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“Interesting:” The Limits of Education for Social Change

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“Interesting:” The Limits of Education for Social Change

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Education Studies Capstone

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Abstract

As an American Studies major, I've gained a critical awareness of injustice that I've always assumed would lead to social change. But I've also begun to wonder whether this critical awareness just allows my peers and I to sound smart in the seminar room, allowing the very violence and inequality we are learning about to continue. To explore this question, I interviewed recent graduates of American Studies and analyzed how they spoke about the impact of their education. I show how the graduates used intellectual terms like "interesting" throughout their interviews, illuminating their distance from the injustices they studied. This distance is fundamentally tied to a social construction of whiteness that the graduates mobilized to distinguish themselves from others. In some cases, they were able to convert their critical awareness into social justice careers, gaining further financial and social capital from their education. Outside of these careers, their academic frameworks for privilege and injustice seemed to obstruct or replace concrete ways of acting against that injustice. The compatibility between the critical examination of injustice and the accumulation of privilege shows the limits of education oriented toward social change.

Introduction

As an American Studies major, I've taken classes like "Inequality in America" and "Anthropological Approaches to Capitalism" that have given me a critical awareness of power and injustice in society: how systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and settler-colonialism manifest in the world around me. These frameworks for race, class and other axes of identity felt eye-opening: after a sheltered childhood in an upper-middle class white family in rural Maine, throughout college I felt myself gaining an awareness of the depth of injustice in the world. And learning about these injustices made me feel that I could change them. I assumed that the reason that white supremacy and capitalism persisted was that people just didn't understand them enough. Now that I— and all of my rich white friends who were having similarly eye-opening experiences— could critique the inequalities and injustices in the world, we could end them.

But of course, my friends and I are not the first rich white kids to take classes that teach a critical awareness of injustice. And injustice is not ending. While generations of college students have been learning about the failures of capitalism to make an equitable society, income inequality in the United States has quadrupled over the last four decades.¹ While we've been learning about white supremacy, Black Americans remain 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than white people.² While we've been learning about heteropatriarchy, an estimated one-third of women worldwide still experience sexual violence.³

So does education that teaches a critical awareness of injustice work against that injustice? Or are the two comfortably compatible? Are the eye-opening frameworks that my

¹ "Inequality in the United States," Inequality.org, found at <https://inequality.org/facts/income-inequality/>.

² Brentin Mock, "What New Research Says About Race and Police Shootings," *Citylab*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2019/08/police-officer-shootings-gun-violence-racial-bias-crime-data/595528/>.

³ "Violence against women," *World Health Organization*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>.

peers and I learned doing anything more than enabling us to sound smart in the seminar room and then, later, a job interview? Or is our ability to critique just allowing us to maintain our privilege while releasing our guilt, thus sustaining the very violence and inequality we are learning about?

These questions are part of a broader conversation about what happens when privileged people become aware of injustice in society. A 2019 *Vox* article labels a recent leftward political shift in young upper-middle class white liberals as “The Great Awakening,” using the term “woke” that originated in urban Black communities to describe a radical political awareness and has since been adopted by white liberals.⁴ The article argues that this increased awareness of racial injustice has polarized the electorate and fractured the Democratic electoral coalition.⁵ A 2018 *National Review* article on this same shift calls it the “Great White Culture War,” charging that white elite racial liberalization enables upper-class white people to gain social capital by distinguishing themselves from working-class white people who are seen as less racially enlightened.⁶ Scholar la paperson’s *A Third University is Possible* expresses a different anxiety about the same phenomenon. la paperson critiques the apolitical function of liberal arts universities, arguing that the liberal arts university “mistak[es] its personalized pedagogy of self-actualization for decolonial transformation.”⁷ They charge that what places like Yale— and

⁴ Matthew Yglesias, “The Great Awakening,” *Vox*, April 1, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/3/22/18259865/great-awakening-white-liberals-race-polling-trump-2020>.

See also Forever 21’s “Stay Woke” clothing line for an example of the appropriation of this word: <https://www.shoptagr.com/shop/forever-21/forever-21/stay-woke-classic-shirt>.

⁵ Another version of this argument: Astead Herndon, “How ‘White Guilt’ in the Age of Trump Shapes the Democratic Primary,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/us/politics/democratic-candidates-racism.html>.

⁶ David French, “The Great White Culture War,” *National Review*, August 8, 2018, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2018/08/great-white-culture-war-race-political-divides/>.

⁷ la paperson, *A Third University is Possible*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). Chapter 3.

within Yale, programs like American Studies— do for white students is teach critical awareness as personal enlightenment rather than political transformation. It seems that being taught a critical awareness of injustice in elite institutions, far from being the uncomplicated good that I had thought in the beginning of my own critical education, might be detrimental to sociopolitical change and equality.

Though these authors express different concerns— around Democratic electoral politics, social inequality, or political conservatism— the locus of their concern is what happens when white people gain an awareness of injustice. Yet these authors fail to examine the very people whom they are discussing, instead using quantitative data or theoretical analysis to make their claims. They ignore vital questions of how exactly white people who have been educated for a critical awareness understand that education and its impact in their lives. This is of vital importance not because white voices should be centered or elevated, but because their articulations offer a valuable lens for studying the question of how privilege and critical awareness interact. Therefore, my project analyzes how racially and economically privileged university graduates articulate the impact of their education, particularly focusing on the ways in which it has given them a critical awareness of injustice. To do so, I interviewed ten graduates of American Studies at Yale University who identify as white. This project cannot answer larger causal questions around critical awareness and political change, and it does not make claims concerning the “truth” of how these graduates actually act or think. By adding students’ own voices to this conversation, I hope to deepen the analysis of the relationship between education and social change.

Research Rationale

To address questions of education for critical awareness, I chose to focus on white students who majored in American Studies at Yale University. This section explains this choice and how it shapes my analysis. Firstly, the focus on white students is not intended to elevate voices of privileged students above those of marginalized students. Rather, this focus is because education for critical awareness has very different meanings depending on students' positionality. As critical whiteness scholar Sara Ahmed writes, "Whiteness is only invisible to those who inhabit it."⁸ Considering education for critical awareness as a process that makes the invisible visible only makes sense for white people, who move through the world with the visible invisibility that is whiteness. For people of color, Ahmed argues, critical awareness is "about making what can already be seen, visible in a different way."⁹ Similarly, even as they express anxiety over the self-serving circular mode of critique found in liberal arts universities, la paperson calls for colonized subjects to engage in critique, saying that "only through critique can the colonial code be cracked."¹⁰ Yet la paperson is not concerned about colonized subjects perpetuating the "colonial code" of white supremacy: they identify privileged students as the ones using critique to abstain from political change. Thus, though my interlocutors may have other marginalized identities, their racial privilege has particular implications for the relationship between critical awareness and social change.

Similarly, I chose to interview recent graduates in American Studies neither to elevate nor to demote that discipline but rather because it is a field that highlights the issues that I seek to

⁸ Sara Ahmed, "Declarations of whiteness: the non-performativity of anti-racism." *Borderlands* e-journal 3, no. 2 (2004), 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰ la paperson, *A Third University*, Chapter 3. la paperson's call is reflected in Black and Chicano student movements during the 1960s calling for ethnic studies, among other demands on the academy. For a history and critique of these movements, see Roderick Ferguson's *The Reorder of Things*.

examine. At Yale, American Studies is characterized simultaneously by critical awareness of injustice in society and by an agnosticism over how to use that awareness. The program ranges from history to literary analysis, although it particularly focuses on cultural critique. Many of its classes are cross listed with other departments, particularly Ethnicity, Race, and Migration; Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; African American Studies; and History. They lean heavily on critical race theory, feminist theory, queer theory, and other critical frameworks. This focus is reflected in how American Studies as a scholarly field understands itself; in 2017, American Studies Association president Kandice Chuh called for American Studies scholarship and teaching in the service of “a pedagogy of dissent...understood to be essential to social transformation.”¹¹

Though social transformation is indeed a topic of many Yale American Studies classes, it tends to be an object of analysis rather than an urgent goal. The questions these classes pose are generally about how students can hone their analyses of political problems, rather than how they can use those critiques to inform actual political projects. This is reflected in how American Studies at Yale advertises itself. While the Ethnicity, Race, and Migration program declares on its website, “ER&M majors study the world in order to change it,” the American Studies website says, “American Studies offers a broad-ranging curriculum to introduce students to critical scholarship and methods from multiple disciplines.”¹² In other words, ER&M teaches a critical awareness of injustice in order to fight against that injustice; American Studies simply teaches a critical awareness. This agnosticism over how critique is put to work after formal education makes the program an ideal case study for the question of how privileged students understand the

¹¹ Kandice Chuh, “Pedagogies of Dissent.” *American Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2018), 168.

