


INTRODUCTION

Diversity, Markedness, and the Liberal Arts College



I started teaching at the College in 1988, right after wrapping up research on race, class, and language among Puerto Rican families in New York City. Within my first few years of teaching, I met students who might easily have been from families I knew in New York, and I often wondered what they made of this largely white rural liberal arts college a few hundred miles from their home. Sometimes they would relay comments made about them by professors and classmates. For example, a few of my bilingual advisees described a professor who told them in their first year that their writing problems were caused by Spanish ‘interference’ and they should therefore not take any more Spanish courses (although I thought the real issue was their having had much less extensive practice or feedback in their high school writing than more privileged students had had). Other students described being judged for what they did or did not say, or for what they wore or looked like, as if they were expected to be walking stereotypes. Students of color said that such incidents happened enough to remind them how white and privileged the school was, as if they were on notice to show that they deserved to be at the College.

At about the same time, I started paying attention to College efforts to recruit ‘multicultural’ students. I also heard that some of the same students who had had difficult social and classroom experiences had been tapped to supply faces for publicity material presenting the school as what was called ‘multicultural’ in the 1990s, and ‘diverse’ by the mid-2000s. This publicity material, quickly becoming the stuff of websites, presented carefully curated pictures of diverse communities. This ‘diversity,’ which looked a lot like a marketing device, depended on text and imagery that read as race without pointing to the inequalities or exclusions that shaped non-white, especially black, student experience. Without students of color to provide images or be counted as numbers, this could not be done: the marketing process

needs people who look like race while not acknowledging them as racialized. But those whose faces appear in those photographs do experience being racialized, and this book examines that disconnect in its various iterations.

Over time, it struck me how much faculty, students, administration, and staff occupied separate, if intersecting, social spaces. Especially striking was how some of the administration faced outward and some inward. Admissions faced outward to future students, and the Office of Advancement outward to past students, trustees, donors, and other schools. The Dean of Students Office faced inward toward students, and the Dean of Faculty Office toward faculty. As the term ‘diversity’ settled into institutional usage, the differences between its inward- and outward-facing use grew evident. Inward-facing offices used it in position titles, handbooks, and policy statements. Some faculty saw it as a cover term for race, class, and gender; some faculty argued it should include religious and political diversity; many faculty commented on its semantic looseness. For students of color, diversity meant race as they had known it throughout their lives—a meaning that, as they were aware, was not what it meant to the school’s outward-facing offices.

To Admissions and the Office of Advancement, diversity was the message generated in their marketing publications, illustrating the school’s self-presentation as a ‘diverse community.’ This usage seemed unfixed in meaning: while it largely pointed to race, it could also point to gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and even the states students came from (though rarely ability, and never age). But it worked best when it pointed to images, and the easiest images to point to were labeled as ‘Black’ (capitalized in the college’s style guide) or ‘Asian’ or ‘Latino/a’ (by the mid-2010s, ‘Latinx’). These images work especially well with the neoliberalization of difference that higher education imported from the corporate world. By that I mean that race and other forms of problematic difference are treated not as the outcome of historical, economic, or social dynamics but as the property of individuals, and ideally as a ‘contribution’ to a business or school or other organization; much more on that later in this chapter. The easiest way to show such diversity is by using an image one can point to of someone doing what good organizational or institutional citizens do, despite not looking white.

This book is about the tension between neoliberalized diversity—something marketable that sort of looks like race and that students bring to the school—and the realities of racial and other forms of social

inequality that students live with. It is set in a liberal arts college, but the marketing aspects of diversity can be found throughout US higher education, especially in liberal arts undergraduate education, and even more so in elite schools like the College. But why liberal arts in particular? Although American colonial colleges were modeled after Oxford and Cambridge, the idea of a liberal arts undergraduate curriculum, particularly in a four-year liberal arts undergraduate college, is characteristically (though not exclusively) American. Liberal arts colleges are smallish (the student population at the College numbers fewer than 1,900) and most are exclusively undergraduate, though a few offer a master's degree. They emphasize humanities, sciences, social sciences, and arts, though a few include limited professional or technical education. Ideally, a liberal arts curriculum teaches students to think critically about everything. At the same time, parents and employers have been known to complain that liberal arts trains students for nothing. The whole point to a liberal arts education seems to be the reproduction of class. The highest-end liberal arts colleges and university programs are very elite indeed, and despite their claim to not be vocational, liberal arts education is a primary site for producing neoliberal values and for neoliberalizing diversity.

Diversity on the Website

College self-presentation rests on the construction of an institutional product that I call the Good Student, a construction critical to defining a liberal arts college's market identity, or 'brand.' The Good Student—not to be confused with ordinary good students, who are actual people—is no specific student, though it is based on images and narratives of specific students. It is a figure of attractive, productive youth; a marketable student ideal designed to appeal to parents, future employers, and donor organizations. Good Students are key to marketing liberal arts education, which by definition does not train students for a particular line of work. Liberal arts education turns out students who are 'bundles of potential,' whereas technical and professional education turns out engineers, computer scientists, managers, accountants, and so on. Successfully marketing liberal arts education means casting that bundle of potential as capable of just about anything. Students thus embody their education as self-managed bundles of skills, demonstrating a flexibility valued by corporate employers and donor organizations.

We see Good Students on the websites of every college and university. At present (2020) the College's home page is a mosaic of images,

captions, and bits of stories suggesting a cheerful world in which a mix of Good Students share interests and enthusiasms, including classroom activities, sports, music, volunteer work, and productive forms of play. Further down the page we find a compendium of Twitter-like social media messages and images that cumulatively project a wide range of student and faculty contributions to the College. And although the word ‘diversity’ does not currently appear on that page, the idea of diversity is conveyed by the student faces and names carefully laid out on the home page, some white, some not, but all attractive, productive, and engaged. All are Good Students. Those who read as other than white are Diverse Good Students. Neoliberal diversity is made up of Diverse Good Students.

The College, like other liberal arts schools in its comparison group, balances text and visuals to project itself as a community. On the college’s “Just the Facts” page (one click in from the home page) is a list describing the college’s location and founding, the acceptance rate, high school ranking, and testing range for its most recent entering class, details about academics, athletics, and financial aid, and a list of academic and athletic honors achieved by current and past students. One further click in we find the demographic profile for the entering class, including proportions of gender, first generation in college, Hispanic/Latino, Asian American, African American, and multiracial (the last four summarized as “students of color”), international, geographic distribution, and again high school graduating class ranking and testing range. The page labeled “Our Diverse Community” (also one click from the home page) is headed by a statement that a diverse student body enhances the quality of interaction throughout all aspects of student life because “different perspectives and life experiences” enhance the quality of social life and the rigor of intellectual life. (More on this statement shortly.) While the college does not currently specify what it considers diverse, in the mid-2010s the diversity statement just referred to concluded by saying that a student at the College could be “grungy, geeky, athletic, gay, black, white, fashionable, artsy, nerdy, preppy, conservative,” all as ways for a student to think of “being yourself.” The older statement and the current language say in effect that all these ways of being diverse are personal, individual qualities. A diverse community is thus an aggregate of distinct individuals.

The visuals mix students (and some faculty) who ‘look’ black, Latino/a, or Asian into a white matrix, bringing to life the numbers in the ‘student of color’ demographics. Diversity ‘improves’ so long as

these numbers increase each successive year. Each college and university is marketed in relation to its comparison group of competing peer schools. Diversity numbers higher than those of a peer school can be a marketing plus. But most important, diversity must be seen. Such imagery also inhabits the communities described by the College and its peers in their diversity statements. *U.S. News & World Report (USN&WR)*¹ ranks the College among its top 25 national liberal arts colleges. The College is also a member of NESCAC (New England Small College Athletic Conference),² and most NESCAC members are also in the *USN&WR* top 25. As Stevens (2007: 98–99) argues, US universities and colleges demonstrate status by who their athletic teams play;³ the importance of NESCAC membership arises from this fact. The College particularly values its comparison to Williams, Amherst, and Middlebury, all leaders of the *USN&WR* list, all NESCAC members, and all iconically old, small, and elite New England liberal arts colleges. To that end, their website self-presentations warrant comparison to those of the College. None are exactly alike. Rather they are variations within a set of common themes, identifiable with each other without being ‘cookie-cutter.’ As Tuchman (2009: 49–50) points out, this is an important branding principle for schools positioning themselves within peer groups; I have examined the websites of several other highly ranked colleges, and all follow the same general pattern. Let us start with their diversity statements:

The Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity at Williams College dedicates itself to a community where all members can thrive. We work to eliminate harmful bias and discrimination, close opportunity gaps, and advance critical conversations and initiatives that promote inclusion, equity, and social justice on campus and beyond.⁴

The Office of Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (ODEI) at Amherst College works collaboratively to support and sustain the growth of a just, equitable, vibrant, and intellectually challenging educational environment, and a culture of critical and compassionate campus engagement. Through understanding, mutual consideration, and unconditional respect, we work to ensure that all members of the College community are afforded the opportunity to reach their full potential as active participants in our global society ...⁵ [Elsewhere on the website] Diversity is a natural condition of the modern world. And, not coincidentally, it is a foundational part of an Amherst education. We believe that a great intellectual community should look like the world, and with every incoming student, that community comes to life here.⁶

We [Middlebury] are deeply committed to creating a diverse, welcoming community with full and equal participation for all individuals and groups. We work together daily to foster a respectful and engaged community that embraces all the complexity and individuality each person brings to campus. We are dedicated to learning, growing, and becoming our best selves. Groups of people from a variety of backgrounds and with differing viewpoints are often more resilient and adaptive in solving problems and reaching complex goals than more homogeneous groups. They coalesce into an effective community that benefits from the talents and identities of each individual.⁷

For years, versions of the following were on the College's website:

The quality of personal interaction that takes place in our classrooms extends to residences, performance halls, playing fields, dining halls, labs and to casual conversations that take place in [the Café]. That's why we seek a diverse student body. Different perspectives and life experiences expand the breadth and augment the rigor of the intellectual life of our College.

