the athletes at the school) can be the best. This hierarchical relationship (among academics, athletics, and the arts) is evident in how students talk about spaces on campus.

Chapter Four, "Reserved Seating" more fully explores how students talk about spaces on campus

and "the importance of group boundaries and hierarchies, and the role that space plays in organizing and maintain them" (p. 98). Gatzambide-Fernández asks students to draw the seating charts of the dining halls and then invites students in focus groups to talk about why space reflects social boundaries. He writes that one student "ignores the important role that wealth, social networks, and cultural consumption play in the formation of student status groups, particularly the 'popular' crowd with which she identifies" (p. 125). And he writes that "Students on both sides of the social landscape seek to reject or at least downplay their economic status" (p. 125). However, the organization of the social spaces of Weston closely mirrors the dynamics of status groups at all other schools in the United States. Gatzambide-Fernández writes that students are able to resolve the paradox of realizing the presence of social status groups with the official school discourse, which advocates for tolerance and inclusion by saying that they are able to move easily across groups with ease, although of course Westonians must be able to distinguish themselves from public school students.

Chapter Five, "Bonding Rituals," discusses how various rituals help to thicken the Westonian identification. Some of these rituals include assembly guest speakers repeatedly telling students that they are bound to be the "leaders of the world" and the administration reminding students that they are "the best and the brightest" (p. 139). Students also describe Weston as a "family." This deep bonding among students (not with teachers) cements their future lives of distinction as "Westonians." Through both institutional (award ceremonies, formal dinners) and organic rituals (those that take place beyond the gaze of adult authority), students solidify their identification as being Westonians

Not until Chapter Six does Gatzambide-Fernández finally address the hidden inequalities—what he calls "Unequal Distinctions"—at Weston. Here, he troubles the categories of bonding, curriculum of diversity, and the "hidden injuries" of meritocracy, observing that elite boarding schools "re-inscribe the social dynamics of class, race, and gender oppression in the production of elite status groups" (p. 192), especially for those students who have to distance themselves from their home lives in order to identify as Westonian. This chapter also goes into greater detail about the sexism at Weston. When a female student asks Gatzambide-Fernández if he'd send his daughter there, he suddenly comes clean and is brutally honest about his reservations of sending his daughter, because he believes that sexism is pervasive and accepted at Weston. This honesty comes as a relief. Readers see clearly here how Gatzambide-Fernández is making his thinking and his subjectivities transparent. And though the female students disagree with his assessment, they are happy to point out that the reason girls come to Weston is to "prepare to be chosen" by the boys of the Westonian elite (p. 186).

Chapter Seven outlines the ways in which students envision an elite future including "how students talk about their college prospects and the kinds of professional careers they envision for themselves" (p. 16). It is no surprise that at the end of the book the Westonian elite are sent off into the world to re-inscribe the social hierarchies as we know them. The ending left this reader feeling a little more than hopeless that this cycle of privilege would ever end. Given that Gatzambide-Fernández clearly places himself in the critical tradition—for example, he states that his study is informed by "critical, postcolonial, and feminist traditions" (p. 222)—I anticipated some sort of call to action and was disappointed when none appeared. According to Lather, "critical theories are informed by identification with and interest in oppositional social movements" (p. 88). Gatzambide-Fernández provides an important insight into how all students (regardless of socio-economic status) learn to appropriate the privileges they enjoy as members

of an elite boarding school. But I remain unconvinced this work was in any significant way oppositional or emancipatory. This goal might be rather lofty and may not have been within the scope of Gatzambide-Fernández's study, yet I feel that he may have missed an opportunity to more strongly advocate for the equalization of educational institutions.

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