¹² Ethnicity, Race, and Migration: <https://erm.yale.edu/our-community>. American Studies: <https://americanstudies.yale.edu/>.

impact of their critical education. Finally, I chose Yale graduates because of the convenience of who I could reach out to; while there are distinctive aspects of Yale and of American Studies at Yale, it can be seen as fairly representative of other liberal arts universities.

Methodology

I interviewed ten people who had recently graduated from Yale University in American Studies and identified as white. These people were mostly referred to me by my advisor, who had taught them in various American Studies classes. Two graduated in 2012, one in 2013, four in 2014, and three in 2015. Six of my subjects identified as female, three as male, and one uses any gender pronouns. None were first-generation college students, although one was the first in their immediate family to graduate with a four-year degree. Currently, five are pursuing further degrees, one works as a public defender, one is running a start-up that produces snacks, one is a charter school teacher, one is a journalist, and one works at a venture capital firm. All names have been changed and all identifying information removed from this paper. The interviews took place either by phone, over video chat, or in person, and were semi-structured: most questions were asked to most subjects, but no two interviews were exactly alike. The participants were told that the interview was for a project about the impact of American Studies on their lives. Each interview began with questions about what the graduates are doing now both professionally and personally, then moved to why they chose American Studies, then to how their education at Yale affected them.

I put the data from the interviews in conversation with scholarship from critical whiteness studies and higher education studies. In doing so, I read the transcripts as cultural texts, examining patterns and specific use of language. I am looking less at what the graduates describe

and more at how they describe it, showing how their language illuminates broader systems articulated by the theorists with whom I am in conversation.

Framing

I come to the questions of this paper as an economically privileged white American Studies major at Yale— the exact identities that characterized my interviewees. Therefore, I do not make these critiques from a place of moral distance or superiority. My positionality deeply affected the process of both conducting and analyzing the interviews. The graduates were comfortable with me, and I made a deliberate effort to bring out our common identities and experiences in order to elicit a relatively unguarded dynamic in the conversation. We should understand the transcripts that resulted not as objective statements made in a vacuum but as products of a particular conversation held between two similarly positioned people, and should think carefully about the kinds of performance that that setting might engender.

Further, it is perhaps unsurprising that I found the transcripts extremely difficult to analyze, simply because my subjects talked the way I talk. I found it difficult to achieve the critical distance necessary to interrogate their discourse, and therefore leaned heavily on my advisor and my peers to help me do so. What I found reflects back on myself as much as it does upon my interviewees; for example, I began to notice in my own speech what I had noticed in that of my subjects. Thus, though I am writing about the graduates and not about myself, I make these arguments out of an ongoing process of self-reflection.

Findings and Analysis

Pulling the graduates' interviews together, I will follow the chronological arc of their choice of the American Studies major, how they think it affected them, and what they are doing in their lives now. I will show how the graduates used intellectual terms throughout their interviews, illuminating their distance from the injustices they studied. I argue that this distance is fundamentally tied to an elite, progressive whiteness, which the graduates mobilize to differentiate themselves from others as more critically aware. This critical awareness often enabled them to pursue social justice-inflected careers, thus converting their academic interest in injustice into financial and social capital. Outside of these careers, their academic frameworks seemed to obstruct or replace concrete ways of acting on that knowledge.

Why American Studies?

I thought [American Studies] was so interesting.

I mean, all the classes that I was interested in were in American Studies, so it felt like a pretty natural thing...I remember thinking I could either do history or American Studies, and American Studies just had more classes that I was interested in.

I ended up being in Formations of Modern American Culture [an introductory American Studies class], which is like, this is everything I'm interested in.

I just went through the course booklet and was like, this class sounds cool...I took the classes that seemed interesting to me.

These quotes are just some of the many moments where the graduates used the word “interesting” to describe why they chose American Studies as a major. On the surface, it may seem unremarkable that all ten graduates used this framing; after all, isn't learning supposed to be interesting? Yet when put in context with the classes offered by American Studies— classes such as “Plantation, Prison, Ghetto” or “Inequality in America”— this framing becomes much

more troubling. So what does “interesting” really mean in this context? I argue that it reflects a widely held conception of the liberal arts education as personalized exploration of intellectual curiosity. Intellectual curiosity is in this context focused on difference and injustice, particularly in terms of race, and has significant implications for how the graduates approach and use their learning.

la paperson’s charge that the liberal arts university focuses on a “personalized pedagogy of self-actualization” is a criticism, contrasting this purpose with that of a decolonizing university.¹³ Yet many other scholars would see this charge as a worthy goal, not an indictment: they articulate the liberal arts education as a process of individual enlightenment. For example, president of Wesleyan University Michael Roth argues that the ideal liberal arts education enables students to explore intellectual interests that may not have immediately apparent value, writing that the liberal education should “enrich....students by enhancing their capacities for shaping themselves and reinventing the world they all inhabit.”¹⁴ He uses his own education as an example of what this process could look like, recalling that “my teachers were very willing to let me follow my interests...[they] said to stop worrying about what to call my field and to go to classes that interested me while pursuing my research projects.”¹⁵ Roth might therefore applaud the graduates for their willingness to follow their personal “interests” wherever that may lead them.

Roth is by no means going out on a limb with these arguments; rather, he is part of a broader cultural conception of the liberal arts university. Yale University itself says in its mission

¹³ la paperson, *A Third University*, Chapter 3.

¹⁴ Michael Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, ix.

statement, “Yale is committed to improving the world today and for future generations through outstanding research and scholarship... We carry out this mission through the free exchange of ideas.”¹⁶ To be sure, this articulation is slightly different than Roth’s: the former is speaking of a community at large, while the latter is focusing on individual students. Yet both formulations posit unconfined intellectual exploration as the central goal of an education. Moreover, both Roth and Yale suggest that this individualized exploration has larger implications: it enables students to then enact their agency on society by “improving the world” or “reinventing the world.” Given this widely held vision of what a liberal arts education should look like, it is unsurprising that these graduates articulate their educational choices as being driven by “interest.”

The sense of “interesting” as freewheeling intellectual exploration is further bolstered by the fact that four graduates emphasized the interdisciplinary freedom of American Studies as an appealing aspect of the major. Jackson said, “Part of what attracted me to American Studies was the ‘Choose your own adventure, create your own curriculum.’” Ashley used the same phrase: “I liked that in American Studies it was, like, ‘Choose your own adventure.’” Roth would approve of the way in which these graduates are pursuing the academic topics that are thought-provoking or exciting to them, just as he was able to “follow [his] interests” in his own education.¹⁷

American Studies is interesting to these graduates because it is the kind of “choose your own adventure” that they expect from a liberal arts education. Yet American Studies classes largely focus on topics of inequality, white supremacy, and settler-colonialism. What does it mean to articulate these painful topics as an exciting personal “adventure,” and who is able to do so?

¹⁶ Mission statement: <https://www.yale.edu/about-yale/mission-statement>.

¹⁷ Roth, *Beyond the University*, ix.

The issue is that in this context, “interesting” signifies more than a generalized curiosity: it stands for a curiosity about difference, particularly racialized difference. Three of the graduates emphasized that they chose American Studies because it was more interesting than history. For example, Lauren recalled that a teaching assistant for one of her first classes told her to major in American Studies because “it’s, like, way more interesting than history.” Similarly, Hannah said, “I remember thinking I could either do history or American Studies, and American Studies just had more classes that I was interested in.” As noted above, American Studies classes contain a lot of historical analysis and many are cross listed with the History department. So what exactly distinguishes American Studies from history as more “interesting?”