These four statements are fairly non-specific about what constitutes diversity but are clear about the importance of protecting and nurturing membership in the institutional community. In each, members participate as individuals distinguished by specific traits, backgrounds, and viewpoints. Williams adds the importance of protection. Amherst elaborates on that theme, and stresses reaching one's potential. Middlebury adds to that the importance of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints in problem-solving. The College links different perspectives and life experiences to intellectual rigor. All these themes are suggested in all four formulations; each emphasizes a different angle. In each, the school speaks as 'we.' *Diverse* and *diversity* are used in reference to or in connection with *community*, *members*, *growth*, *intellectual*, *viewpoint*, and *perspective*. Williams, Amherst and (as of 2020—see below) the College also make reference to *equity* and *inclusion* and some notion of social justice, always in relation to the idea of an intellectual community of individuals. This is especially clear in the College's most recent diversity statement, posted in 2020, which now includes the following language:

At the College, we embrace diversity, commit to work against systemic racism and bigotry, and support a community where all individuals, without exception, feel valued, empowered, and treated fairly. Our mission to prepare students for lives of meaning, purpose,

and active citizenship is inextricably tied to our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Serious intellectual inquiry and informed engagement with our ever-changing world depend on open dialogue among people with differing perspectives and values, and from different backgrounds.

References to *community* and *growth* also appear in mission statements and academic goals, making their use on diversity pages coherent with qualities defining the school generally. Here for example is Middlebury's mission statement:

Through a commitment to immersive learning, we prepare students to lead engaged, consequential, and creative lives, contribute to their communities, and address the world's most challenging problems.⁸

And here is the College's mission statement:

[The College] prepares students for lives of meaning, purpose, and active citizenship ... [the College] emphasizes intellectual growth, flexibility, and collaboration in a residential academic community. [Our] students learn to think independently, embrace difference, write and speak persuasively, and engage issues ethically and creatively. One of America's first liberal arts colleges, [the College] enables its students to effect positive change in the world.

The mission statements most straightforwardly present the terms in which institutions like these see themselves and their purpose: institutionally guided safe havens that cultivate Good Students, including Diverse Good Students. It is thus unsurprising to find notions of equity and social justice worked to fit such a notion of community-nurturing diversity.

The College as Ethnographic Setting

The College has just under 1,900 students and 200 full-time faculty. Like many of its peers, it was founded in a rural setting in the early 1800s as a men's college, only admitting women in the mid-late 1900s. Like most such schools, it is organized by divisions with distinct functions and principles of organization: the Dean of Faculty Office; the Division of Student Life headed by the Dean of Students Office; the Office of Institutional Advancement (OIA); the Office of Admissions, the Business Office; and Library and Information Technology Services.

The head of each of these divisions is a senior staff member who reports directly to the college president. In addition, there is a chief of staff who serves as secretary to the Board of Trustees who make the college's legal and fiduciary decisions, and who are thus central to any planning of college initiatives and general direction.⁹ In this book I take into account those divisions whose job it is to present diversity as part of the school's public image (the offices of Institutional Advancement and of Admissions) and those whose job it is to structure diversity programs and policy, including faculty hiring, within the school (the offices of the dean of students and the dean of faculty). Even in a school as small as the College, these divisions are different enough in their effect on people's experience of the institution as to challenge the idea of it as a single entity that everyone knows in the same way. As the outward-facing divisions oriented to external stakeholders, the OIA takes care of fund-raising, communication, and marketing (addressing alumni, individual donors and donor organizations, and the general public) while the Admissions Office takes care of applications and admissions (addressing prospective students and their parents). OIA and Admissions rarely address faculty or current students. The internal administration governing faculty and student life—the offices of the dean of faculty and the dean of students—address faculty and students, sometimes in ways focused on procedure or policy, sometimes reminding those addressees to help enhance the college's reputation and identity. Faculty and students mostly address each other and themselves.

With diversity most readily equated with categories of difference that are discrete, readily counted, and easily projected as images, Admissions keeps the numbers for students and the Dean of Faculty Office keeps them for faculty, while the OIA manicures and arranges images of students and faculty. Good Student imagery (as can be seen on any higher education website) depicts students engaged in activities that reflect well on the school or that can be construed as beneficial to the school. Good Students, including Diverse Good Students, are of particular concern to institutional OIAs because they reinforce institutional reputation, highlighting a school's capacity to turn out productive, value-bringing future workers, the ideal product of liberal arts education. Colleges retain their ranking in their comparison group largely through their reputation metric; reputation rests heavily on perceptions, such as having a diverse community of Good Students.

My ethnography of the College started in a small way. Around 1993–95, when I had been teaching there for a few years, I would

sometimes meet students from working-class bilingual neighborhoods like those in New York where I had done fieldwork for my previous project on race, class, and language ideology. While I was writing up that research for *Exposing Prejudice*, I floated some chapter drafts to some of those students. A few commented “that sounds like my neighborhood” or even “that sounds like my mother.” This led to conversations about their experience of coming to so white a school: what the transition was like, what they made of whiteness at the school among students and faculty. For me, coming from a middle-class Italian-American background from a city around fifty miles from the school, I saw the school’s whiteness in complicated ways: it was white and I was white, but when I was growing up (and the school was still all-male) it felt un-ethnically white, especially in terms of class, which made a big difference then. That history seemed to linger, so what did my students make of it, and for that matter, of me?

Many of these students, especially young women, were the core of the Latino/a student club. Many had chosen the College because it gave them the best financial package. In my service on the admissions committee, I heard comments about such students “bringing multiculturalism” (as it was more commonly called then) to the school, which suggested to me a quid pro quo: the school provided an education framed by its symbolic value, and the students provided multicultural content for the school. In doing so, they seemed to be developing a new identity; not just Puerto Rican from Manhattan or Mexican from Chicago but Latino/a in ways specific to a liberal arts college. At about this time, with college websites still in their infancy, I started noticing (as mentioned earlier) nicely produced literature and other media for prospective students on multicultural organizations and festivities, including “Multicultural Weekend.” Clearly, these students were not simply at the College as students, but as part of an imagery production.

Around 1997–98, I started paying attention to the *U.S. News & World Report* college and university ranking system (when it was still published as a magazine), especially the way it displayed the ethnic/race demographics supplied by schools. By 2002, *USN&WR* had developed, and still publishes, a campus ethnic diversity index in which institutions are ranked according to the proportion of students representing what *USN&WR* terms *ethnic categories*: “non-Hispanic African-American, Hispanic, American Indian, Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, Asian, non-Hispanic white, and multiracial (two or more races).”¹⁰ Clearly something called *diversity* had become important in

college marketing—what it consisted of was less clear. At the same time, I noticed a usage shift in what in the 1990s had been the relatively interchangeable terms, *diverse* and *multicultural*. By the early 2000s, *multiculturalism* remained associated with group identity, shared history, and concern with social justice, while *diversity* became associated with individual contributions to a larger social order. *Multicultural/ism*, as a cover term for non-white demographic categories, became institutionally restricted to mid-level administrative position titles, offices of student life, and student organizations. *Diverse/ity* had become the institution's preferred expression for referring to difference represented by types of people.

