



SPEAKING OF
RACE
AND
CLASS

THE STUDENT
EXPERIENCE
AT AN ELITE
COLLEGE

ELIZABETH ARIES

Author of *Race and Class
Matters at an Elite College*

WITH RICHARD BERMAN

Speaking of Race and Class

*The Student Experience
at an Elite College*

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TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS
PHILADELPHIA

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122
www.temple.edu/tempress

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Published 2013

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Aries, Elizabeth.

Speaking of race and class : the student experience at an elite college /
Elizabeth Aries, Richard Berman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4399-0966-9 (hardback : alk. paper) —

ISBN 978-1-4399-0967-6 (paper : alk. paper) —

ISBN 978-1-4399-0968-3 (e-book) 1. Amherst College—Freshman—
Social conditions—Case studies. 2. Private universities and colleges—
Social aspects—Massachusetts—Amherst—Case studies. 3. Minority
college students—Massachusetts—Amherst—Social conditions—Case
studies. 4. College students—Massachusetts—Amherst—Social
conditions—Case studies. 5. Universities and colleges—Social aspects—
United States. 6. Elite (Social sciences)—United States. I. Berman,
Richard, 1948– II. Title.

LD156.A76 2012

378.744'23—dc23

2012015448

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the
American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence
of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992

Printed in the United States of America

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

Speaking of Race and Class

To Rose Oliver

Preface

This book is a continuation of a study I began in 2005. Its aim is to help us better understand how race and class shape students' experiences and learning on campus. In *Race and Class Matters at an Elite College* (2008), I described the challenges based on their race and class that fifty-eight students from four distinct groups (affluent black, affluent white, lower-income black, and lower-income white) faced and what they learned from living in a diverse community during their first year at Amherst College. The current book, written in collaboration with my husband, Richard Berman, presents the views of fifty-five of the original fifty-eight study participants as they looked back on what they experienced and learned over their four years at the college. In their final interviews in the spring of 2009, most of the students in the study agreed to give up confidentiality. They remain identified by their original pseudonyms, but their permission to use more identifying information has made it possible to bring individuals more sharply to life and to profile some students and their experiences more fully.

This book centers on students' voices. Because students answered questions in their interviews about topics that often they had not previously considered or spoken about, their speech was spontaneous and conversational. To improve readability, I have removed false starts and repetitions, including the repeated use of "like," "you know," "kind of," and "sort of." In this book, the voices of many students are heard, but students who were particularly representative of their group's concerns or who were particularly articulate are profiled in greater detail.

When I recruited the participants for my study in 2005, I explained that my goal was to gain information that could be used to make Amherst College a better place for its students. Since that time, this goal has expanded. I hope that the voices of these students will help all those in U.S. academia who are concerned with ensuring the success of every student, improving campus climates, and promoting diversity programming that will support students and help them learn from their differences.

Elizabeth Aries
January 2012

Acknowledgments

My deepest gratitude goes to the students who participated in this study. Their experiences over four years at Amherst College are the focus of this book. Their willingness to speak openly in their interviews about the challenges they faced and what they learned during their college careers has taught me an enormous amount about the lived experience of race and class on campus.

Very special thanks go to my summer research assistant, Southey Saul. She originally worked with me on the analysis of the freshman-year data, and I was extremely fortunate to have her return to assist with the analysis of the senior-year data. Southey's interest in and dedication to this project, her meticulous coding of the interview data, her skillful data analysis using SPSS statistical software, and her hard work and enthusiasm in the face of the many more tedious tasks were inspiring. I could not have asked for a better assistant. I was also very fortunate that Rebecca (Becky) Lieberman volunteered her time during her summer break from college to gain research experience by assisting with the data analysis. I greatly valued Becky's energy, commitment, and skills as a coder.

In order to write the final chapter to this book, which steps back from Amherst to look at the broader literature on diversity programming, I hired three wonderful students as research assistants: Tyler Chapman, Aleksandra (Sasha) Margolina, and Spencer Russell. They identified, read critically, and summarized articles from scores of publications,

working with consistent competence and enthusiasm. Their careful research, review, and summarization were invaluable to me.