One answer to this question comes from a different cultural conception of the liberal arts education, as exposure to multicultural diversity. In her book *Cultivating Humanity*, Harvard philosophy professor Martha Nussbaum argues that increasing racial and cultural diversity within the academy is strengthening academic life, rather than diluting it as its critics charge. She details how political problems have become incorporated into the traditional set of issues analyzed by university classes, reporting that questions of racialized violence and climate change are starting to attract “student interest.”¹⁸ Nussbaum thinks that this shift is positive for students because it both engages them in the classroom¹⁹ and allows them to effectively pursue careers that involve engaging with diverse people and cultures, such as an American who graduates university and then works at a transnational firm in Beijing.²⁰ It is the former reason that is important in this section, although the latter will become significant. For Nussbaum, what makes classes more “interesting” is the extent to which they engage with difference. Education is

¹⁸ Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 78.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 79.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 50.

enriched by its incorporation of what Nussbaum calls “newly fashionable issues about human diversity:” questions of difference along lines of race, culture, sexuality, and gender.²¹

This enriching can be seen, for example, in Rachel’s articulation of why she chose American Studies. Recalling her and her friends’ decisions, she said that “we were all kind of upper-middle class or rich white Jewish girls who...were interested in history and identity.” Though Rachel and her friends are “interested” in history, the reason that they major not in History but in American Studies is their additional interest: “identity,” highlighted by Rachel’s emphasis on her and her friends’ racial, socioeconomic, and gendered positionalities. They are responding to what Nussbaum identifies as “issues about human diversity” that they see being addressed not in the History major but in the American Studies major. They are “interested” in learning about difference along lines of race, class, and gender.

According to Roderick Ferguson, this interest in difference is precisely what the university has set itself up for in the last several decades. Ferguson argues that through the creation of the “interdisciplines”— fields such as American Studies, ethnic studies, and gender studies— the university incorporated difference as something it could come to know and thus have power over. Largely due to student movements in the 1960s, the university began to teach about race, class, gender, and other forms of difference.²² That process, while providing a platform for the expression of minority culture and critique of power in society, also incorporated difference into the hegemonic power structure of the university. This meant that difference had a more prestigious platform, but also that the university could regulate it into an object to be “interested” in, as these graduates are. Ferguson writes that as corporations and the

²¹ Ibid, 2.

²² Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 5.

government reckoned with the radical social movements demanding recognition of racial, sexual, and cultural difference, “the academy would become the handbook on the absorption and representation of those differences...U.S. higher education would become the capitol of archival power, training state and economy in its methods of representation and regulation.”²³ Thus, the graduates’ articulation of American Studies as “interesting” serves to regulate difference, constructing it into an object of study.

Moreover, Ferguson argues that such regulation defangs social movements’ critiques and thus their radical political force.²⁴ This is because difference cannot be untangled from inequality and injustice. Sometimes, the graduates express this explicitly. For example, Hannah explained her choice of major by saying, “I knew I was interested in racial justice.” She elaborated that she was affected by seeing segregation in her high school and the racially disparate impact it had on her peers: “Initially I observed the injustice in high school [of school segregation], and then got interested in the history of it.” It is this interest in the history of racial injustice— not only in racial identity and difference more broadly— that led her to American Studies.

What enables Hannah and the other graduates to express their motivation for learning about injustice as “interest” is their whiteness. White supremacy affects all of us, all the time. Yet the way we perceive it is extremely unequal. White people may indeed witness racial injustice in the world, but that witnessing leads to a curiosity about something that is fundamentally happening to other people. White people become aware of white supremacy from a safe distance, grasping it as an object of intellectual analysis. For example, though like Hannah I was aware of racial injustice before college, it was only in the classroom that I discovered my own implication in white supremacy. In contrast, people of color learn about this system in the

²³ Ibid, 27.

²⁴ Ibid, 7.

first person: those who are directly harmed by white supremacy must learn to recognize and navigate a racist world long before they reach the classroom.

To be sure, people of color might find great value in academically studying racial injustice: as noted above, theorists like la paperson charge that “only through critique can the colonial code be cracked.”²⁵ Yet the approach to theory is often quite different. Black activist and professor bell hooks writes, “I came to theory because I was hurting...I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend— to grasp what was happening around and within me.”²⁶ In other words, hooks is drawn to intellectual critique because of her personal experience, her emotions, and her relationships. In contrast, the graduates expressed their motivation to gain a critical awareness of injustice as an intellectual curiosity about that injustice, rather than an urgent feeling of being impacted by it. This is not to say that Hannah does not deeply feel the injustice that she witnessed in high school, or that that feeling did not matter in her educational choices. Rather, it is to note the difference in the way she (and the other graduates) articulated those choices and, for example, the way that bell hooks did. For hooks, critique is appealing because it enables her to grapple with her experiences and emotions; for the graduates, critique is appealing because it enables them to gain intellectual mastery over an object of interest.

Thus, the graduates are doing exactly what Ferguson charged the university as doing. The university is the archetypal archive: it stores various bodies of knowledge, and in doing so regulates their form and limitations.²⁷ The 1960s student movements that demanded recognition of racial and gender difference called not only for new forms of education such as ethnic and gender studies, but also deeper changes in the structure of the academy such as institutional

²⁵ la paperson, *A Third University*, Chapter 3.

²⁶ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 59.

²⁷ Ferguson, *Reorder of Things*, 27.

student power, particularly for students of color.²⁸ As Ferguson argues, the university's response to this was to archive the students' claims into recognizable forms: creating new academic disciplines that defined—and limited—their political scope.²⁹ This process constructed racial difference as something study-able and thus master-able. Though the new discipline of ethnic studies certainly achieved significant political changes and continues to agitate against power, “its activation [was] concomitant with its regulation” by not only the academy but the state as well.³⁰ In other words, “race” was defined as something to be known by those in power and thus regulated, disciplined, and mastered. Almost all of the graduates spoke of wanting to “understand” systems of injustice as why they chose American Studies. In doing so, they are invoking this sense of race as something that power can come to know and thus master.

The other aspect of the articulation of racial injustice in intellectual terms is a sense of distancing. Yet while many theorists and activists have shown how white people use intellectual arguments to distance themselves from racism, this form of intellectualization is different. For example, Robin DiAngelo gestures to intellectualizing as a strategy of white fragility. When white people are confronted with their own racism, intellectualizing can be a tool to distance themselves from their own investment in white supremacy by turning their focus to statistics and information rather than personal vulnerability.³¹ As an anti-racist pamphlet directed at white people explains, “One potent form of denial and defensiveness is intellectualizing, where we say

²⁸ Ibid, 5.

²⁹ Ibid, 6.

³⁰ Ibid, 31.

³¹ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. (Beacon Press: New York, 2018), 135.

all the right things and use our intellectual understanding of racism to distance ourselves from taking a look at how we benefit from and perpetuate racism.”³²

Yet when, for example, Rachel recalled being part of a group of “white Jewish girls who...were interested in history and identity” she was not disavowing her whiteness but rather tying it to an interest in racialized difference. She was suggesting that intellectualism would help her solve these thorny questions of history and identity, not run away from them: approaching her whiteness through the lens of facts, critique, and ideas. This is different from DiAngelo’s idea of intellectualization as a denial of whiteness point blank; this is an articulation of whiteness as the precursor to knowledge and understanding. Lauren echoed this when she said, “I came into Yale from private school in Virginia, where I thought, like, racism against white people was real. I think coming from that background, a lot of things in American studies were really revelatory.” Her “background” as a white person in a privileged setting set her up for a “revelatory” education in racism. These graduates are not necessarily distancing themselves from their whiteness here; they are formulating whiteness as that which positions them to learn an eye-opening critical awareness of race and racism.