In 1995, I decided to interview a handful of students, hoping to learn what had happened when they came in with locally inflected identities (e.g., Ecuadoran from New York, Cuban from Florida) and developed a college-based *Latino/a* identity (*Latinx* not yet being a term). We talked about where they were from, how they found the school, and what struck them as most 'white' about it. But once it was clear how their sense of themselves at the college could not be disentangled from how the college operated, the project grew. I interviewed faculty members and administrators, and paid much more attention to the work of Admissions and the OIA, especially the rapidly developing college website. By the late 2010s, I had spoken to sixty-nine students, in individual interviews or in focus groups. Of these, forty-six identified as students of color (twenty-eight as *Latino/a* or *Latinx* depending when the interviews were done, five as Asian, twelve as black, and one as Native American), five as international, four as LGBTQ, and eighteen as straight white US students. The numbers do not quite add up because there is some intersectionality in there. Most of the student interviews were done between the mid-1990s and late 2000s, with a few central issues revisited in focus groups and class discussions in the mid-late 2010s. Interviews with students of color, international students, and students identifying as LGBTQ explored what it meant to experience those modes of identity at the College. Other interviews covered sports, private societies, tour guiding, and residential life. I also interviewed faculty and administrators, some of color and some white: altogether, twenty-five faculty including several department and program chairs, and fifteen administrators including the admissions director and two assistant directors, five student life administrators, a director of the college's diversity center, a chief diversity officer, two directors of the college's Opportunity Program, an associate dean of faculty, a dean of students, and an OIA program

administrator. This was supplemented by experience and understanding gleaned from teaching, faculty meetings, workshops, committee service, department chair service, conversations with students and colleagues, and just general routine minutiae.

As one can see, this work is an auto-ethnography of the academy, in which what matters is the reflexive capacity to “engage in a critical reflection on one’s relationships with others, as circumscribed by institutional practices and by history, both within and outside of the academy” (Young and Meneley 2005: 7). Academic auto-ethnography is a tricky business, especially if one is trying to keep the name of one’s institution out of the print record, as most studies of colleges and some of universities seek to do.¹¹ This is partly to keep participants’ identities confidential and partly as courtesy to the institution. The anonymity itself also makes the important point that this work is really not about this specific school but about a type of school, and how that type fits into its peer group. So, the reflexivity is not about my personal career at this specific institution but about how my structured experience has allowed me to figure out how this type of institution operates.

My analysis starts with an examination of the school’s divisions—its constituent structures—in relation to each other, and the school in relation to its peers, and the market relations and contemporary business ethos in which that comparison group is embedded. In doing so it follows the lead of Gaye Tuchman’s (2009) *Wannabe U*, an ethnography of a state university’s transformation (in corporate-academic parlance) over some years, through the efforts of its presidents, trustees, and top administrators, from a regional to a nationally ranked research university. The construction of diversity at the College was also part of a transformation process—one focused on student life, similarly motivated by ranking concerns, similarly engineered by the concerted efforts of its president, trustees, and top administrators over some years. Mitchell Stevens’ (2007) *Creating a Class*, an ethnography of the admissions office in an elite liberal arts school not unlike the College, provides insight into the process of finding students whose on-campus presence works for the school as well as the school working for the student. Elizabeth Lee’s (2016) *Class and Campus Life* provides insight into the situation of low-income students at an elite liberal arts college, again not unlike the College, and the discrepancy between administrative views and representations of those students and what students themselves experience.

Diversity, Neoliberalism, and Social Markedness

This book is based on the premise that the notion of diversity dominating higher education was imported from the corporate world, and that it points to but cannot be equated directly with race or gender or sexual orientation or any other category of human social difference. It is a neoliberalization of social markedness, represented mostly, and most conveniently, for organizations and institutions, as race. Before going any further, let me make clear that this is not true of all notions of diversity; I am very specifically talking about notions of diversity that function as strategies to show organizations and institutions to their best advantage.

By social markedness, I mean whether social identities and characteristics belong to the larger social world they inhabit as typical and taken for granted (unmarked), or as specific, exceptional, and not fitting in (marked):¹² racial markedness is experienced as not fitting into social regimes where being white is normative; class markedness is experienced as not fitting into social regimes where being middle class is normative; gender markedness is experienced as not fitting into social regimes where being male is normative; sexual orientation markedness is experienced as not fitting into social regimes where being straight is normative; and so on. Complicating all that experience is the fact that social markedness is routinely experienced intersectionally (Crenshaw 1991), as intersecting structures (such as gender, race, and class). Where middle-class whiteness and straight maleness are normative, the more ways one is not that, the more complicated and difficult one's life can be. In short, social markedness is not an individual property but a condition of the (often intersecting) classifications produced by the social orders within which people live.

By neoliberalism, I mean the notion that the governing principle of any organization should be the maximizing of market potential, measuring the value of any social practice or form of knowledge in market terms (see, e.g., Harvey 2005; Rossiter 2003).¹³ For social actors (rather than for organizations), this plays out as what Gershon (2011, 2017) describes as *neoliberal agency*: the capacity to imagine 'running' oneself as a business, "a bundle of skills, assets, qualities, experiences, and relationships" (2017: 9) that can all be profitably deployed. To think of oneself in this way, one segments and presents everything in this bundle as valuable to a business or organization, not only to oneself—which in some cases turns into a way of being that is heavily associated with diversity. The importance of that way

of being for students is unevenly distributed around the school: it is little evident in day-to-day social or classroom life, a little more evident in some aspects of organizational activity, and most evident when students are put on view by Admissions and the OIA, or asked to represent the College in some public venue.

Throughout this book, we see unresolved tensions between diversity imagined in terms of neoliberal agency, as something one ‘brings’ to the institution, and the realities of social markedness, of being racially or class or gender or sexually other, lived by the students who ‘bring diversity.’ Diversity in higher education marketing, and in the corporate world whence it came, is a neoliberalization of markedness, especially (but not only) race, given value through what the marked have to offer the institution, both as students and as future workers. All this depends on social markedness being crafted to fit existing institutional interests.

This is an ethnography of neoliberalism in Greenhouse’s sense of “experience-based inquiry into the interpretive, institutional and relational makings of the present” (2010: 2). As she points out, the importance of ethnographic examinations of neoliberalism lies in the fact that neoliberalism intertwines with various places in the social order so specifically that it cannot be fully understood as a single abstract concept. In their discussion of the existence of multiple neoliberalisms, including academic, Shear and Hyatt stress “neoliberalism as a relatively open signifier that can help us think about governance and social reproduction across scale and space” (2015: 7). We see this in the workings of neoliberalism in contemporary higher education, especially in audit and accountability that, as explained by Shore and Wright, “embody a new rationality and morality, and are designed to engender among academic staff new norms of conduct and professional behavior. In short, they are agents for the creation of new kinds of subjectivity: self-managing individuals who render themselves auditable” (2000: 57).¹⁴

Audit particularly governs the lives of faculty in universities directly answerable to the state, as in Britain, continental Europe, New Zealand and elsewhere addressed in the original audit culture literature, and in US public universities, despite so little of the latter’s support actually being public (see studies in Wright and Shore 2017 on the current fragility of public universities). In private institutions and especially in elite liberal arts colleges, neoliberalism plays out somewhat differently in terms of the stakeholders and the stakes. As private colleges, their stakeholders include boards of trustees heavily

invested in their market position in comparison groups of other elite schools. The stakes then are marketability and accounting, which take the form of college ranking. While faculty activities are far less tightly held to account, the market ethos governing such schools assigns value to faculty and student activity to the degree that they provide marketable elements, almost like pieces of a mosaic, that enhance college and university reputations and in turn their place in the rankings, in which reputation plays a substantial role. This is where diversity fits into the picture—literally, into the images projected by these schools.

The neoliberal qualities of diversity explored in this book are not unique to the United States. In her salutary critique of ‘doing’ institutional diversity, Ahmed (2012) describes the work and frustration experienced by diversity administrators at universities in Britain and Australia. Their academic systems are directly subject to a government-mandated audit that drives their diversity initiatives, while the influence of market relations is more directly visible in the United States. But in both we see the consequences of a wobbly concept with implications different for the institution than for those charged with doing diversity work. Ahmed describes the term *diversity* itself as deployed in institutional speech acts in which its referent is unclear, in large part because its primary functions are the maintenance of the institutional status quo or the indication of added value or the promotion of a positive image (ibid.: 54–72). Thus, to do their job, diversity workers must use a referent whose denotation is never clarified: “Diversity is regularly referred to as a ‘good’ word precisely because it can be used in diverse ways, or even because it does not have a referent” (ibid.: 79–80). Mohanty (2003), drawing from her experience in two US liberal arts colleges, notes the commodification of race and gender in the US academy in the business of prejudice reduction workshops and diversity consultants. Pointing to the neoliberal element inherent in this commodification, she says: “If complex structural experiences of domination and resistance can be ideologically reformulated as individual behaviors and attitudes, they can be managed while carrying on business as usual” (Mohanty 2003: 210).

