

The Frontier Myth Lives on through Elite Universities' Promise of Equity

A bribery scandal concerning elite American colleges has recently swept the nation, capturing widespread media and public attention. It was revealed that more than thirty wealthy parents bribed university officials and facilitated cheating on standardized tests to secure admission for their children to elite colleges, such as Stanford and UCLA, without the academic merit needed to do so (New York Times). In an article describing the scandal and the cutthroat environment of college admission and counseling from which it was born, Alexis Redding, an expert in the field of college admission, deemed it to be “almost like the Wild West.” (Goldstein and Healy). Although Redding was most likely referring to the classic Western film tropes of lawlessness and chaos, the shock and widespread media attention of this scandal proved that universities are a surprisingly accurate symbol for the classic American western and the myths that they perpetuate after all.

In his widely influential frontier thesis, Fredrick Jackson Turner echoes the idea that universities are where the western frontier and the American values it reaffirms will live on after westward expansion ceases to exist (Turner). Turner’s thesis served as a way to describe the West’s liberty and individualism as what defined America, and more importantly, as what made America different from the countries it’s people originated from. Turner states, “The most important effect of the frontier has been in the promotion of democracy and... of individualism” (Turner 6). His thesis created the optimistic myth of the frontier that became the foundation for the classical western film genre: the myth that the West was United States at its finest,

showcasing American's best values of "democracy" and "individualism" while leaving the history of indigenous massacres and exploitation in the shadows.

Thus, when the frontier closed, the myth moved to the elite universities of our nation as Jackson predicted. Without realizing, American culture refers to Yale, Stanford, and other elite institutions in the same way that the United States referred to the Western frontier in the late 1800s and early 1900s in film and other media. Turner, echoed by many classical, John Ford-type Western films made after him, described the frontier as "a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas" (Turner 9). The words "opportunity" and "escape from bondage of the past" (read as socioeconomic background) could easily be used to describe elite universities in this day and age. Furthermore, the Western trope that the frontier will create a new, equitable society where anyone, regardless of their race or status, can succeed with honest intentions and hard work has become a type of cultural trope to describe elite universities. For example, in Ford's Western *Stagecoach* the premise of the film is that in the west, an ex-convict and a prostitute are given a chance to escape their pasts and their stereotypes by the rest of the passengers in the stagecoach, allowing them a happy ending (*Stagecoach*). This idea of upward mobility is reaffirmed in the American cultural promise of college. Specifically this is seen in New York Times journalist Frank Bruni's article detailing the failings in the "promise of college." He highlights that college is seen in America "as a glittering centerpiece of the American dream, a reliable engine of social mobility"(Bruni). Bruni's words could seamlessly be placed in a classic western film, such as *Stagecoach*, as a way to describe

America's beloved frontier. Furthermore, the widespread media attention and public shock surrounding the scandal that exposed the reality of elite colleges only further proves a part of the western frontier does live on in elite universities: the widely believed myth that it is a place of meritocracy and upward mobility *for all*. The only difference between the western frontier and elite colleges is that the world chose to continue believing in the myths inherent in universities, rather than demystify it in the same way that global Spaghetti Westerns demystified the classical western.

The shock and disbelief at the news that elite colleges were in fact susceptible to bribery and not diligent protectors of equity and justice demonstrate how prevalent and deeply believed the frontier myth is when applied to elite universities. Although the scandal has seemed to awaken the American public to the truth, the fact that elite universities are inequitable is indeed a known fact that has simply been overshadowed by the blindly accepted myth. In a study published in 2017 by the Equality of Opportunity Project, it is stated that "children with parents in the top 1% are 77 times more likely to attend an Ivy-Plus college than children with parents in the bottom 20%"(Chetty et al.) The colleges deemed "Ivy-Plus" in this study included colleges involved in the recent 2019 scandal. These numbers show that elite educational institutions are not founded completely on equality and the betterment of society; they are still capitalist institutions whose incentives are to make the most money and hold the most power. Thus, similar to the old west, minorities and the poor are once again deprived of the promise the frontier myth gave to them: a better life with equality and upward mobility as long as they worked hard. Furthermore, American society has been, to quote the John Ford western *The Man Who Shot*

Liberty Valance, “print[ing] the legend instead of the fact” of elite universities across the nation. The outrage, fury, and preoccupation with the criminal activity of the wealthy parents demonstrate how, as a nation, we are just beginning to realize that the beloved American values that are believed to be the foundation of our country are myths in the places where the sharpest and brightest American minds are supposed to reside.

In conclusion, believing that elite colleges are the key to American upward mobility and are not preferential to the rich is what Sergio Leone, a major Spaghetti Western director, meant when he famously called the Western myth a “fairy tales for grownups” (or in this case should we say “ for parents”). It is understandable that our society still clings to this myth: the last remaining hope that America is in some way more of an equitable and just meritocracy than other rich and powerful countries profiting off of neoliberalism. Yet, just as the original frontier was proved to be a fairytale we repeat to comfort ourselves in the face of struggles and injustice, the fact that elite universities in our nation are devoid of greed, corruption, and acceptance of wealth is a myth that the U.S. had refused to face. Even more than a century since the frontier closed and sixty years after the Spaghetti Western genre was born, America still chooses to cling to the myth rather than face the oftentimes ugly truth. Although embracing reality is not as satisfying as listening to a handpicked, nonrepresentative story of a poor, African-American child getting into Stanford or a film about a prostitute and an ex-convict cowboy given a second chance by an accepting society, it is the only path to achieve the desired world that exists in myths. So instead of telling our children fairy tales and legends about our country, why don't we

tell them the truth. America has been an unjust and unequal country since its frontier stretched its way west. And it doesn't need a heroic cowboy to come save it: America needs us.

Works Cited

Bruni, Frank. "The Imperiled Promise of College." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 28 Apr. 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/04/29/opinion/sunday/bruni-the-imperiled-promise-of-college.html.

Chetty, Raj, et al. *Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility*, Equality of Opportunity Project, www.equality-of-opportunity.org/assets/documents/coll_mrc_summary.pdf.

Ford, John, director. *Stagecoach*. Walter Wanger Productions, 1939.

Goldstein, Dana, and Jack Healy. "Inside the Pricey, Totally Legal World of College Consultants." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 13 Mar. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/03/13/us/admissions-cheating-scandal-consultants.html.

The New York Times. "Your Questions on the College Admission Scandal, Answered. By Us. Without Cheating." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 14 Mar. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/03/14/us/college-admissions-scandal-questions.html.

Turner, Fredrick Jackson. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History 1893*. National Humanities Center, 2005, nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/gilded/empire/text1/turner.pdf.

Stella Rufeisen

3/15/19

English 165 Final Part 2