So what happens to whiteness when it encounters that critical awareness? Many argue that an understanding of power is necessary to eradicate that power; thus, studying injustice will contribute to ending that injustice. This is typified by American Studies Association president Kandice Chuh’s call for American Studies to pursue “a pedagogy of dissent...understood to be essential to social transformation.” It can also be seen in the field of critical whiteness studies, which explicitly calls for an examination of whiteness.³³ In one of the field’s founding texts,

³² Tema Okun, “From White Racist to White Anti-Racist,” *Dismantling Racism Works*, <https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/files/webfm-uploads/documents/diversity/LifeLongJourney.pdf>.

³³ This call was an intervention in the prevailing assumption that constructions of race do not shape white people’s lives or identities. It also contravened the cultural notion of racism as the province of intentional

Ruth Frankenberg writes that “by examining and naming the terrain of whiteness, it may, I think, be possible to generate or work toward antiracist forms of whiteness.”³⁴ Frankenberg and other scholars directly connect the understanding of power structures to concrete change in those structures. When Rachel and Lauren link their whiteness with their choice to learn about race in American Studies, they seem to set themselves on Frankenberg’s path of an examination of whiteness that leads to anti-racism. The graduates may indeed be assuming that knowledge leads to justice. After all, that was my own expectation: I came to American Studies because I thought that learning about systems of race, patriarchy, and capitalism would help me to fight injustice.

Just as I grew to doubt that assumption, however, after a couple decades of the kind of examination that Frankenberg called for, critical whiteness studies scholars began to express doubt about the connection between knowledge and sociopolitical change. In contrast to Frankenberg’s hope that studying whiteness would diminish its power, Sara Ahmed argues that potentially, “whiteness studies will sustain whiteness at the centre of intellectual inquiry.”³⁵ In other words, she is concerned that the very act of studying whiteness, even as it exposes race as a fiction, will perpetuate the power of whiteness rather than diminish it. Expanding Ahmed’s concern to the study of power more broadly— in other words, to critical awareness— illuminates the limitations of the assumption that the graduates’ words evoke. Their articulation of whiteness as the precursor to learning about race in fact allows them to distance themselves from actual, tangible racism: becoming critically aware of one’s own whiteness does not automatically entail antiracism, and in fact might enable a distancing from acting against injustice.

bigots. Critical whiteness studies is featured in many American Studies classes, which often analyze the construction of whiteness in cultural texts.

³⁴ Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993),

7.

³⁵ Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness,” 4.

Eve Tuck and K.W. Yang argue that focusing on knowledge as a means of social justice can in fact serve to claim innocence and deny investment in white supremacy and other forms of violence. They write, “[T]he pursuit of critical consciousness, the pursuit of social justice through a critical enlightenment, can also be settler moves to innocence - diversions, distractions, which relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility, and conceal the need to give up land or power or privilege.”³⁶ In other words, situating social justice in the mind is a way of avoiding actually giving up privilege. Thus, when the graduates articulate racial injustice as something distant and “interesting,” they distance themselves from that injustice by relegating antiracism to the intellect-- and in doing so maintain their privilege. The same statements that suggest their dedication to antiracism also reduces that antiracism to an intellectual exercise in the classroom. This is not to say that any of these graduates were consciously attempting to claim innocence of white supremacy. Rather, it is to point out how describing injustice through terms of intellectual curiosity works to distance and discipline that injustice into something study-able, not something tangible and incommensurate. Identifying racial injustice as an object of analysis can be seen as a claim to innocence in which whiteness— even as it is the precursor for such analysis— is used to relegate sociopolitical change to the intellect and thus distance racial injustice.

Of course, the graduates did not by any means come up with this on their own: Western society has taught us to locate liberation in the rational mind. Wendy Ryden shows how critical pedagogy-- such as is found in American Studies-- has worked under “the tacit operative assumption [that] arming students with the ‘facts’ about the inequities of their societies will give

³⁶ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012), 21.

them the necessary motive to become critical social agents.”³⁷ The presumption that intellectual knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for sociopolitical change is rooted in an emphasis on *logos* (rational argument) that Ryden dates back to Aristotle. Tuck and Yang similarly identify this societal preference for logic and knowledge over emotionality, rooting it in Plato’s allegory of the cave. In this trope, “the thinking man individualistically emerges from the dark cave of ignorance into the light of critical consciousness:” in other words, personal intellectual enlightenment produces liberation, freeing us into a purely rational world.³⁸ In contrast, Black feminist thought subverts this trope by rooting liberation in emotionality. Tuck and Yang quote Audre Lorde: ““The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free.””³⁹ The graduates’ implicit linkage of ““think[ing]”” with sociopolitical change is part of a deeply engrained project of whiteness.

The process of maintaining privilege through asserting education as liberation can be seen in the graduates’ words, particularly where they differentiate between themselves and other students who seemed to be less concerned with liberatory enlightenment. Hannah explained, “Some people who were not very....they were athletes, or had interests outside of the academic space, would choose American Studies. They’re certainly not trying to rescue the world from racism and capitalism or any of those things at this stage.” Similarly, Rachel said, “A lot of people did [American Studies] because it was an easy major with no requirements and a group of us did it because we were really eager, wanting to learn about this stuff.” They differentiated themselves from other students within the major by showing how invested they themselves are in

³⁷ Wendy Ryden, "Moving Whiteness: Rhetoric and Political Emotion," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 16, no. 12 (2007), 113.

³⁸ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

learning about injustice, implicitly linking that learning with “rescu[ing] the world” from injustice. This aligns with Ahmed’s depiction of the way critique— or here, the possibility of critique— can be used to distinguish oneself as a critical— and thus “good” white person.⁴⁰ Thus, Hannah does not even need to actually study American Studies to be able to distinguish herself as a “good” person who cares about injustice— much less to do anything about that injustice. All she needs is to assert her intention to “interest” herself in injustice; this distinguishes her from others who study American Studies for other reasons.

At first glance, the graduates’ use of the word “interesting” to describe why they chose American Studies seems insignificant. After all, this word aligns them with conceptions of the liberal arts education articulated by thinkers like Michael Roth and by Yale’s mission statement itself: following one’s academic curiosity seems like a straightforward way to choose a major. Yet this is no generalized curiosity: it is troubling to be intellectually curious about issues of identity and to be able to incorporate difference into a field of academic study. The inadequacy and danger of the word “interesting” is made most apparent given that the graduates are fundamentally interested in injustice, particularly in racism. The privilege to see racial injustice as an object of intellectual analysis is deeply tied to whiteness. Yet while whiteness is articulated as a precursor to an understanding of race, that understanding does not necessarily lead to antiracism and may even serve to claim innocence from racial injustice. Privilege is further displayed in the graduates’ differentiation between themselves and those who are less interested in injustice. This differentiation will become even more apparent and significant as the graduates articulate the impact of their studies.

⁴⁰ Ahmed, “Declarations of whiteness,” 39.

How did American Studies affect you?

Given the graduates' emphasis on their "interest" in American Studies, one might expect that, in answer to this question, they articulated the ways in which their education made them smarter than they were before. Perhaps given the assumption that studying injustice makes one less racist, it could also be expected that they would explain how they were less racist than they were before. Instead, most of the graduates responded to questions on how American Studies had affected them by discussing how their education differentiated them from others in the present, rather than from themselves in the past. They emphasized how their education gave them critical academic language for racial difference and injustice, and explained how that knowledge distinguished them from less critically educated people around them. The graduates' words illuminate scholarly claims that learning about injustice allows privileged people to consolidate social capital through the construction of an enlightened, progressive, "good" whiteness.

American Studies fulfilled the graduates' desires to understand race and injustice primarily by teaching them vocabulary; eight out of ten graduates characterized the critical awareness they gained through their education in terms of language and speech. Eve said, "I had some sort of racial vocabulary when I got to Yale from an academic perspective, then took a ton of American Studies classes where you're learning all this academic vocabulary and ways of talking about race and racism and whiteness and power and privilege and all that sort of stuff." Benjamin told the story of his Yale education in terms of the vocabularies he gained:

As I branched deeper into American Studies, looking at formations of identity around gender and sexuality, and then being aware that I was developing this vocabulary. Then another really big opening moment was...my first time living with a Black person. I could feel myself feeling very fluent in conversations around gender and conversations around sexuality, and he was really fluent in race. When it would come up I would feel awkward and unsure, and like I didn't have a language. I was like, this is not chill.