Race/Ethnicity, Multiculturalism/Diversity, and Neoliberal Diversity

So, to pick up Mohanty’s question, how *do* “complex structural experiences of domination and resistance” get reformulated as “individual

behaviors and attitudes”? Or to put it another way, how does neoliberal diversity get formulated so that it suggests that one’s race and ethnicity operate parallel to one’s gender, sexuality, international status, and what state one comes from? The answer to that lies in the work of 1990s diversity trainers who set up this parallel as a strategy for presenting the corporate world with a model of ‘diversity’ disconnected from history, structure, inequality, or group identity; but however much diversity trainers recast their notion of diversity to point to multiple aspects of person, it remains grounded in notions of race/ethnicity. What the model did was to start from a notion of ‘the individual’ (i.e., individual worker) and set up race/ethnicity as the paradigm, equal in weight, for other aspects of that individual. This model of neoliberal diversity—diversity as useful personal attributes—works well for diversity trainers, the corporate world, and higher education promotional representation, though less well for actual people.

In this section, I trace the development of neoliberal diversity from previous notions of diversity/multiculturalism, which in turn reclassified earlier notions of race.¹⁵ All these are about markedness and belonging. To review briefly, unmarkedness is the condition of belonging to a larger category as typical or unproblematic, whereas markedness is the condition of being atypical or problematic, of being classified in ways that from the perspective of the larger category compromises belonging. In terms of social markedness, this is about belonging or not to a social formation: a nation or society or some form of organization. And by belonging, I mean how people’s capacity to participate is allowed or constrained. In social classifications, the terms of markedness are spelled out in discourse, especially in writing, by those in a position to do so.

In the ‘figure–ground’ relation of social marking, the unmarked control the work of marking, identifying the socially marked with the figure while leaving themselves taken for granted as the ground. The unmarked cast the shape of the marked figures and manipulate representations of it with respect to that ground into stereotypes of individuals or groups. The unmarked thus point to (index) the conditions that produce them, radiating out from where *us* is normal.¹⁶ The unmarked, in the *us* position of privilege, generally perceive the more marked (*them*) as separate, distinct, and problematic, perceptions that the marked too often internalize (e.g., as internalized racism). The unmarked, and too often the marked, also tend to assume that the marked ought to fit into the social spaces allotted them by the unmarked. They also operate within what Williams (1977: 133) terms

“structures of feeling”: the shared system of meanings, values, and interpretations experienced and felt among fellow social actors.¹⁷

Let us start with race, which for centuries has set the terms for national belonging in the United States. Despite rhetoric equating race with skin color, what racism does is point to physical and other features of difference as signs of ancestry that make belonging compromised or impossible. The specifics of racialization are not fixed: Mullings points out the “fluidity, mutability and historical contingency of racism—its differences, its transformations, and its contestations” (2005: 674). This fluidity reflects, as Dick and Wirtz (2011: E3–4) put it, the fact that racialization is not about “fixed categories of people and things, but processes by which people become marked as exemplars of racial imaginaries.” Insofar as race is a social fact, it is real, but its reality depends on its continual construction through social action, especially discourse, in opposition to whiteness. The white/non-white polarity is sustained by structural mechanisms growing from histories of appropriated labor, land, and resources, interpreted as a linkage of descent, geographical origin, and what are assumed to be natural characteristics.¹⁸ The less control people have had over their labor, land, and resources, the more they have been subject to racialization (see Wolf 1982; Omi and Winant 1986). Above all, whiteness has been maintained in polar opposition to people of African slave descent: the structural limits faced by African Americans show how powerfully racialized they remain (Baugh 2006).

The actual work of wrapping people in these imaginaries has been done through laws, institutional documents, and other public language. Since (at least) the eighteenth century, racializing discourses have been abundantly produced by those claiming the authority of science, religion, and law to describe, explain, and judge people’s aspect, qualities, and actions as natural manifestations of where they are from and from whom they descend (Horsman 1981). Throughout this history, whiteness became clarified as the condition of ‘natural’ and unconditional national belonging, and of unmarked ancestry; hence the stress on the ‘purity’ of English and North European ancestry. Racializing discourses spelled out non-purity, often as sub- or non-human qualities (dirty, grasping, criminal, greasy, ape-like, stupid, lazy, aggressive, dangerous), first targeting people of African descent and native Americans, then Mexicans, and later in the century the labor migrations from East Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe, all seen as unworthy of belonging to the United States. They flourished in the early twentieth century (in the works of Madison Grant, among others), and they remain all too present.

The whiteness that eventually accrued to descendants of South and East European labor migrants came in part from the efforts of those descendants to unmark themselves, but their capacity to do so depended on the ways in which specific manifestations and meanings of whiteness have been in flux throughout US history, unevenly distributed, actively produced, and not all equal (Jacobson 1998). Meanings of whiteness are particularly uneven across class (Hartigan 1999). Manifestations of whiteness emerged from strategic labor policies playing off workers of European, British, and Irish ancestry against those of African slave ancestry (Allen 1994; Ignatiev 1995). The provisional whiteness achieved by Irish, Jewish, Italian, and many other immigrants, remained subject to challenge by those who counted themselves ‘really’ white and who guarded that whiteness by restricting membership in, for example, country clubs and private schools.

Still, the marked (sometimes with the help of the unmarked) found opportunities to generate ethnicizing discourses that signified provisional belonging. Ethnicizing discourses mitigate markedness at least in part by stressing what people of marked ancestry have done to justify belonging. Such discourses play up class aspirations, democratic participation, personal and family effort, sacrifice, and contribution, all of which demonstrate the desire and effort to do what Americans value. Such discourses work best when done in public, such as literature, performances, parades, and statues of heroes: Italian Columbus discovering America; Polish General Pulaski leading Revolutionary War troops. While ethnicizing discourses rarely obliterate all residue of racialization, they mitigate it by saying, in effect, these people have communities and values. Their food, music, traditions, and language (performed only when appropriate) are signs of their heritage, and never impede individual achievement. They have helped build the nation. Such ethnicization, starting unevenly in the late 1800s, peaked after World War II. ‘Ethnic groups’ now seen as white became so as their class and occupational situations shifted enough to allow them to be seen in unmarked ways. The post-World War II growth of the US middle class, helped by benefits from the 1944 Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (“G.I. Bill”), made an enormous difference, facilitating higher education, small business start-ups, and home ownership.¹⁹ The largely white, male, primary-sector workforce of this era experienced small business and corporate sector mobility as ethnic-hyphenated Americans became middle class.

Such ethnicizing discourses, focused on nation building, still take place, but the orientation toward whiteness in their earlier iterations

has shifted toward a more general unmarkedness.²⁰ Ethnicizing discourses have also come to coexist with a newer development, diversity discourses, which grew partly from the neoliberalizing of the corporate world and partly from the new set of demographic terms developed in the 1970s by the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to track hiring equity as required by the Equal Employment Opportunity Act. These were also called ‘affirmative action terms.’ Whereas the ethnic terminology of the earlier twentieth century was primarily oriented to national origin, the affirmative action categories (Black/African-American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, Native American) were based sort of on race and sort of on sections of the world. (The OMB capitalizes the B in Black and the W in White, so I follow OMB usage in this section.) These categories were primarily used by corporations, higher education, and public and non-profit sectors. They were also, by the 1980s, associated with multiculturalism.

According to Newfield and Gordon (1996: 76), the term *multiculturalism* came into US usage in the 1970s’ “grassroots attempt(s) at community-based racial reconstruction through ... the neighborhood public school.” In the 1980s and 1990s it became associated with higher education, especially with efforts to reform institutional racial inequalities. Such activist hopes gained little traction elsewhere, and even in academe *multicultural/ism* was displaced by what became the standard term for racial difference in the corporate world: *diversity*. That happened as the terms white, black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaskan Native came into existence as the classifications specific to the category *multiculturalism*, and then to the general category *diversity*. These are the categories on the forms that students and faculty have been filling out since then, and they are the source of the demographic information posted by colleges and universities on their ‘fast facts’ pages. As Brenneis (2006) points out, the very choices offered by forms themselves reflect the conditions shaping those forms, and reinforce institutional realities.²¹ For some time, multicultural and diverse existed in institutional discourses as quasi-synonyms, with apparently the same general relation to their subcategories—apparently, but not quite. While diversity and multiculturalism include the same subcategories, diversity is more fluid, as diversity consultants show us below, making them useful to institutions in ways that multiculturalism is not.

The terms White, Black, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaskan Native were established by the OMB in

1977 and revised in 1997 when Asian or Pacific Islander was split up into Asian and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and Hispanic became Hispanic or Latino. White, black, Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native are all considered racial classifications; Hispanic/Latino is considered an ethnic classification that can be further classified by white or black.²² These terms are the culmination of processes of selecting and naming race/ethnic and gender categories as ‘officially’ recognized minorities between 1965 and 1975. The Equal Employment Opportunity Act, created by Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (which prohibits discrimination by race, sex, or religion), required race categories to track hiring practices; hence their designation as “Affirmative Action” categories. The first were ‘Black’ and ‘White’; the other three were worked out as rough parallels to Black, building on (then) less bureaucratized but widely used categories such as Spanish-American, Indian, and Oriental. Skrentny (2002: 103) points out that the establishment of these categories was an almost entirely bureaucratic process, taking place during the Johnson and Nixon administrations, and that the categories were largely used in employment and government contracts. Social activism figured minimally in their establishment, and no one involved in the process seemed to question their parallel to ‘Black,’ nor what it meant to be a ‘minority.’ By the early 1970s, women became included as a (sort of) parallel category for accounting for legal discrimination as well, though as Skrentny points out, *women* as a labor category was politically trickier than the establishment of race/ethnic minority categories—there was little Congressional support for the legal establishment of gender equality, whereas there was plenty of Nixonian maneuvering for Black and (the then-common term) Hispanic votes.