I thank Nancy Aries, Rhonda Cobham-Sander, and Jessica Salvatore, who read chapters and offered references and feedback. My sincere appreciation goes to Micah Kleit at Temple University Press for his belief in my research and his support of this project, to Maryanne Alos for the wonderful job she did indexing the book, and to everyone at Temple University Press who has seen the book through to production.

This study could not have been carried out without funding. The research was supported in part by a grant from the Amherst College Faculty Research Award Program, as funded by the H. Axel Schupf '57 Fund for Intellectual Life.

My heartfelt thanks go to Richard Berman, my husband and cowriter, for his extraordinary commitment to this book and for his perseverance over the two-year writing process. I asked him to join me as coauthor because I knew that as a writer, he had the skills to bring the interview material to life in a way that I could not. Richard has an eye for narrative and a gift with words. A singer-songwriter by profession, Richard put his songwriting aside to help transform my academic writing into a much more engaging style. Involved in this project from the start, Richard conducted interviews with eight of the students at the beginning and the end of freshman year and with eighteen of the students in the final round of interviews. The students' incredible openness in the interviews that Richard conducted speaks to his remarkable ability to draw people out. He wrote the narratives about the students in this book and played a major editorial role in rewriting chapters to sharpen the focus, strengthen the organization, and present the issues in a clearer and more captivating style. His contribution to this book was a labor of love, for which I am forever deeply thankful. His faith in the importance of this work has never wavered.

Elizabeth Aries
January 2012

I join Elizabeth in thanking the students whose voices are the focus of this book and whose generous openness shed so much light on the experience of race and class at Amherst. I thank you, Elizabeth, for giving me the opportunity to be a part of this important study. It has been an education for me. My awareness of and concern about issues of race and class have grown enormously. And I thank you for your steady belief that my writing was of value to your work.

Richard Berman
May 2012

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Race and Class on Campus

Four Students' Stories

“**I** kind of feel like I’ve been dropped on Mars. . . . I mean, it’s so different.” These few words reflected Emily’s experience of her first weeks at Amherst College in the fall of 2005. Had you passed Emily walking across the campus of her elite New England liberal arts school, she would not have stood out from other young white women in casual clothes on their way to class. Given the school’s past reputation, you might have assumed she came from relative wealth and privilege. But a closer look would have revealed she was not in designer jeans and did not sport the markers of wealth that some students chose. In fact, Emily came from a small farming community of six hundred in South Dakota. Her father, a farmer and truck driver, had quit school after eighth grade; her mother had never made it through college and was now at home, unable to work at her hospital job since becoming ill. Emily was one of nineteen students in her high school graduating class in a K–12 school of three hundred students, and in four years of high school, she had written one research paper. Her school had no library—Emily did her research online, and her main source was Wikipedia. Her community was white, and most referred to black people as “niggers,” but there were few black people in town to take offense. The use of the term was “prominent” and went unchallenged.

The Bigger Picture

Lower-income white students like Emily, whose parents were not college educated, would have been difficult to find at Amherst or other elite

colleges and universities forty years ago. The Amherst College that Emily entered in the fall of 2005 bore little resemblance to the college back then. Over the succeeding four decades, Amherst had undergone a sea change, from an all-male, largely affluent, prep-schooled, legacy-rich student body to one that was half women and more than a third nonwhite, with more than half its students receiving financial aid. Today, elite colleges and universities like Amherst recruit both underrepresented minority students and white students with high need for financial assistance and/or limited family education. This recruitment is both purposeful and expensive. A quarter of the college's operating budget each year goes to financial aid.