To ease his discomfort with his first significant interracial relationship, Benjamin decided that he wanted an academic vocabulary for race. To gain this racial language, he ended up taking an American Studies junior seminar on critical race theory.

To be sure, many of the graduates expressed how the critiques they learned shaped the way they tried to act in the world. Rachel said:

I think I went from growing up with this general sense that as a Jewish person I have an obligation to make the world a better place, and that kind of general idealism. And then learning about the policies and laws that created the current structure of racism and classism...it gave me the grounding for understanding why I have the privileges that I do...that made me want to be a part of trying to mitigate that.

Rachel identified American Studies as giving her a critical awareness of her own privilege and why she has those privileges. That awareness made her want to “mitigate” injustice through broad systemic work. Thus, the critiques she learned in American Studies did lead to a sense of how she wanted to act in the world, ultimately causing her to become a public defender. But it was not those critiques that gave her the feeling of “obligation” in that action; that came from before.

In fact, many of the graduates attributed their desire to reduce harm and work against systems of injustice to other places in their lives, such as family or religion; what they primarily attributed to American Studies was a critical vocabulary. Indeed, they used this vocabulary throughout the interviews: sometimes to critique injustice around them, sometimes to critique their own privilege, but very often just to critique their own critiques. Six out of ten graduates pointed out how their own analysis of their privilege was lacking, even as they performed that analysis. When I asked Jackson how learning about privilege and injustice had affected him, he said:

Jackson: I am a cisgender straight white guy...I've been able to use some of the muscles I've built reading and writing about other stuff at Yale to try and interrogate in a really

active, alive way how my privilege is working in all the sort of minutiae of my daily life now. It's a process more than a fact that I think I learned there and continue to carry on.

Miriam: Are there examples that come to mind?

Jackson: Something that— this is a narrow example— I've found myself able to be a little more self critical in the way I read a book or watch a movie...the ability to start parsing that and engage with it actively— I got better at it— didn't get sufficiently good at it, but got better at it.

Jackson is explaining how his education enabled him to be acutely aware of his privileged identities particularly in terms of cultural politics: how his critical thinking about whiteness enabled him to continue thinking critically about whiteness manifested on the screen or the page. Then, he critiqued this example of self-critique as “narrow” and not “sufficiently good” even as he explained it.

Why does this matter? After all, surely it is a good thing that the graduates are critically aware of their own whiteness and how that affects the way they view the world; that must make them more antiracist. Yet critique is not in itself an antiracist act and may in fact reproduce white privilege. As discussed previously, the assumption that studying racial difference is a way to interrupt white privilege is a move to innocence.⁴¹ By positing racism as that which is done unknowingly, openly critiquing one's whiteness is an implicit claim to not be racist. Sara Ahmed explains, “If racism is defined as unwitting and collective prejudice, then the claim to be racist by being able to see racism in this or that form of practice is also a claim not to be racist in the same way.”⁴² When Jackson says that he is “interrogat[ing]” how his whiteness plays out in daily life, while he is by no means consciously trying to disavow racism, his words have that effect

⁴¹ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” 19.

⁴² Ahmed, “Declarations of whiteness,” 20.

because of our societal assumption that racism is unwitting and un-interrogated. He is a “good” white— one who is enlightened of his positionality and who critiques his own privilege.⁴³

Yet Ahmed rejects the latent assumption that critiquing one’s own racism makes one antiracist, arguing that critiques of whiteness can in fact serve to distance white people from racism. She writes, “[T]o be against something is precisely not to be in a position of transcendence... The messy work of ‘againstness’ might even help remind us that the work of critique does not mean the transcendence of the object of our critique; indeed, critique might even be dependent on non-transcendence.”⁴⁴ In other words, antiracism is not dependent on transcending race; it is a process of striving for humanity within a racialized system. This means that critique is not in itself an act of antiracism, contrary to the assumption that to critique one’s own racism negates that racism. This may be all the more true given that the graduates focused on representational politics: they were concerned about how they consume culture, rather than how their material privileges harm other people.

This does not mean, of course, that critique is inherently bad. Yet it can be used in ways that consolidate privilege with already privileged people. Specifically, assuming that knowledge of racism makes one less racist maintains antiracism as the preserve of the educated elite. As Ahmed says, “We must contest the classism of the assumption that racism is caused by ignorance – which allows racism to be seen as what the working classes (or other less literate others) do.”⁴⁵ Because this kind of knowledge is highly unequally distributed, locating antiracism in intellectual critique is inherently elitist. Further, Ahmed’s argument can be extended to social justice more broadly: the assumption that critiquing injustice is an act of social justice restricts

⁴³ Ibid, 39.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 47.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 38.

liberation to those who can acquire a critical awareness— in other words, to those who can buy a formal education at places like Yale.

Indeed, eight out of ten graduates articulated the impact of their American Studies education primarily by differentiating between themselves and others— using their privileged ability to critique to gain social capital. When I asked Deborah how learning about how power operates through culture affected her work as a journalist, she explained, “Contemporary discourse on pop culture is today very much about inclusivity and creating a better future and better media narratives, and I think I was very well primed in how to be a part of improving media narratives and not to be retro... people even five, six, seven years older than me have a different context of understanding things.” Her Yale American Studies education enabled her to be inclusive in her writing, which is presumably positive. Yet the way she articulated that ability was by contrasting herself with others who are less educated in “understanding” difference, and the way this ability “primed” her to be ahead of the curve in incorporating difference into popular media.

Similarly, when I asked Joshua how an American Studies class on travel had affected him, he said:

I was in Thailand in the summer of 2014, and in Thailand they have all these different shrines and temples, and all these different things... Anyway, super sacred place and whatever, super important place, and I'm 22 and I'm there with a bunch of 22-year-olds... and they start doing yoga poses in front of this shrine, and they're standing on each other and they're trying to do all these crazy Instagram things. It's like, you so missed the point.

The way Joshua articulated the impact of this class was not by how it changed him as an individual or made him a more critically aware traveler than he was in the past, but how it made him a more critically aware traveler than others. When I asked Lauren how her education shows up in her life, she gave an example of her brother reading an anthropological book. She said, “He

was like, ‘Oh my gosh. I never read about all these things being socially constructed before.’

And I was like...duh, we covered that in whatever that intro American Studies course was.”

Again, this is in response to an open-ended question about how her education affected her: like Jackson, she articulated how her critical awareness makes her more knowledgeable than others around her, rather than how it makes her more knowledgeable than she was in the past.

Though these statements are not overtly classist, they consolidate social capital by differentiating between those who have gained a critical education and those who haven’t. The students’ self-differentiation makes sense in the context of Ahmed’s argument that a focus on education as the key to antiracism renders “racism...as what the working classes (or other less literate others) do,”⁴⁶ and with an argument from a thinker on the opposite of the political spectrum as well. Conservative intellectual David French writes in the *National Review* about the ways in which white elites use social justice language and ideas as ways of differentiating themselves from those labeled as ignorant white people— those who do not have access to elite educations and thus may not have access to critical frameworks and language. By denigrating poor and working-class white people as less enlightened and thus more racist and sexist, progressive elites accumulate even more social capital while not having to give up any power: as French argues, they “elevate black and brown voices while remaining on top themselves.”⁴⁷ Thus, French agrees with Ahmed that critical frameworks can actually serve to exacerbate inequality by positing an Ivy League education as something that renders its holder ahead of the curve or more enlightened than others.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Here, I am broadening Ahmed’s argument from racism to social justice more broadly: promoting critical education as the key to liberation reserves progressivism for those who can acquire such an education.

⁴⁷ French, “The Great White Culture War.”