In her discussion of these categories, Yanow outlines the administrative and policy practices through which they came to be treated as scientifically grounded. And despite language (in both these OMB categories and in the US Census) stating that race and ethnicity are separate (e.g., as specified in census instructions to further subdivide Hispanic/Latino into Black and White), Americans do routinely treat race and ethnicity, in use, “as if they mean the same three things: color, culture, and country of origin” (Yanow 2003: x). The categories established in 1977 were put into practice for federal data collection starting in 1980, the first time such categories had been so codified for general use by the state.²³ These categories quickly became standardized in hiring and contracting, and in college applications. They were also quickly naturalized as categories of racially marked ‘types’,

which may have been the quality that made them so readily transferable from *multiculturalism* to *diversity* as identity categories.

In 1980s academic circles, faculty and administrators may have interchanged diversity and multiculturalism, but the corporate world was looking for a diversity model that made sense within existing company policies and practices, enhancing profits and keeping the organization operating as usual. By the early 1990s, there was a literature on diversity management strategies that addressed what was considered the ‘problem’ of group-based identity politics associated with affirmative action hiring initiatives. The preferred model became that of diversity made up of specific traits that characterized individual workers, including race and ethnic identity along with other value-added traits that make workers desirable to their organization. Group social history no longer needed to be considered. A diverse workforce became “the mosaic of people who bring a variety of backgrounds, styles, perspectives, values, and beliefs as assets to the groups and organizations with which they interact” (Rasmussen and Roe 1995: 8). Diversity itself became “those important human characteristics that impact individuals’ values, opportunities and perceptions of self and others at work” (Loden 1996: 14). This formulation put the individual-as-worker front and center, making affirmative action classification one among many “human characteristics.” In an update of the model first presented in her 1996 book, Loden proposed primary and secondary dimensions of diversity.²⁴ The primary dimension (or “inner wheel”) includes age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, income, class, spiritual beliefs, physical abilities; the secondary dimension (or “outer wheel”) includes ten categories of experience, personal background, and style, effectively mapping elements of self onto résumé categories (e.g., work and military experience, education, first language, and communication style).

So here is race, an old, widespread, intense, enduring construction of markedness and denial of belonging, still doing a lot of damage. And here are a couple of mitigating and provisionally unmarking responses to that construction: ethnicity, peaking many decades ago as a path to whiteness but still operating as a recasting of marked elements as valued contributions to the nation; and the diversity model developed by corporate consultants, recasting marked elements not as a group identity but as one of many individual qualities valued as contributions to one’s organization. Either way, it is up to the marked to unmark themselves.

How Diversity Points to Neoliberal Values in Higher Education

Diversity moved into US higher education from the corporate world in the 1990s as the academic world was being reimagined along business lines by its governing boards, a point in academic institutional history thoroughly documented by Shumar (1997) and Tuchman (2009). The rhetoric of diversity goals in the corporate world and higher education are quite similar:²⁵ to approximate more closely the demographics of the general population and to enhance what the organization produces. Both goals presuppose diversity as a property of individuals, and the enhancement of productivity presupposes the diverse subject as a neoliberal agent in Gershon's sense, as discussed earlier—a move in which, as Davis (2007: 347) points out, “neoliberalism shape-shift[s] racism to limit its power as a legitimate grievance.” It also shape-shifts race into a device by which organizations and institutions present themselves to advantage.

One major effect of this shape-shifting is that students from disvalued categories of markedness are recruited to restructure institutional demographics while being interpellated (or ‘hailed’, after Althusser 1971) to rework the social value of diversity as neoliberal values. We see this in the Posse program²⁶ with which the College worked for about twenty years, having initially partnered with it to ‘bring’ diversity to the school (as Admissions personnel routinely put it), primarily by increasing the number of students classified in the non-white OMB categories. Students apply to a college or university through Posse, and admitted students are selected as Posse scholars based on their potential to serve as ‘agents of change’ for that institution. Posse particularly selects for leadership potential and diversity, the latter largely but not exclusively based on non-white OMB categories. Posse sends cohorts of ten students into the first-year class of a partner school, which in turn provides the cohort with tuition scholarships. Posse provides ‘leadership’ training to the cohort for several months preceding matriculation. Once matriculated, the cohort meets regularly and frequently with a faculty mentor to discuss their experience of the school; the Posse Foundation also sets up on-campus retreats to reinforce the leadership message. Posse scholars must unmark themselves by enacting something identifiable by Posse as ‘leadership’ and ‘campus change’, while remaining marked enough to allow schools to point to them as *diverse* leaders and change agents. Such a burden is tough enough when placed on the shoulders of working adults; when placed on the shoulders of those

just becoming adults, serious questions should be raised about the nature of the task.

In 2019, the College's website gave entering class demographics as 27 percent "US students of color" (first used on the website in the mid-2010s; the earlier term was "multicultural")—4 percent African American, 10 percent Hispanic/Latino, 8 percent Asian American, 5 percent multiracial—and 8 percent "non-US citizen" (international students). These numbers are roughly comparable to those of schools in its immediate comparison group; the more elite and higher ranked the school, the higher the number of "students of color" is likely to be. International students include a substantial proportion of white Anglophone Canadians, along with students from Britain, continental Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, often from well-off families, and often from International Baccalaureate programs. This language is relatively recent. Until a few years ago, those demographics were counted together as "student diversity" (which would have made this class "35 percent diverse"), an incommensurable (unmeasurable by a common standard) accounting system that played down the actual white demographic in the college. The fact that those categories remain grouped together suggests that the classificatory logic has not changed much, but the new labels better match those of the College's peer schools. Class turns out to be a trickier category to represent but the website does provide a category "first generation to college" that provides some idea, currently 16 percent, a number that began rising when the school went need-blind some years ago.

The College website has consistently kept a page ("our diverse community") that lists the student cultural organizations including the black, Latinx (the current term), and Asian clubs, and the campus center that provides programming on "facets of human difference" including, according to the website, gender, race, culture, religion, class, sexuality, and ability.²⁷ Until this center was established in 2010, student cultural organizations provided most of the diversity programming in the form of invited speakers, performances, celebrations, and other educational or recreational enactments of identity. Students of color and international students, by staffing these organizations, also supply faces and stories for college publications and web pages. All this recasts markedness as *culture*; most organizational mission statements have at some time mentioned "educating" the "community" or "public" about members' "culture." This transformation of markedness into culture takes place both in students' social lives and in classrooms, becoming part of the tangle of functions that make up higher

education, central to which is the maintenance or transformation of class status. It becomes not only culture as a form of identity, but cultural capital in Bourdieu's sense. It also becomes central to the neoliberalization of diverse subjectivity.

Most people going to college expect to acquire credentials in preparation for employment; they also expect to maintain or upgrade their social status. These may appear commensurate, but such thinking only works if class mobility is assumed to happen through mechanisms operating on individuals: college inculcates students with skills and knowledge that make them valuable to potential employers. This modernist notion of human capital may look like Bourdieu's (1979) Marxian notion of cultural capital, but it is not. Workers imagined as human capital are assumed to be self-controlling, self-directing individuals made up of skills whose value is a function of their place in the labor market. Bourdieu theorizes cultural capital coexisting with social and symbolic capital (connections and affiliated status), all convertible into economic capital. Their acquisition is necessarily intertwined with class hierarchy. Thinking of workers as human capital takes no account of hierarchic dynamics and so does not recognize social or symbolic capital in that relation. Rather it recognizes hard skills (knowledge and techniques) and soft skills (social practices productive for one's company: communication, leadership, teamwork, time management). Unlike the hard and soft skills that turn people into human capital, Bourdieuan cultural capital is not defined by how it enhances the worker's value to the company, though it might do so. Even though cultural capital can be understood as the social knowledge and practices that allow people to move into good jobs (and are skill-like in that sense), its value lies in what it does for the status of those who have it, not for the profits of those for whom they work.

