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Life Behind Flower Covered Comforters:
A New Critical Analysis of Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*
Kimberly Gutierrez

Private educational institutions are structures of domination and subordination; this is evident throughout Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*, published in 2005. The novel takes place in a highly respected and renowned boarding school named Ault, which Lee Fiora has the great "privilege" of attending. Her life, like that of other underprivileged students and faculty members, drastically changed when she moved from her lower middle class hometown of South Bend, Indiana to the wealthy state of Massachusetts. At Ault, underrepresented students and teachers have to deal with the repercussions of being a minority due to their socio-economic and ethnic background. While Ault's reputation benefits from minorities' attendance, minorities have a difficult time finding acceptance. Having lower-middle class and racial minority students at schools that advance classism and prejudice can lead to the students' oppression, which leads to a detachment of self and ultimately a longing to be someone else. This oppression is demonstrated through the manner in which Ault exploits, marginalizes, and internalizes inferiority in students.

Because private schools tend to be composed of affluent white students, they are in the process of diversifying their racial and economic demographics. They hope that this movement will help foster a more inclusive community, which will inherently aid the school's reputation. The school benefits to a greater degree from the students and faculty than the students and faculty do from the school; the benefits are not reciprocal. Little was accepted because she "was a star in cross-country and was supposed to be even better at basketball" (Sittenfeld 14). The idea that black people are only good at running and basketball furthers ethnic stereotypes and fails to acknowledge Little's intellectual capabilities; Ault's sole reason for accepting Little was to

secure athletic excellence. The school did not think about how Little would have a difficult time fitting in or paying the seventy dollars for cross country warm-ups (Sittenfeld 35).

Minority teachers do not escape from being taken advantage of either; Ms. Moray's students spent more time criticizing her outfit and labeling her as "LMC" than learning from her. Ault never thought about how she would be ridiculed by the privileged students due to her humble background, making it impossible for her to gain respect. She has to deal with Darden Pittard portraying Uncle Tom as a pimp even though Uncle Tom is a *Christ* figure (Sittenfeld 142). Ms. Moray serves as a cultural police in the classroom, reminding Aspeth, Dede, and Darden that "internalized racism is still racism" (Sittenfeld 143). Minorities should not have to serve as educational tools in the classroom by routinely pointing out cultural misrepresentations. If Ms. Moray had not been hired by Ault perhaps no one would have corrected these students because no other professor would have found this scene from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as problematic as she did due to her experiences. The minority students and teachers have to unjustly give up their talents and culture in exchange for Ault's esteemed education.

The natural process of diversification leads to marginalization; throwing minority students into the midst of the majority makes them feel ostracized. Ault has a history of being a white institution, yet it tries to deny it. The Ault faculty asks its tour guides to point out to prospective students that Martin Luther King once spoke there, this being at a time when "there hadn't been a single black student enrolled in the school" (Sittenfeld 190). This deceives prospective students into believing that Ault celebrates diversity, when in reality there is a limited number of students of color. Darden Pittard is described as the "class's cool black guy" as if this were a position that needs to be fulfilled at every school (Sittenfeld 41). Darden is probably the only student of color in the novel who is widely accepted at the school; however

this is only because his character serves as entertainment for others. Kevin Brown, the only other black student at Ault, is not considered “cool” because he enjoys studying. Even though both of his parents are professors, Kevin still does not fit into Ault’s social strata due to his race. During her short time at Ault, Little was the only black girl in her dorm (Sittenfeld 14). The physical marginalization from people she ethnically identifies with made her fear discrimination and racism in her own dorm; she felt like she could not rely on anyone if she needed help.

After being at an institution like Ault students that once felt like they were being taken advantage of or marginalized begin to conform and internalize their inferiority. This is evident through the skit Darden performed from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* but it is also demonstrated through Lee as she progresses through high school. At the beginning of her education at Ault, Lee realizes that there are students just as intelligent as she. Nothing distinguishes her from others (Sittenfeld 5). She uses this excuse throughout the rest of her time at Ault to pity herself academically, making herself feel inferior to her classmates. As Martha tries to help her with the math exam problems, Lee repeatedly says, “I can’t do these”; she does not even try. Lee’s curiosity and meticulous attitude are signs of the intelligence she has been hiding from herself due to her internalized inferiority.

As Lee spends more time at Ault, she also becomes ashamed of her socio-economic status and wants no one to find out that she is there through a scholarship (Sittenfeld 392). Scholarships are an award to be proud of but Lee cannot express her honor because she fears that people who exist in Ault’s universe of privilege might judge her. She wishes to be part of those who can have flowered comforters, believing that it will help her fit into Ault’s social hierarchy. She has internalized that in order to be accepted and liked at Ault, one has to be financially well off.

Minority students and faculty member cannot be the only ones with the task of diversifying schools. This change must begin through classes such as Introduction to Black Studies or Issues in Feminism. Whenever people are used as educational tools for the privileged, the privileged do not acquire much understanding; however, the minorities begin to realize their status in society. This realization makes the minority want to reinvent themselves into someone they wrongly desire to be.

Works Cited

Sittenfeld, Curtis. *Prep*. New York: Random House, 2005. Print.