Furthermore, because learning about one's own privilege is a process only for the privileged, critical education serves specifically to grant privileged students even more social capital. As Ahmed argues, "[I]f learning about whiteness becomes a subject skill and a subject specific skill, then 'learned whites' are precisely 'given privilege' over others, whether those others are 'unlearned whites' or learning or unlearned non-white others."⁴⁸ As discussed above, it is a mark of privilege to discover injustice in an intellectual context— to follow an "interest" about injustice into academic classes— rather than learn through personal experience. Because becoming critically aware of one's own whiteness gains one social capital, education that teaches critical awareness bestows further social capital on already privileged students. Thus, the distinctions that the graduates make between themselves and less educated others construct and are constructed by a particular kind of whiteness: social advantage accumulated through critiquing one's own privilege.

One of the few moments that seemed to disrupt the graduates' intellectualization was the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump, further highlighting the privileged distance from injustice they demonstrated through critique. While the graduates articulated their education by differentiating themselves from others through critique, they recalled Trump's election with emotional, personal reflections. Deborah said, "I went from college from 2009-2013— it was the Obama years. Life was really good...[politics] just didn't feel urgent... [Trump's election] felt very personal in a way that politics hadn't before then." Trump's election changed Deborah's feelings in a way that her college education didn't: it made her feel how "good" things had felt before, and how scared she felt after. Similarly, Benjamin said that during the Obama administration, "there was a sense more broadly that this was a long struggle but that we could

⁴⁸ Ahmed, "Declarations of whiteness," 40.

move towards progress and healing.” David echoed that the Trump election “felt again like a wake up call— like no, this is really serious.” American Studies gave these graduates a critical vocabulary for injustice: it was the election of Donald Trump that made them feel something.

In some ways, this is surprising: did learning about the deep-rooted injustice and inequality pervasive in our world not make Deborah or the other graduates feel “urgent?” However, given the reasons that the graduates articulated for choosing American Studies in the first place, this disconnect makes perfect sense. The graduates expressed an “interest” in injustice and identity as determining their educational choices. That interest signaled a distance, mediated by whiteness, from the systems that they wanted to learn about: an ability to grasp injustice and difference as objects of analysis. Within that ability is an assumption deeply held in Western society: that intellectual enlightenment will lead individuals to work toward social change. Yet intellectual enlightenment, according to the graduates themselves, only went so far. It took a cataclysmic political event to engage their political emotions. Deborah explained how her American Studies education allowed her to be ahead of the curve as the media world moved leftward; she explained how she herself had shifted only in terms of Trump’s election. Her political emotions only caught up to her critical awareness in 2016. This contrast highlights the fact that a critical education cannot bridge privilege students’ distance from injustice.

However, even emotionality is fraught with the same distribution of social capital as critical awareness. Some of the graduates did in fact identify ways in which American Studies affected their emotionality. When I asked Joshua how college changed him politically, he explained that while many of his friends had become more politically conservative because they didn’t want their high salaries to be taxed, he had remained liberal. He attributed that difference

less to his American Studies education than to the way that travel had developed his emotionality:

I think the better question that you should be asking is, "Has anything changed [politically] for you from the moment you graduated till now?" That's, I think, a better—and the answer for me is probably not, but for many, many, many of my friends the answer is yes...not so much with me, because I've just sought out many experiences that continue to reinforce the things that are important to me. I think it takes somewhat of a strength of character...I didn't just graduate college and go work at a bank, because I went to go explore into many different cultures and develop my empathy.

Joshua suggested that he was able to “develop [his] empathy” by becoming aware of “different cultures” after college; this period of exploration and the emotional register it gave him is what differentiates him from his peers. This is the same person who spoke of how his American Studies classes allowed him to be a more critically aware traveler than others. Yet like Deborah, Joshua suggested that this education was not enough to affect his political emotionality; it is the way he acquired understanding of other cultures that distinguishes his politics. This is a slightly different kind of “learning” than the one that Ahmed identifies as bestowing privilege on “learned whites:” a consumption of culture in addition to formal education, and a development of emotionality rather than intellect. Yet the acquisition of social capital is the same. Just as the graduates articulate the impact of their American Studies education through the ways it differentiates them from those who are less critical, Joshua articulates his politics by how his consumption of culture distinguishes him from less empathetic peers.

To be sure, I am not arguing that Joshua or the other graduates are consciously attempting to gain social capital through their education. Yet it is important to see how they frame the impact of their American Studies education through differentiation. The graduates came to American Studies through an “interest” in injustice; indeed, their curiosity gained them academic frameworks and vocabulary for injustice. They used this vocabulary to critique themselves and

the world around them, evoking an enlightened whiteness, and articulated this whiteness through how it differentiated them from less enlightened others. The distance that privilege affords them from their learning about injustice becomes clear in how the 2016 election of Donald Trump changed their political emotions in a way that their education did not.

What are you doing now?

Each interview began with questions about what the graduates are doing in their lives now: mostly how they made the choices that led them to their career, but also about their choices of where to live and how to spend their time. Given that these questions came before questions about their education, it is striking that the same word that characterized their educational choices—“interesting”—characterized the graduates’ choices of working in professions like public defense and teaching. Unprompted by questions around education, they framed the way they acted in the world with terms of intellectualization. These intellectual terms often led them to social justice careers, allowing them to convert their interest into financial and social capital. Outside of these careers, their academic frameworks for injustice seemed to hinder or replace concrete action against that injustice. The graduates located liberation in the mind; it seemed to remain there even after their education.

When I asked Rachel how she ended up at a policy nonprofit after college, she said, “I think I just wanted to apply to places that were doing good things in the world...I knew I was interested in race stuff and I just did the kind of classic American studies stuff and learned all about race politics and culture and history...So I just sort of applied to a broad spectrum of nonprofits that I had heard of.” In response to a similar question about his job at an educational nonprofit, David explained, “I always felt that teaching was something that’s interesting to me.”

It's one thing to call your college major "interesting;" it's entirely another to articulate an academic curiosity about working in a social justice context-- about working to help people who are surely not intellectually "interested" in their own disenfranchisement. This is not to say that these graduates, or the others who said similar things about their professional choices, are in fact motivated by curiosity. Rather, it is to point out that they are using terms of intellectualization to describe why they chose social justice-oriented careers.

Even when I pressed them to delve deeper into their motivations, the graduates were often at a loss. For example, I asked Hannah why she chose to be a teacher for a few years before going to law school:

Hannah: I was really interested in racial injustice through my classes at Yale...excited by the idea that teaching could be an act of racial-- or could be in the service of racial justice.

Miriam: Can you talk about what you think interests you about racial injustice?

Hannah: Yeah. That's such a good question, and one that I'm still asking with the work I'm doing, I'm interning at a racial justice legal advocacy organization this summer, so I feel like I should have a good answer for my initial interest.

Hannah directly traced her choice to teach to her academic interest in racial injustice, cultivated in American Studies. Further, she was unable to articulate what lies behind that interest, despite the fact that she made the choice to work for a racial justice organization. She recognized that incongruity—"I feel like I should have a good answer for my initial interest"—and yet was unable, in the moment, to interrogate what might have lurked behind those terms of intellectual curiosity.

In one sense, it is not so surprising that the graduates followed their "interest" in injustice into careers of social justice. After all, college is widely understood as setting students up for their careers. In addition to conceptions of college as pure intellectual exploration, put forth by people like Michael Roth, there is a common sense of college as pre-professional. Countless

scholars argue about how college can set up their educational offerings to best prepare students to pursue meaningful careers, even when they are not engaging in directly vocational training.⁴⁹ Along these lines, the middle sentence of Yale’s mission statement reads: “Yale educates aspiring leaders worldwide who serve all sectors of society.”⁵⁰ In other words, Yale sets its students up for their careers—and not just any career, but prestigious ones. Thus, it is not surprising that the graduates use the same terms to articulate their professional choices as they do their educational ones.

It is through this parallel between intellectual and professional choices that an education purporting to cause social change through critical enlightenment turns into professional advancement. Recall that Yale’s mission statement begins with “Yale is committed to improving the world.” The juxtaposition of this aspiration with prestigious career preparation is the same paradox in the graduates’ words. Both Yale and its students articulate a vision of political change through academic study that fuels career advancement. This is precisely what la paperson called a “personalized pedagogy of self-actualization.”⁵¹ Intellectual critique leads to individual enlightenment, which leads to social change—by way of personally satisfying careers. In this way, the graduates are hewing closely to the path that Yale lays out for them. They are following their generalized “interest” in injustice to a critical awareness of that injustice, and following their critical awareness to careers, in the injustice field.