How students in a highly ranked undergraduate school acquire cultural capital depends on their social backgrounds and what they must build on. Cultural capital can include classroom learning, but it also includes forms of knowledge and ways of speaking and acting shared with or learned from socially valued connections, or *social capital*. Social capital includes association with the institution itself, but it also includes classmates, fraternity buddies, and so on. The more social privilege one is born into, the more easily one develops the social connections that lead to other career and social connections. Through these associations, one acquires symbolic capital: the school's reputation on one's diploma, the prestige accruing to the 'right' connections (family, fraternity, exclusive club). One can practically see social and

symbolic capital in the class notes and wedding pictures of college alumni magazines. Any college provides some degree of these forms of capital, but nationally ranked private universities and liberal arts colleges, the loci of concentrated social and symbolic capital, do it especially well.

Students selected by such schools as icons of neoliberal diversity are placed in a peculiar position. As far as schools are concerned, students' passage through the admissions process means they have already met a major unmarking criterion, making them 'competitive' as social beings who can now represent what the school stands for and how it defines itself. The fact that they are presented as 'change agents' and 'leaders'—social roles that do not arise from student culture, marked or unmarked—means that they have been selected for the symbolic capital they can give their school. This allows the schools to show themselves to each other and to their trustees and donor organizations as neoliberal incubators. At the same time, these students must navigate day-to-day social lives in their classes and with other students while figuring out unfamiliar norms and rules with no readily available guide. They never know when they are going to encounter attitudes or practices, routinely experienced as microaggressions (often not so micro), that reinforce racialized assumptions. Schools pay nowhere near enough attention to the daily stresses and demands experienced by students whose faces and stories provide them with such benefits. If policies were to be put in place that recognize and effectively address the racializing realities that students face, what race means in such schools might actually be affected. Otherwise, neoliberal diversity practices do little more than idealize a marketable version of institutional life.

Some Basic Semiotics

This book builds on some key semiotic concepts which I will set out and explain at this point, indicating where they will arise in the book.

Most important (and briefly discussed earlier) is the idea of a *construct*. Race, ethnicity, diversity, and so on are all constructs—ways of imagining social markedness in terms of physical features, place of origin, ancestry, culture, and so on. But they are not the same as these markers, in the same way that kinship is imagined in terms of, but is not the same as, biology (Schneider 1968: 115) or that accents are imagined in terms of, but are not the same as, phonology (Urciuoli 1996: 124). Kinship and accents are social classifications

based on constructions of types of people. So too are race, ethnicity, and diversity.

People generally imagine social categories, including race, ethnicity, and diversity, as clearly opposed, and demarcated by ‘bright lines.’ People also rank their membership as better/worse, higher/lower, right/wrong, and so on. As US social categories, they are thought of as types of person; the person being, in Schneider’s terms, a cultural unit, “culturally defined and distinguished as an entity” (Schneider 1968: 2) that exists in a larger system. For instance, Schneider argues that units called “relatives” operate in a cultural system called “kinship” in which they manifest key values. Such constructs are real precisely *because* they are interpreted as elements of cultural systems.

This brings us to the next important point, how such constructions are created and sustained. They come into being through discourse. People think with them and talk about them. Drawing from Jakobson ([1957] 1971), Silverstein (1976) points out the fundamentally indexical nature of language. Indexical here means (roughly) connected: any and all use of language, in any channel (spoken, written, signed) is linked to social life, and ultimately what people regard as linguistic meaning depends on that capacity: that is why meaning is variable, often hard to pin down, and continually subject to change.²⁸ Discourse can operate in ways that leave interpretations as they are and reinforce existing ways of understanding the world, or it can shift perspectives, bring about new understandings, and fundamentally change how people see the world. In such ways, it can be performative (or as Silverstein has put it, “indexically creative”). What people do with language is always connected to an immediate context and through that to the larger structuring principles (such as class, race, gender) that shape immediate context. Everything people do in discourse—what they say, how, to whom, and why they say it—is linked to what they already recognize and understand among those who share their social world as shaped by those larger structures. Everything that is real to people is real because of that dynamic.²⁹ It is thus important to recognize that there is no such thing as ‘just a construction.’ Whatever is real to people has been conceptualized and discursively shaped, whether naturally occurring physical objects (rocks), artificial objects (houses), inferences from behaviors of physical objects (gravity), abstractions of multiple dynamics and conditions (the economy), social values (justice), and so on and so on.³⁰ All ‘facts,’ however concrete or abstract, are (in Durkheim’s sense) social in that people work out knowledge of them through discourse, which takes place in structured

(by class, gender, race, etc.) social relations,³¹ worked out through interconnected interpretive processes in which reference based on denotation (‘dictionary meaning’) plays a much smaller role than most people think. This continual semiotic engagement (meaning that all interaction, including discourse, is a continual interpretive process) is organized metasemiotically, the ‘meta’ prefix indicating the operation of a set of principles (more often than not implicit) that guides interpretation of specific instances, so that they all fit more or less into a generally coherent way of thinking.³²

This brings us to the next point: how does *diversity* as a social construct come to have different meanings for different people in different contexts. This question could be asked of any term and any concept; in this book it is an especially important point, as it ties into how college marketing works, how internal college administration works, what student life is like, and what goes on in the classroom. What people recognize as real is produced by the register they use. Because all language use is embedded in social relations, people adjust the forms they use and the interpretation of those forms to what they are doing. Registers are characterized by co-occurring forms, usages, and functions (interpretations linked to or indexing context), and while the overall pattern of these is relatively stable, forms and functions can shift or drop from use, and new forms can appear, taking on functions compatible with those already existing. The potential for change exists in each act of discourse.³³ Registers across the college differ in part because different college offices have different jobs, but even more so because people in them have different ways of seeing themselves and what they are doing in relation to the college and each other. The contrast between different offices and faculty and students is especially vivid.

Here the concept of chronotope is of some use. How people experience language registers is grounded in the times and places of that experience, and the relationships in which that experience takes place. Drawing from Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of literary chronotope, the time–space setting shared by characters that gives meaningful coherence to their actions (and thus the plot), one can also understand how people’s experience of discourse in particular relations grounded in shared times and places (i.e., register) can become meaningful to them, can take on a “chronotopic character” (Silverstein 2005: 6), “a semiotic representation of time and place peopled by certain social types” (Agha 2007b: 321). The ‘figured world’ of Holland et al. (1998) is fundamentally chronotopic. In such worlds, people come to see

themselves grounded in their own story. There are the stories told by the OIA in their marketing narratives, as we see in Chapter 2. There are discourses by diversity administrators about faculty, students, and themselves as we see in Chapter 3. There are those told by socially marked students, especially students of color, as we see in Chapters 4 and 5. And there are those told by faculty about themselves and their students, as we see in Chapter 6. For example, the OIA and Admissions use *diversity* mostly in text, creating a glowing picture of the college's promise. This promise consists of pictures and stories about (mostly) students of color, embodiments of Diverse Good Students, investing markedness with neoliberal value, especially displayed as liberal arts soft skills (more on that in Chapter 1) that show the College to best advantage. This is a marketing story but it is also meant to be taken as real, as how the college should really be seen. By contrast, the diversity administrators we hear from in Chapter 3 use diversity in ways that locate where the institution falls short; and in chapters 4 and 5, as students talk about their college life, their stories about diversity point to the gap between their experiences and unkept institutional promises. In Chapter 6, we see diversity as part of an expert discourse, where outside experts hired by the Dean of Faculty Office take authority over what it is and how to get it, even though many faculty themselves specialize in historical or literary or social or biological aspects of diversity. In each instance, we see diversity not only in different registers but as an element of very different stories.

Throughout the book, we see the strategic use of semantically variable terms (like *diversity*) in ways that I call 'strategically deployable shifters' (Urciuoli 2003, 2008). Such terms may appear referential (conveying information), but their semantic indeterminacy allows them to align the user with a particular set of interests. This is the primary function of the use of 'buzz words' in corporate and corporate-linked discourses. Semantic content takes second place to casting the organization, and those speaking for it, in an optimal light. Such usages are shifters insofar as their referential value depends on other elements of context relative to the speaker (or writer),³⁴ and they are strategic because their semantic indeterminacy allows users to align them with other terms of interest to addressees (making it an index of addressivity; see below). Terms like *skills*, *culture*, *excellence*, *leadership*, *communication*, and *diversity* are routinely strung together in neoliberal discourse, as is seen in the following language from Loden's website, which aligns the values suggested by the italicized words with the status of "we" professionals: "As a firm known for *innovation*

in *diversity* and *leadership* theory as well as training design, we attract highly *skilled* and experienced professionals.”³⁵ Loden’s model of the diverse individual also exemplifies another semiotic principle at work here, that of metaculture (Urban 2001), the metasemiotic frames that accelerate the movement of cultural formations through social worlds. Urban particularly notes the central place of the idea of innovation in contemporary metaculture, and the instrumentality of metacultural texts (such as reviews) in that movement. Texts by diversity innovators, as Loden, Rasmussen and Roe, and others in the 1990s portrayed themselves, play just this role, moving this ‘innovative’ notion of diversity through the corporate world into the academic world through the services of diversity trainers who bring these texts with them when they are hired as consultants in colleges and universities. We meet such specialists in Chapter 6.