What has prompted this move to diversity at Amherst and schools like it? Changes in admission policy began with the emergence of the civil rights movement and growing civil unrest in the 1960s. The idea of "affirmative action" arose to help remedy past discrimination, creating more opportunities for African Americans in many areas, including college admissions. The changes in admissions policy were both a response to black discontent and a reflection of a new concern on the part of universities and colleges like Amherst to open up the educational opportunities they offer to a wider range of students in an effort to promote equity and social mobility. Over time, however, as affirmative action came under attack, arguments shifted away from compensating for past discrimination to the need for "diversity" for reasons other than social justice.¹ Leading educators made the case that potential educational benefits existed in having students of different races and classes interacting with one another. To be prepared to become citizens in this fast-evolving, increasingly diverse society, to thrive in it, and to compete in a rapidly expanding global economy, students need to understand and be able to work with those different from themselves. They need to have previous assumptions and prejudices challenged, and ideally, they should acquire the motivation to work for equality. According to Census Bureau projections, by 2042 non-Hispanic white people will no longer be in the majority in the United States.² As Neil Rudenstine, former Harvard University president argues:

In our world today, it is not enough for us and our students to acknowledge, in an abstract sense, that other kinds of people, with other modes of thought and feeling and action, exist somewhere—unseen, unheard, unvisited, and unknown. We must interact directly with a substantial portion of that larger universe. There must be opportunities to hear different views directly—face to face—from people who embody them. No formal academic study can replace continued association with others who are different from ourselves, and who challenge our preconceptions, prejudices, and assumptions, even as we challenge theirs.³

While Amherst College, along with many other colleges and universities, has done much to create a diverse student community, two important

questions need to be answered: To what extent does learning from diversity actually take place? And what distinct challenges arise for students—affluent, lower-income, black, white—living in this diverse community? The answers to these two questions are the focus of this book.

In Search of Answers

To help us attain those answers, 58 students out of the 431 entering students in the class of 2009 at Amherst College agreed to participate in a longitudinal study of race and class at the college. The fifty-eight students came from four distinct groups: (1) affluent white, (2) affluent black, (3) lower-income white, and (4) lower-income black. Through online questionnaires and face-to-face interviews at the beginning and the end of their freshman year and again at the end of four years, the fifty-eight students (roughly fifteen from each group and balanced by gender) laid out their thoughts about how race and class had shaped their college experience.⁴

How were the groups defined? The students in the two “affluent” groups had no need for financial assistance from the college. In contrast, the “lower-income” students had significant need for financial assistance. The average financial aid award for lower-income students in the study was \$34,203 to cover the \$43,360 fee for full tuition and room and board. Half of these students were first generation—their parents had not attended college.⁵

In this study, race was limited to students who, on their admission applications, self-identified as either “white or Caucasian” or “African American, black.” Race is obviously more complicated than “black” and “white,” and a number of other races were represented on the Amherst campus. Optimally, other racial minorities would have been included in the study—in particular, Hispanics, who are one of the two racial groups that have faced the greatest challenges in attaining college degrees (African Americans are the other racial group).⁶ While forty-one students in the class of 2009 self-identified as “African American, black,” only twenty-seven students self-identified as “Hispanic.” The number of Hispanics was too small to produce a meaningful sample for this study. Forty-five entering students self-identified as “Asian/Asian American,” but these students made up an extremely diverse group in terms of families’ national origins and cultural heritage. A much larger sample of students would be needed to meaningfully study this group.

Race and Class Matters at an Elite College, an earlier book by the first author, describes the challenges students faced and the lessons they learned about race and class during their first year at the college.⁷ That book contains details on the participants’ backgrounds and the research methods. This book expands on the earlier work in two ways. It presents students’ views on what they experienced and learned at Amherst over *four* years at the college, rather than a single year. Those reflections are enriched because, of the fifty-five students who took part in the final wave of data

collection, all but six agreed to give up confidentiality and allowed identifying information to be used.⁸ This book thus gives greater depth to individual students, the issues they encountered, and what they learned.

To give a sense of what students in each of the four groups experienced and learned at Amherst, we present the stories of Emily, Matthew, Andrea, and Marc. Each of these students comes from a different group in the study. Each of them speaks to some of the common issues that other students of his or her race and class experienced, and each one's story illustrates the potential for learning from diversity. But these four students are not fully representative of their groups, as considerable variability in students' experiences and learning existed within each of the groups. Their profiles are portraits of individuals.

Emily

Early one afternoon in her first weeks on campus as a freshman, Emily took a seat for lunch at a table in Valentine, Amherst's college-wide dining room, and was soon joined by three black male students. These students were friendly and affable, but Emily sat in silence. "I didn't know what to say, how to begin a conversation." She was worried about what words might come out of her mouth, possibly something "politically incorrect." Having grown up with TV as her only exposure to black people, Emily had developed powerful stereotypes. "I have those in my head," she noted at the time, "and yet I don't really want them." She continued, "To combat that is really difficult."

