Let me begin with a story. Fifteen years ago I enrolled at St. Paul’s School to begin my time at one of the nation’s most elite boarding schools. As I unpacked my room I noticed something quite startling: I was surrounded by Black and Latino boys. Within a day I realized that it was not the case that St. Paul’s was an incredibly racially diverse place, rather I had been assigned to a minority student dorm. Students of color were largely sequestered into two houses: one for girls and one for boys. The other eighteen houses on campus were overwhelmingly filled with those whom you would expect to be at a school that educates families like the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts: white, wealthy elites. Many were entitled, feeling that lineage, family, and history were essential to belonging at St. Paul’s. Ten years later I returned to the school as a faculty member and researcher. Almost immediately I noticed that the sequestering of non-whites was a relic of the past. But sequestering practices were not over; a new group found themselves isolated in single dorm. Today it is the entitled students who are sequestered - some of whom come from the most established American families, families with long ties to St. Paul’s and the Ivy League. What happened at St. Paul’s School?

This anecdote begins a tale I wish to tell about the 21st century elite. My project is a cultural study of those at the very top of our social hierarchy. American elites have often been read as exceptions to their European counterparts - we Americans have no nobility and are particularly fond of our narratives of mobility. Yet we know comparatively little about our elites: how they acquire, maintain, and protect their positions. What do the contemporary American elite look like? How are they educated? What do they learn about the world around them, their place in it, and how to interact within it? And how have they adapted to the changing social environment of the past 50 years? How have they dealt with the demands of openness by those who for much of modern history have been excluded from their roles?

In order to address these questions I lived, taught, and studied at St. Paul’s School. Since its inception St. Paul’s has been home to America’s East Coast social elite. Along with one or two other schools it is considered one of the top boarding schools in the nation. It is incredibly wealthy, with an endowment of about $500 million, or about $1 million per pupil. The college its students are most likely to attend is Harvard, followed by Brown, the University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth, Yale, Cornell, Princeton, and Stanford. It is coeducational and racial and economically diverse. Through an account of my year living and teaching at St. Paul’s I provide insights into the everyday lives of America’s elite; I also explore how an adolescent elite are educated and formed in the 21st century.

I argue that in order to understand the new elite, we must understand privilege. Whereas in the past elites were entitled - valuing the “right” breeding, connections, and culture - new elites develop privilege: a sense of self and a mode of interaction that advantages them. New elites de-emphasize what you know about the world (cultural knowledge) or who you know within it
(social capital) and instead highlight how you act in and approach it. This is a particularly contemporary American approach to being an elite. Who you are or where you are from does not matter; instead, it is what you have done. Students at St. Paul’s increasingly explain their advantaged position relative the to work they have done and the talents they have cultivated. The story that the new elite tell is not one of entitlement, instead it is one that mobilizes the American codes of merit and hard work. And part of the of way in which institutions like St. Paul’s and the Ivy League tell this story is to look less and less like an exclusive (discriminatory) yacht club, and more and more like a microcosm of our diverse social world.

Yet this narrative of merit and hard work is in many ways a useful fiction. Though students from St. Paul’s get into elite colleges at astonishing rates, they are on average less qualified than their public school educated college peers. Their grades and standardized test scores are lower. Once in elite colleges students from St. Paul’s continue to underperform their public school classmates. But as they leave college and begin their careers students from St. Paul’s who have underperformed the rest find that their earnings are higher. While students from St. Paul’s embrace an American Dream, their trajectory suggests that such a dream is more of a privileged reality for them and a fantasy for others. In short, I argue that being a 21st century elite is not just about hard work and merit; privilege matters - it is about embodying an orientation to the world and set of relationships with your fellow man. Such privilege is what St. Paul’s teaches its students.

Compared to elites of the recent past, my story is the story of American promise. It is the story of the transformation of the world from one of social exclusion and entitlements to one of openness and merit. It is the story of the minority student dorm dissolving and the entitled sequestering emerging. And it is the story of elites rejecting social closure and embracing the ideals of an open society. In reflecting upon life at St. Paul’s School I hope to provide insights into our understanding of a group we know so little about (elites) and more importantly, the character of our 21st century lives.

Yet I end by tempering this optimism and my story of promise. Students from St. Paul’s are privileged - they are advantaged over their public school peers even in the face of their poorer academic performance. My story of an elite embracing the American Dream happens in a backdrop of increasing social inequality. While the elites have welcomed those who before were kept outside their doors - the poor, nonwhites, women - our world is marked by increasing inequality and economic uncertainty. The new elite exist in the same world the rest of us do - feeling an anxiety at a return to a new Gilded Age of enormous wealth for some and deprivation for many. I do not forget that elites continue to enjoy the privileges garnered at exclusive institutions like boarding schools. This work ends by asking what the new elite can tell us about an increasingly open yet unequal society; what I call, “the new inequality.”
Chapter 1: The Emergence of a New Elite
I begin with a narrative of transformation. Within the past fifty years Americans have experienced a radical social change. We can think of this as the open society - social exclusion and entitlements are no longer sustainable. Instead Americans believe in the promise of mobility for all regardless of race, heritage, or gender. The new elite develop within this social context. And unlike those of the Gilded Age who relied on capital, today’s elite are increasingly reliant upon their own work for their wealth. Onto this context I provide an introduction to boarding schools and St. Paul’s in particular. Boarding schools are not traditionally heralded as places of openness. During the 19th century, as elites felt threatened by new immigrants, they built institutions like St. Paul’s to isolate and morally protect their children. Yet as the world has changed, so has St. Paul’s. As early as 1960 the school claimed to be a microcosm of the larger world. And today its diversity is a matter of hard work and pride. Its continued educational prominence, its history as a place for educating American elites, its diversity, and the advantages it provides its graduates make St. Paul’s an ideal place to understand the new elite.