Such texts, heavily invested with the gloss of neoliberal modernity, establish links within and across institutions. Their very existence as published texts, apparently separate from the social processes producing them (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996), is register-specific, enhancing their capacity to authorize scaling projects (Carr and Lempert 2016: 8) that produce a “view from nowhere” (Irvine and Gal 2000). But as Irvine (2016) and Gal (2016) remind us, such universalizing ‘big picture’ scales certainly do incorporate a perspective. Whoever authorizes the scale also determines what the type is and what serve as tokens of the type. The scaling project of concern here is the universal grid of the ‘official’ OMB categories entextualized around 1970. In this ‘big picture’ that swamps other perspectives, students and faculty of color serve the institution as tokens of the type *diversity*, countable units for comparing institutions; their actual experience is irrelevant: an instance of predatory scaling (Irvine 2016).

Given the muscle behind such corporatized notions of diversity, they get much less institutional traction than one might expect. This is because of who those corporatized discourses are directed to—that is to say, their addressivity (Bakhtin 1986: 95), the qualities of discourse that point to their addressees. Most corporatized discourses are aimed outside the institution: the OIA uses it to address past students and possible donors, while Admissions uses it to address future students and their parents—all addressees whose buy-in is really important. There are a few such addressivity markers in discourse directed internally (from the dean of students and dean of faculty offices), but they are nowhere near as strategically deployed, nor do they seek the same kind of buy-in. Students have other concerns, though they will

become major addressees when they graduate. As to faculty, they tend to ignore it unless, as we see in Chapter 6, they are a captive audience.

Finally, threaded throughout the book (and central to the nature and function of liberal arts institutions) are Bourdieu's (1979, 1991) notions of habitus and of cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Habitus is the complex of taken-for-granted understandings that organize how people interpret, respond, and otherwise organize their social (and therefore discursive) interactions; it is structured by the conditions, especially class and race, in which people are socialized. It shapes the development of registers and the chronotopic basis of social relations. It corresponds to the idea of primary socialization shaping what Berger and Luckmann (1966) posit as the basis for social reality. These are all ways (rooted in Weber and Durkheim) in which various theorists have tried to get at what shapes people's social life. Bourdieu's forms of capital (rooted in Marx) serve to enhance and reinforce access to economic advantage: cultural capital as forms of knowledge accruing from structural (especially class) advantage; social capital as forms of advantageous social relations (such as well-placed friends and associates); and symbolic capital as the gloss or prestige accruing to such relations, and to the institutions they attend and inhabit. Whatever else liberal arts college life is about, it involves either extending a class/race-advantaged habitus of childhood and adolescence into college, or it involves moving from a less advantaged habitus into a world of class and race privilege, and if possible, benefiting from the cultural, social, and symbolic capital that can come with such a move. If it's the latter, it ain't easy.

Where This Book Is Going, Chapter by Chapter

Chapter 1 ("What is liberal arts education 'for'?") examines the nature of US liberal arts education, anchored historically in white public space, and its role in shaping neoliberal diversity. Liberal arts education in the United States grew out of the precolonial colleges, grounded in the Enlightenment philosophy of education, whose broad mission was to educate for character rather than to train for a specific career or profession. But the history of higher education confounds that simple opposition. Despite at least two centuries of academic ideologies about molding young minds, educational content operates in tandem with student social life, fraternities, and sports that bond students and give alumni happy memories. That social life is also at least as much a source of social and symbolic capital as are academics. From the

beginnings of corporate expansion right after the Civil War, degrees from elite colleges gave young men an edge that had little to do with whether their college had a conservative core curriculum or a wide range of electives. That through-line from ‘good’ colleges and universities to the corporate world became, in the 1990s and 2000s, reinscribed in neoliberal terms in which academic specifics give way to the ‘soft skills’ that make a graduate a desirable corporate hire. Despite the heated arguments of the 1980s about ‘multicultural curricula’ versus ‘Western civilization,’ the 1990s also saw what had been about the politics of difference turned into neoliberal diversity, a sort of soft skill that one could acquire by going to a college with lots of it. The very notion of diversity thus entered the (neo)liberal arts repertoire.

Chapter 2 (“Marketing and Admissions: Regimenting the imagery of markedness”) begins the ethnographic examination of the College with the work of the Office of Institutional Advancement (OIA) and of Admissions. The OIA is responsible for the school’s external image, generating the signs of the college’s identity, or brand, using the college website to project an idealized vision of student life for prospective students, parents, and donor organizations. The website is the home of the Good Student—healthy, attractive, productive—and its subset, the Diverse Good Student, differing only in appearance and personal background. Reality intrudes once students arrive at the school, and continues to intrude when they become alumni. The happiest (and most generous) alumni tend to be the whitest and most successful; alumni of color have an understandable ambivalence toward the school, which pays little attention to the sources of that ambivalence.

Chapter 3 (“The administrative structures of student life”) takes up the work of the Dean of Students Office, the inward-facing office that structures student life and sociality. Many of its policies and practices are about getting students to live and act as community members, which (not surprisingly) is easier to construct and project than to achieve. We see how administrators try to set up a safe and productive life for students with marked social identities and we see some of the issues students and administrators encounter. We also see how socially marked students do their bit for the school through cultural organizations, and the consequences of that work for their college experience. The more marked students are, the more they are interpellated to act as exemplary college citizens, a role that requires cultural capital that is more likely to be in short supply for students of color than for most white students, especially when class privilege plays a role.

Chapter 4 (“Turning markedness into culture”) examines college life among students classifying themselves as Latino/a, black, Asian, LGBTQ, or international—their friendships and alliances, their work in student organizations, and their experience in private societies and athletics, as they shape and reshape their sense of who they are and what those demographic labels can mean as identities. What does it mean to shift from locally inflected identities (Cuban from Miami, Chinese from Boston, Haitian from Brooklyn) to broader categories? How does participation in the cultural organizations, and the friendships formed there, supply content for these identities? How does it ‘preserve culture’? What kind of work does it take just to live as socially marked students? What does the institution expect from them, and where does the institution come up short? Why should it be the mission of the ‘cultural’ (black, Latino, Asian, LGBTQ, and international) student organizations to ‘educate the community’, and what does that mean? Why is it their job to show the unmarked how markedness works?

Chapter 5 (“Students just wanna have fun”) shows what ‘student fun’ is for most unmarked students, and how they are able to challenge boundaries in ways not represented in college marketing. Private societies (fraternities and sororities), technically independent of the college, occupy anomalous but important social space. Fraternities particularly generate a great deal of social and symbolic capital: with chapters across schools, they unite past and present students in an identity affiliated with but not controlled by any one school. But their activities can also embarrass the school, and the offices of Student Life and Residential Life work hard to patrol them. Fraternities play a greater role than ‘official’ student organizations in the school’s social life: hosting parties with alcohol is widely considered by members and non-members to be their main function. They also generate a great deal of school feeling among alumni, whose fond memories can move them to contribute generously, as the OIA is aware. Such ‘fun’ may take the form of transgressive play, as at ‘theme’ parties that play on ethnic/race, gender, and class stereotypes, and fitting into or challenging this world of unmarked sociality can be tricky for socially marked students.

Chapter 6 (“Where is the faculty in all this?”) examines what faculty think diversity is, and how they address issues of race, class, and gender in their courses and beyond the classroom. We see how faculty notions of diversity carry little weight with the Dean of Faculty Office in the recruitment of faculty of color; rather such searches are structured and cast, based on expert advice, in ways that use neoliberal

logic to improve numbers. From the perspective of the president and trustees, faculty diversity numbers are part of the College's reputation, seen in comparison with peer school numbers. What does not command administrative attention is what college life is like for faculty of color, especially young women. Compounding that is the need felt by faculty of color to serve as role models for their students.

In the end, neoliberal diversity cannot be equated with the different kinds of social markedness that it supposedly represents. Rather, it is part of a larger institutional and organizational pattern, found far beyond the confines of academe, of pointing to a performance of something the institution calls *diversity* while holding on, as much as possible, to elements that allow for (as Mohanty put it earlier) business as usual, maintaining most of the privilege of white public space without that space actually 'looking white.' In doing so, it also exemplifies what Leong (2021) calls *identity capitalism*, whereby those with privileged identities benefit from association with those with non-privileged identity, in ways that reinforce the former's position.