But isn’t “self-actualization” a good thing? Why does it matter that the graduates articulated their actions in terms of intellectualization, if they are taking concrete actions to bring about a more just world? To be sure, I am not arguing that these graduates should not have

⁴⁹ For example, see Cathy Davidson’s *The New Education* or Richard Hersh and Richard Keeling’s *We’re Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education*.

⁵⁰ Mission statement: <https://www.yale.edu/about-yale/mission-statement>.

⁵¹ la paperson, *A Third University*, Chapter 3.

chosen careers that are engaged with social justice. Yet it is important to understand the ways in which those careers perpetuate white privilege even when that privilege is being critiqued or disavowed. With the same critical awareness that gained them social capital in the context of their American Studies education, the graduates are getting jobs and thus financial capital. Their American Studies education set them up for prominent careers in the field of social justice the way a computer science major might set them up to work in Silicon Valley. Of course, social justice careers tend to pay vastly less than Silicon Valley. Yet the fact that careers like public defender and teacher are low-paying actually further reserves these opportunities for privileged white graduates who don't have to build generational wealth or support families after graduation.

Moreover, these jobs also gain the graduates social capital; this can be seen in the way in which they articulate their careers as distinguishing them from other people. Rachel said about choosing to apply to nonprofits, "As everyone was applying for investment firms and consulting firms and that kind of thing, it was just like, 'I didn't come here to do that.'" Similarly, Eve explained why she chose to teach for four or five years: "It was really important to me that I did not just teach for a year or two years...Similarly, when I think about Yale, I feel like there were a lot of [social justice] programs where you go to a thing once a week....But I was a public school intern, which is like an eight to ten hour a week commitment." To be clear, I am not criticizing their choices to work at a nonprofit or teach for longer than two years, nor am I ascribing inappropriate motivations for these choices. Rather, I want to show how the graduates gained moral superiority and social capital by articulating their professional choices through differentiation from others. They explain the ways in which they are the "good" white person who is working toward justice by pointing out that which they are not, whether that is an investment banker or someone who doesn't teach for long enough. As Ahmed argues, however,

the claim to be a “good” white person not only entails a certain kind of privileged knowledge but serves to disavow personal implication in white supremacy.⁵²

Further, while the graduates’ “interest” in injustice may have led them to social justice careers, those intellectual terms often proved to be an obstruction on the job itself. Two graduates explained how their intellectual lenses impeded the ways they were able to relate to people of color. Hannah described the way in which she had to unlearn her education while working at a racially diverse charter school: “One thing I realized is that sometimes interaction with families just needs to be on a really human level. The more psychoanalysis or historical, whatever you're doing, the parents are like, ‘I just want my kid to be successful, stop.’” Eve was also teaching at a racially diverse charter school and discussed similar experiences:

[At Yale I] was allowed to do that thinking [about power and injustice] in a way that was really, really detached and really academic. And then have spent a lot of the last five years like, ‘How do I take what I know and kind of consciously unlearn’— not unlearn but ensure that I'm not...distancing myself from the deep, personal work that will actually allow me to be a better teacher and be a better coworker and be a better member of this community in ways that really matter.

Both of these graduates found that in their teaching jobs, the intellectual frameworks and vocabularies they had for the racial injustice that they were directly witnessing were not only inadequate but actively unhelpful in relating to other people. Whiteness enabled the graduates to understand racial injustice as an object of intellectual analysis; in the context of actual interracial interactions, that intellectualization hindered, as Hannah put it, more “human” relationship.

Outside of these career paths, intellectualization often failed entirely to give the graduates a way to act against injustice. David said initially that American Studies “gave me the knowledge to see how f***ed up the situation was and to also feel, okay I need to do something about this.” However, when I asked how he acts on that impulse, he said that after graduation that desire to

⁵² Ahmed, “Declarations of whiteness,” 39; 57.

act faded, until the election of Donald Trump, which was a “wake-up call” to him: “I remember after that I felt a huge impulse to get back into stuff and I tried to— I volunteered for a while at a clinic helping people fill out their asylum forms.” Yet after he moved to Europe for a further degree, he stopped volunteering, although he qualified, “[F]or sure, it still motivates me— if I hear of a march or something, it’s still a motivating factor that I want to go to this.” He then said his American Studies classes didn’t actually give him the tools to act on his political values: “[Class] was kind of more of an intellectual pursuit in how I experienced it... not what do we do with this, how is the situation f***ed up right now.”

Contrast that last statement to the one he made minutes earlier: that American Studies taught him “how f***ed up the situation was” and made him feel that he “need[s] to do something about this.” How do we understand this discrepancy? In her essay “The Multicultural Wars,” Hazel Carby explains this seeming paradox. She charges that diverse texts, particularly from black female authors, are used in the classroom as a display of minority inclusion without mention of power or politics, allowing white students to ignore actual inequalities in the world around them. Carby asks, “[A]t what point do theories of ‘difference,’ as they inform academic practices, become totally compatible with— rather than a threat to— the rigid frameworks of segregation and ghettoization at work throughout our society?”⁵³ David’s words take Carby’s arguments a step further. David did indeed learn about power and politics: throughout his interview, he mentioned impactful pieces of learning such as critical race theory and feminist theory, particularly in the context of histories of Jim Crow and American Indian boarding schools. Yet in his own words, he learned about these things as “an intellectual pursuit.” It is this intellectualization of injustice that became, as Carby says, “totally compatible” with inaction.

⁵³ Hazel Carby, “The Multicultural Wars,” *Radical History Review* 54, no. 7 (1992), 12.

David expressed multiple times that he wanted to live out his political values: the problem is that the tools he was given for that process were intellectual ones. When I asked how it feels to not know how to act, he said:

It's hard. I have so many complex, strange feelings about it. I think at times I feel quite a lot of guilt that I can't do more or haven't done more. But guilt to me— I think it's productive to an extent that it can motivate, but that also you can just sit in guilt and do nothing. So whatever small ways I can find to try and— even if that's being vocal for a bit about something on social media, which also feels silly to say because it's totally— you know? But even just to stay informed of what's going on...I do try— reading and research is kind of a part of my artistic practice. Trying to read about facism, about capitalism, about the history of racism. So that has been a way or something.

He expresses initially unresolved feelings of strangeness and guilt but then immediately pivots to productivity, as his emotions prompt him to share his opinion on social media and read newspapers and books. In other words, he acts through sharing critique and consuming critique. David's education around injustice was on intellectual terms; those are the terms he uses for action against injustice. This is not to diminish these actions, nor to posit that there is some inherently superior model of action. Yet even on David's own terms, his actions are insufficient, prompting guilt. American Studies gave him critiques of the deep injustices and inequalities in the world, yet it failed to give him a way to act against them besides more critique. Hazel Carby addresses this exact connection between guilt and intellectualization, arguing that critique is the way in which “many middle-class white students and faculty cleanse their souls and rid themselves of the guilt of living in a society that is still rigidly segregated.”⁵⁴ Carby identifies the seeming paradox between learning about injustice and inaction as being built into the structure of a critical education for privileged students.

Lauren also expressed intellectual tools for action; for her, these tools replaced acting on the critiques that she had learned. She discussed choosing to move to a gentrifying area:

⁵⁴ Ibid, 11.

Lauren: I love Chicago. I always joke that it's the intersection of affordability and interestingness...

Miriam: You said there's some angst around [gentrification], can you talk more about what you mean by that?

Lauren: Oh yeah. Obviously there's so much baggage around gentrification and cities right now. As a young white woman with generational wealth, moving into a historically black neighborhood, which anywhere I'd move in Chicago, that would be the case. I think definitely reading up on how to be thoughtful about that.