For Emily, the wealth of some of Amherst's students was an eye-opener but not a cause for envy. On seeing students in coordinated outfits with well-chosen accessories or visiting another girl's room, she observed, "The piles of shoes and clothes—and everything I own in a trash bag—it's funny to me, because when I see someone who is all decked out, I think, 'Why would you want to appear that way? Why would you want to show off the fact that you're rich?'"

Yet Emily had chosen to come to Amherst, aware that she was taking herself out of her community and into a wider world, however stressful the transition might be. As she put it that first week, "I want to be very open. I want to meet people who are of different races. I mean, that's why I'm here. I want to see diversity in action. I want to be a part of that. I want to go out of my way to make friends who are different than me." She achieved that goal. By the end of her freshman year, Emily was part of a close circle of seven female friends, and she was the only white person in the group. The others were Chinese, Indonesian, black, and biracial. The racial diversity that Emily experienced in her first year remained an integral part of her Amherst world all the way through her senior year.

Whereas the races of the friends she chose to live with were diverse, none of the students in her group of close friends came from wealthy

backgrounds. When asked at the end of her senior year about the importance of having friends of the same social class, Emily responded that when she had first arrived, she had not thought it would be important. "But looking back, it has been extremely important for me to have that. I think just having that day-to-day help, and not to feel alone, just to navigate it with someone. I mean, there's a lot going on here and just to have someone to go through it with you."

That said, Emily did form close friendships with two wealthy white students over her four years. It was not as though she was trying to. As she explained, "I've made friends with people, not social classes." But Emily felt that it had taken more work to form those friendships. She mused, "Maybe not on their part—on mine—letting go of the stereotype that they're not going to understand." There were things they could not understand, like why Emily worked so many hours a week off campus. "But they appreciate it," she said. Talking about the wide gap she felt between herself and wealthy students at the college, Emily noted, "People still ask me, 'How many hours a week do you work? Why do you work so much?' . . . If I saw somebody working a lot, I would think, 'Oh, they need the money.' I don't get any deep joy out of doing dishes at Val [Valentine dining hall]." Emily worked over twenty hours a week and sent money home to help support her teenage sister, who has two children. In response to questions from affluent students about her working, Emily reflected, "We've had two totally different lives. And in the same way that I'm looking at them through a cage of 'How did you get this way?' they're also looking at me." The disparity in social position between Emily and Josh, one of her two wealthy friends, was highlighted when he told her he did not know how to cash a check. She thought about how long she had been working and how getting her paycheck every week made her feel "so excited." She remarked, "I would never have thought that someone twenty-two years old would not know that."

In discussing her relationship with Josh, Emily noted, "I think the reason we are close is that he's very comfortable talking about his class." Josh did not shy away from acknowledging his wealth. Emily also noted that, unlike Josh, many students tended to "close off about themselves" when they discovered she had limited resources. She was not sure if "it's because 'I don't want to be friends with you' or if it's because 'I don't want to make you uncomfortable.'" She tended to give them the benefit of the doubt and assumed that students were trying to avoid creating discomfort for everyone.

For Emily, what she could tell friends from her class differed from what she could tell her wealthy friends about the day-to-day issues that involve class. With friends of the same class Emily could discuss "not having the money to do this or that" or what she referred to as "the implications of class," confident that the concerns she voiced would fall on sympathetic ears. In contrast, with Josh, she said, "I would feel more like I was whining. . . . He really doesn't know, and I don't expect him to know, what I mean."

One incident that occurred in her freshman year stuck with her painfully. Emily was at a party with her other wealthy white friend, Abby, and at some point, Abby's boyfriend called Emily "white trash." The comment not only made her think poorly of him but also raised concerns about how *other* people viewed her. "If I say, 'Oh, I'm low income,' do they automatically assume something else?" Although Emily held on to the idea that this was not "the general attitude," she said, "I definitely think there are people here who just do look down on people who [are low income]."