Notes

1. <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-liberal-arts-colleges>, accessed 3 November 2020.
2. NESCAC consists of eleven private colleges and small universities whose men's and women's athletic teams regularly play each other. <https://nescac.com/index.aspx>, accessed 3 November 2020.
3. See also Thelin 2004 for a discussion of the emergence of intercollegiate sports conferences.
4. <https://diversity.williams.edu/>, accessed 3 November 2020.
5. <https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/diversity/office-of-diversity-equity-inclusion>, accessed 3 November 2020.
6. <https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/diversity>, accessed 3 November 2020.
7. <https://www.middlebury.edu/college/student-life/diversity-equity-inclusion>, accessed 24 August 2021.
8. <http://www.middlebury.edu/about/mission>, accessed 3 November 2020.
9. The board consists of alumni trustees elected for a non-renewable four-year term, charter trustees elected for a renewable six-year term, and life trustees elected from among charter trustees who have served at least seven years. The voting trustees are alumni and charter. The trustees' relation to the school is mediated by the OIA but they have considerable authority over the school's direction.
10. <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-liberal-arts-colleges/campus-ethnic-diversity>, accessed 5 November 2020.

11. Ethnographic work on named institutions is more likely to be of universities, such as the decade-long project of student ethnography overseen by Nancy Abelmann and Bill Kelleher at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (Hunter and Abelmann 2013).
12. I adapt my notion of social markedness from concepts of semiotic and linguistic markedness. Drawing on Trubetzkoy's work on phonological oppositions, Roman Jakobson examined sound systems and grammatical systems as oppositions of marked and unmarked elements (see, e.g., Jakobson [1957]1971). The unmarked member of the opposition is the basic, more general member of the category, while the marked member has or lacks some quality that makes it more specific compared to the unmarked. A non-linguistic example of a markedness opposition might be among birds. As birds, sparrows or eagles are 'unmarked' in that they fly, which is considered a typical bird characteristic, whereas penguins are 'marked' as birds as they do not fly. In general, social terms, the unmarked is what people regard as typical, taken for granted, and the marked stands out as atypical in some key way. Even with birds this is a cultural construction in that any given bird might be perceived by observers as having some non-typical quality, depending on what counts as typical. (Ellen and Reason 1979 provide an excellent discussion on social constructions of classification.)
13. Rossiter (2003: 109) explains neoliberalism as an imaginary, characterized by a "managerialist demand for the products of intellectual labour—knowledge coded as intellectual property, which makes possible the commodity object—to be accountable to the logic of exchange-value and market mechanisms. The neoliberal imaginary seeks to subject all socio-cultural practices to the laws of the market, which are one manifestation, albeit limited, of the logic of capital."
14. See also Shore and Wright 2015.
15. See Urciuoli 1996 on racialization and ethnicization; and Urciuoli 2020 on that and neoliberal diversity.
16. That is, they are deictic, indicating time, space, or personal position relative to the speaker at the moment of speaking. Deixis is grammatically encoded in time and space adverbs such as here/there and then/now, verb tenses, and personal pronouns. (See Benveniste 1971: 217–30; Jakobson [1957] 1971 analyzed them as shifters.)
17. This can also be understood in terms of what Silverstein (2003b: 534) terms ethnolinguistic recognition, in which relations of markedness move downward from a privileged, unmarked 'top,' the boundaries of which are the cumulative outcome of myriad "mutually reinforcing" discursive acts in which social actors "create and sustain an 'us' different from either 'you' or 'them.'" That topmost position is the position of least markedness (i.e., whiteness), and the locus of maximum prestige and power.
18. In Harrison's (1995) review of anthropological approaches to race, she notes how long it took mainstream anthropology to follow the lead of African American social scientists Du Bois and St. Clair Drake in theorizing race as historically emergent from social, economic, and political conditions; treating the production of whiteness and non-whiteness as mutually constitutive began

engaging social scientists in the 1980s. Harrison, like Mullings, notes historical shifts of specific racializations within a perduring white/non-white polarity. Analyses by, among others, Omi and Winant (1986), Domínguez (1986), Roediger (1991), Frankenberg (1993), Allen (1994), Ignatiev (1995), Haney Lopez (1996), Brodtkin (1998), Jacobson (1998), Lipsitz (1998), Bonilla-Silva (2003), Bush (2004), and Feagin (2009) lay out the range of social and historical contingencies through which varying modes of whiteness and non-whiteness are mutually constituted, and the processes through which whiteness operates as a ‘ground’ against which ‘figures’ of non-whiteness take on specific and shifting historical meaning.

19. Brodtkin (1998) provides a wonderful account of three generations of her Jewish family’s journey to ‘whiteness.’
20. There is a persistent “possessive investment in whiteness” (Lipsitz 1998) at work here, namely the reluctance of many whites, including white ethnics, to see more recent immigrants in anything other than racialized terms. So ethnicized unmarkedness remains elusive for many immigrant people in the United States, and unsettling eruptions of racialization are particularly aimed at the public use of Spanish, Arabic, or other languages associated with ‘non-white’ speakers. As Zentella (1996) and Santa Ana (2002) have shown, US media and politicians have a history of casting Latinos and their language as a dangerous, undifferentiated, disordered mass. Rosa and Flores (2017) explain this as raciolinguistic, the naturalized co-construction of linguistic and racial typifications linked to legacies of colonialization and slavery. (For analysis of contrasting racializing and ethnicizing depictions of the same Central American immigrants, see Coutin and Chock 1995.) The idea of languages other than English having value has limited traction in the US. Elsewhere in the world language is routinely seen as a neoliberal skill set (see e.g., Duchêne and Heller 2012) based on its capacity for providing added value (Jaffe 2007).
21. Drawing on his experience as a National Science Foundation proposal reviewer, Brenneis shows how the proposal forms reflect the conditions and interests framing their construction, including classifications of information (boxes to be checked) that proposal writers must choose from. Brenneis also points out the forms’ explicit reference to NSF’s accountability to the interests of stakeholders, i.e., “those who have a beneficial interest in the results of some activity” (2006: 62). Even more interesting is the neoliberal rationale offered by NSF for encouraging proposals from underrepresented social groups—or as NSF calls them, ‘diverse stakeholders’—not to level a historically uneven playing field but because of the benefits accruing to society at large.
22. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Revisions-to-the-Standards-for-the-Classification-of-Federal-Data-on-Race-and-Ethnicity-October30-1997.pdf> accessed 11-9-2020 as “race/ethnic standards for federal statistics and administrative reporting” by Office of Management and Budget Directive 15 (<https://wonder.cdc.gov/wonder/help/populations/bridged-race/directive15.html>, accessed 9 November 2020).
23. See Yanow 2003, chapters 2 and 3, for an extensive discussion of the anomalies in these categories.

24. <http://www.loden.com/Site/Dimensions.html>, accessed 9 November 2020. Thanks to Susan Mason for this background.
25. A particularly interesting implementation of diversity semiotics is analyzed by Mena and García (2020) as what they term the ‘converse racialization’ strategies deployed by the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley to frame its Spanish language program. By ‘converse racialization’ Mena and García mean strategies pointing toward unmarkedness and away from any racial identification, including white.
26. <https://www.possefoundation.org>, accessed 24 August 2021.
27. It took a few years for the OIA to add *ability* to this list. One might ask why not *age* as well; perhaps the list was composed for students to see themselves in it.
28. Indexes can also be understood as ‘pointing to’ some element of context. Silverstein’s work in indexicality draws on the work of Roman Jakobson ([1957] 1971 and elsewhere) and of C.S. Peirce (1955), who first developed the notion of tripartite signification (iconicity, indexicality, symbolic) depending on the relation of sign (that which is interpreted) to what is signified (object) to the mental process of signification (interpretant). This is further discussed in Chapter 3. See also Silverstein (1976) and Parmentier (1994) for helpful discussion.
29. Many readers will here recognize Bourdieu’s (1979) notion of habitus.
30. There is a considerable literature on the social basis of reality construction, more than I have room to discuss here, but Berger and Luckmann (1966) is a good place to start.
31. This continual process of interpretation through signs linked to context is called semiotic mediation; see Mertz and Parmentier 1985.
32. See also Parmentier 1994 (after Silverstein 1993) on metasemiotic regimentation, where people are directed, often covertly, toward preferred or dominant patterns of interpretation.
33. As Agha (2007a: 80) puts it, registers are usefully thought of as “repertoire(s) of performable signs” that are “products (or precipitates) of human activity” and, at the same time, “sociohistorical process(es).”
34. A shifter is an indexical grammatical element (word or morpheme) whose “referential value ... depends on the presupposition of its pragmatic value” (Silverstein 1976: 24, from Jakobson [1957] 1971). In English, shifters include deictic time or space adverbs (now/then, here/there), demonstratives (this/that), verb tenses (present, past, future), and personal pronouns (I, we, you, s/he, it, they). The referential value of these depends on the speaker’s position (presupposed pragmatic value) in time or place, as well as social position (“we don’t do that here” aligning *we* and *here* in opposition to *that*). In that they ‘point’ to/from a speaker position, such elements are deictic.
35. http://www.loden.com/Web_Staff/Consulting.html, accessed 9 November 2020. Italics mine.