From the beginning, Lauren is invested in the “interestingness” of her city, implicitly suggesting racial diversity. Then she critiques her own privilege, acknowledging that she is part of the problem of gentrification. Her response to that problem, however, is “reading up on how to be thoughtful.” Learning about critiques of gentrification is the way in which she justifies gentrifying. This echoes findings of a study of gentrifiers in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, which found that one strategy incoming residents used to justify gentrifying was “differentiating themselves from the archetypical gentrifier.”⁵⁵ These justifications actually feed off of knowledge of the problematic nature of gentrification. Both Lauren and the subjects of this study understand that gentrification serves to displace longtime black and brown residents;⁵⁶ it is this understanding that Lauren is expressing “thoughtful[ness]” about. Yet thoughtfulness is unequal: people displaced from their homes do not have the luxury to be passively reflective about their own marginalization. Moreover, this thoughtfulness did not prevent Lauren from gentrifying. In fact, it stood in the place of other actions she might have taken on the basis of her understanding how gentrification hurts people.

The graduates’ centering of intellectualization in social justice exemplifies Joel Pfister’s argument that academic critique may serve as an “intellectual safety valve” for privileged people

⁵⁵ Kathleen Donnelly, “The Gentrifier's Dilemma: Narrative Strategies and Self-Justifications of Incoming Residents in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn,” *City & Community* 17, no. 2 (2018), 385.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 377.

living in an unjust world.⁵⁷ Pfister writes that academics tend to focus on the self as the end goal of critique rather than one step in the process of political action: “[T]heorists often have an individualistic curiosity about how they have been conned into being complicit with social contradictions.”⁵⁸ The classrooms those theorists run, therefore, can bestow the students within them with an intellectual awareness of power in society without ever challenging them to dismantle or redistribute that power. Pfister argues that that critical awareness is a “safety valve:” in other words, the act of critique releases the pressure of becoming aware of one’s privilege. Lauren’s “reading up” on gentrification is one such example of a safety valve that replaces action with critique.

These stories expose the tension inherent in education for critical awareness: the contradiction between learning about massive systems of injustice, recognizing one's personal responsibility in those systems, and not becoming wrapped up in anxiety over individual complicity. Ahmed criticizes those who move too quickly from analysis to action: “To hear the work of exposure requires that white subjects inhabit the critique, with its lengthy duration...the desire to act in a non-racist or anti-racist way when one hears about racism, in my view, can function as a defense.” Yet inhabiting that critique forever-- being ever more critically aware of injustice while never acting against that injustice-- is also a defense against personal implication in racism. The point here is not to measure the graduates against some perfect mixture of reflection and action. Rather, it is to illuminate how white privilege works even-- and perhaps especially-- when it is exposed and critiqued. The graduates were often able to convert their critical education into careers, further accumulating both financial and social capital. In instances where they didn't act on the injustices they learned about, they rationalized their inactivity

⁵⁷ Joel Pfister, *Critique for What*. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 20.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

through intellectualization: they solved the tension between analysis and action by articulating critique itself as action.

Conclusion

I came to this project asking about the possibilities and limitations of academic critical awareness, seeking to add a form of data that was missing from the conversation about critical education and privileged students: that of former students themselves. Given that intervention, it would be easy to focus on the graduates I interviewed as individuals, and to see my critiques as personal indictments. Yet my argument is not about these graduates as individuals but about the systems that allow them to consolidate privilege even as they learn to critique that privilege. The graduates experienced a critical awareness of injustice through the academy and its paradigm of rationality, and so they articulated their awareness through intellectual terms such as “interesting.” That intellectualization is tied to a social construction of a “good” whiteness: an enlightened progressivism that enabled them to differentiate themselves from others and to acquire social justice-inflected careers. Thus, programs like American Studies are to some extent set up to convert critical awareness into social and financial capital. This is further demonstrated by the way in which that critical awareness served to hinder or replace the graduates’ actions against injustice.

If this argument seems like a catch-22— working in a social justice field is consolidating financial and social capital, while failing to act against injustice is perpetuating privilege— that is because it is. Gaining a critical awareness does not absolve one from white privilege; it does not provide a path to innocence. There is no way out of whiteness. Acknowledging this opens up space for what Sara Ahmed calls a “double turn.” The first turn is inward, critiquing our own

privilege; the second turn is away from ourselves and our individualistic desire to not be complicit, working to bring about the world that our critique should lead us to imagine.⁵⁹

The impossibility of finding a way out of whiteness delimits the claims I am making in this paper. I am not positing some better form of action that is inherently superior or more ethically pure than the choices the graduates made, and I am not necessarily arguing that they should not have made those particular choices. My arguments are also limited by the nature of this project. Just as reading a literary text cannot illuminate its author's intentions, I cannot ascribe intentionality to what the graduates said in our interviews. I am not arguing that they are trying to differentiate themselves from others; rather, I am arguing that that is what their words serve to do. I am not arguing that they chose to learn critical frameworks for the purpose of social capital; I am arguing that their words illuminate the ways in which those vocabularies gain them social capital.

While I am not ascribing intentionality to others, the process of writing this paper has caused me to reflect on my own. As I described in the introduction, I came to American Studies with the assumption that learning a critical awareness of injustice would naturally lead me to work against that injustice with more empathy, conviction, and investment. Put another way, I came to American Studies with the intention of becoming more innocent of my own privilege. But thinking through the questions of this project has shaken my conception that privilege can be negated through critical awareness. Moreover, it has made me realize that formal education may not even cause me to reduce the harm caused by my privilege. A critical education can teach me how to critique; ensuring that that critique does more than allow me to gain social and financial capital takes a different kind of work.

⁵⁹ Ahmed, "Declarations of whiteness," 59.

So I want to suggest some possibilities for what that work might look like— how we might strive for Ahmed’s “double turn”— by reflecting on how this project has altered my own actions. I’ve begun to notice how often I reach for the word “interesting” or other terms of intellectual curiosity when discussing issues of inequality and violence, whether in class or in conversation. Because I have learned through this project that those words are not inconsequential but rather serve to distance privileged students from our privilege, I now try to replace “interesting” with more honest and vulnerable terms of discomfort, sadness, and anger. I’m not calling for the form of white fragility that Robin DiAngelo labels “white women’s tears:” when white people emphasize how hard racism is for them, thereby drawing attention and resources to them rather than to people of color who are directly harmed by white supremacy.⁶⁰ Rather, I am hoping for a different tone of conversation, both in and out of the classroom, that would preclude using terms of intellectualization to deflect from the horror of racism, capitalism, and other forms of injustice. In his presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva called for emotions of anger and empathy in academia and beyond. He emphasized that these are not passive, momentary sentiments but rather deep emotions that call us to live out our values: “To challenge the racial order, empathy must foster a political will to act.”⁶¹ I’m not exactly sure what empathy and anger look like in the classroom, but I believe that these emotions are crucial to an education that not only enlightens but explicitly calls its students to work for social change.

Ultimately, however, the classroom is not the primary locus of social change. After all, for centuries people have resisted injustice while either not pursuing or being actively barred

⁶⁰ DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 133.

⁶¹ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “Feeling Race: Theorizing the Racial Economy of Emotions,” *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 1 (2019), 16.

from formal education; many (if not most) social movements have been driven by people who are illiterate. But they have never been driven by people acting alone. This is because the work of moving past critique necessitates mutually challenging relationships. The graduates often focused on how they as individuals could convert the critiques that they had learned in college into a career that did good in the world. Not only does this serve to accumulate capital with already privileged subjects, it also upholds the individual as the agent of change. Asking how an individual can avoid complicity with power or use their skills to work against it is different from asking how one can be in productive relationship with people and organizations who are doing that work already. For myself, writing this paper has coincided with my post-graduation job search, and it has provoked me to look for organizations that compel me to live out my political values, rather than opportunities to build a prestigious social justice career: contributing to a larger collective rather than constructing an individualized trajectory.

I still believe in education; I believe the classroom can be a space of supportive, challenging relationships, and that critique is a valuable part of grappling with the world and how we should act in the world. What I am trying to do in this paper is point out the ways in which privilege is sticky: the ways in which whiteness inevitably manifests, even and especially when it is critiqued in the classroom. I do this not to be needlessly cynical but rather to begin a reflection that provokes us to act in ways that bring about the world we want to see.

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