Emily's journey to Amherst put more than physical distance between her and the family and community she had left back home. She arrived on campus "proud of the people at home, just the way that they got by and could make things work and didn't have a lot of outside help." Over the course of her freshman year, she began to see people at home as being more closed-minded, judgmental, and "very behind the times." Yet she did not assign blame to her home community. "I can sympathize and say, 'You grew up in a totally different way; you grew up in an older generation. You have no experiences outside of that bubble to make you different.'" But she faced a seemingly insurmountable disconnect between home and college. "I can move in between, but there's no bringing them together."

By the end of her last year at Amherst, she oscillated between positive and negative views of her community. When asked then about whether her feelings had changed, she responded, "That's something that's changed a lot over the four years." She still saw a benefit in the way she grew up, but now she also looked at her home community as "so isolated and so not what I want." She explained, "I would love it if the whole world were like Amherst in that it had a whole mix of people interacting." That was not the case, and Emily said with certainty, "I would never want to bring my gay friend home or my black friend." She would not want her friends to experience her community's closed-minded reaction. There *was* no bringing her two worlds together.

Matthew

Had Matthew, an affluent white prep-school grad, passed Emily on a walk across the Amherst campus that freshman year and sized up her position on the social-class ladder, he might well have turned his gaze away. "College is so much about making connections," he asserted in his fall interview, "and your relationships with people. I mean, it is about learning, but the most important thing is *networking* at college. Period. The networking will help you get jobs or know people, or whatever. And the people who are more likely to help you get the jobs you're looking for are of a certain class. That's not to say that kids of another class won't extend this, but the probability that a relationship is going to help you later down the line is going to be much higher if it's a person from a higher class than another."

Matthew had attended Deerfield Academy. His father raised money for Historic Deerfield Village, and his mother was a career counselor at Smith College. They were wealthy enough to send Matthew to Amherst with no financial aid, and he was not the first in his family to go to Amherst. He followed in the wake of his father, his uncle, his sister, and a cousin. “We have pictures of my sister and me wrapped in Amherst blankets when we were two.” Upon arrival, Matthew envisioned himself gravitating toward students from the upper class, from the Upper East Side of New York or Greenwich, Connecticut—students like those he had been surrounded by in boarding school—a far cry from a young woman from rural South Dakota.

If Emily had noticed Matthew as she walked across campus at some point in their freshman year, she might well have assumed he was one of the wealthy preppies at the college. He was always in neatly creased khakis and polo shirts, ever ready with a polite smile and a hello to all he passed, a legacy of his years of socialization at Deerfield. According to his description, “The way I dressed was very preppy. But also the way I acted was just sort of, not ‘snobby’ but sort of as if I had the ability, money-wise, to do anything I wanted, which could not be further from the truth.”

Matthew’s desire to become friends with very wealthy students lessened over the course of his freshman year. Many of the students he got to know during that year were unlike those he had anticipated meeting and befriending. “I remember my cousin’s Amherst, and my dad’s Amherst, and my uncle’s Amherst, and my sister’s Amherst, and being the fifth in my family to go here, I had all those stories floating around of what Amherst is like. It just could not have been more different than what I thought.”

In freshman year, the college assigned Matthew to a double room with Ruben, a lower-income Mexican American. Matthew learned that Ruben had moved out of his home as a junior in high school, had gotten his own lodging, and had supported himself by working two jobs while getting through his last two years of high school. Matthew got close to Ruben that year, but Ruben was not the only person from a dissimilar background who became an integral part of Matthew’s friendship group. That group consisted of a number of people whom he might well never have imagined would be important to him when he first arrived. By the end of that year, when he spoke of social relationships, he stated, “Your close friends you’re friends with because you like them as people and not because you think they will be successful.”

In his senior year Matthew lived off campus with Ruben and two other male students. Matthew described one of them, a black student, as being “in the lowest 1 percent” financially at Amherst, like Ruben—not exactly an obvious choice if you are looking for relationships that are “going to help you later down the line.” That friend had been in and out of college because he had no father at home, and “he needed to be the man of the house, [to] work and support the family, and he couldn’t be off getting an education.” After helping the family with its financial and social problems,