Chapter 2: Finding One’s Place at a Privileged Prep School
In this chapter I outline how students understand the relationships at St. Paul’s School and their position within them. Students learn the importance of their own hard work and talents to success. They also learn to embrace the principles of the open society. However, they do not learn that such an open society means equality. Far from it: students learn that the enduring characteristic of all social relations is hierarchy. Inequality is fundamental. Within the open society there are those on the top and those at the bottom. Yet such positions are not ascribed through inheritance, instead they are achieved through talent and work. Finding one’s place at St. Paul’s means learning the relentlessness of hierarchical relations, but with a twist: this hierarchy is not like that of old where ceilings limit how far up you can climb. Instead students learn the importance of treating hierarchical relations like ladders that allow for advancement.

Chapter 3: Learning to be Comfortable with Privilege
Many of the students who are at St. Paul’s are from already privileged backgrounds. Well over half its families can afford $40,000/year for high school. It is not unreasonable to think that the already advantaged students have an easier time with finding their place at the school and learning to manage the hierarchical relations. Yet while living at St. Paul’s I found something quite different: adjusting to life at the school was difficult for everyone. Those students who acted as if they already knew the relations of the school and their place were rejected as entitled. Knowledge was not something the advantaged few could have and exclude others from. Instead, in learning to be comfortable at the school students rely upon experiences. This represents a shift from the logic of the old elite: who you are (heritage), to that of the new elite: what you have done. The experiences that produce comfort or ease serve to embrace the open society insofar as it is not inheritance but work that marks the new elite. In this sense privilege is not something you are born with, instead it is something you learn to develop and cultivate.

Chapter 4: The Practice of Privilege
What does “knowing how to carry oneself in the world” look like? Carrying forward my observation of the non-excludability of knowledge, in this chapter I outline the practice of privilege. At its core the practice of privilege is easy: acting easily in the world across a diverse set of social situations. Learning to be comfortable with privilege is not something that students
learn cognitively, instead it is a kind of embodied knowledge. Embodiment is an interactional resource. This insight is the major theoretical contribution of my work. In drawing on seemingly mundane acts of everyday life - from eating meals to dancing and dating - I outline how privilege becomes inscribed upon the bodies of students and how students are able to display their privilege through their interactions. I argue that such embodiment is important because it naturalizes what are social produced distinctions. In being embodied, privilege is not seen as a product of systematically produced advantage (inherited) but instead as a skill, talent, capacity - “who you are.” Working within the narrative of the open society students from St. Paul’s appear to naturally have what it takes to be successful.

**Chapter 5: Mobilizing Knowledge**

With the two previous chapters focusing on embodied ease and interactions, I pick up what I have largely dismissed: knowledge. I have not forgotten that St. Paul’s is a school; in this chapter I look to what students learn both in and out of classrooms. I argue that elites do not know more, they know differently. As the boundaries around knowledge have crumbled, the direction of the relationship between inequality and knowledge has reversed. Whereas for the old elite inequality meant that some were provided access to knowledge and others not (inequality causes differences in knowledge), the new elite suggest the exact opposite: it is differences in knowledge that produce inequality. The world is open, yet hierarchical. Students learn to think of the world not as a space of constraints, but instead as one of possibility. I extend the insights of ease in the world to students’ orientation to learning. In classrooms they are asked to think about both *Beowulf* and *Jaws*. Outside of classrooms they listen to classical music and hip hop. Rather than mobilizing what we might think of as “elite knowledge:” epic poetry, fine art and music, classical knowledge, the new elite learn these and anything else. Embracing the open society, they display a kind of radical egalitarianism in their knowledge acquisition. The new elite do not attempt to construct boundaries around their knowledge and protect such knowledge as a resource they have and others don’t. Instead, they display a kind of omnivorousness. Exclusivity is thus not an elite strategy; knowledge is not protected as an entitlement. Ironically, exclusivity marks the losers in the hierarchical, open society. From this perspective, inequality can be explained not by the practices of the elite but instead by those at the bottom. Their limited (exclusive) knowledge means they have not seized upon the fruits of newly open world.

**Chapter 6: The New Elite and the New Inequality**

In my conclusion, I pick from where I ended the fifth and final chapter of my ethnographic work - thinking about inequality. Many of our old models of inequality are about exclusion and protection. Throughout the 20th century the battles against inequality were battles of access: could women, Blacks, and other excluded groups be integrated into the highest institutions and positions in our society? These battles were largely won. Yet the results have not been what we imagined. The promise of the open society was not just more access, but more equality. This promise has proven to be a fiction. Over the past thirty years America has become less, not more equal. The 21st century is marked by a “new inequality” - an increasingly open yet unequal society. We have yet to fully make sense of this new inequality. Drawing on my insights from my ethnographic chapters, I begin this work. In short, I end by embracing the progress of the new elite, while warning that we have a massive task in front of us: making sense of and addressing the new inequality.