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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Between Worlds: Identity, Culture, and Ambivalence in a Boarding School for "at-risk" Youth

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of youth identity formation at a boarding school for "at-risk" children. The school prepares its young boarders for adulthood through systematic intervention in their everyday cultural practices. By inducing a state of social liminality, or felt in-betweenness, the school seeks to guide its students—mainly youth of color—towards particular social roles, norms, and beliefs. However, children respond and adapt to this ambivalence, which leads to lasting effects as they transition into young adulthood. Utilizing extensive fieldwork and longitudinal data, the analysis employs an interpretive approach to provide context-specific insights into these dynamics. The study details the cultural interventions observed in 2013-14 and revisits the children, now young adults, a decade later, to understand the policy and ethical implications of those interventions. In so doing, this study contributes to understanding the complex interaction between authority, conformity, and identity management within institutions devoted to transforming the lives of children at the social margins.

Keywords: Democratic culture; identity; children; youth politics; boarding schools; total institutions

Introduction

Poverty and violence lead to disadvantages that are passed down from one generation to the next, and those disadvantages are disproportionately felt by black and Latino communities. Recognizing this, a variety of social reformers strive to intervene in this cycle by employing a range of strategies from modest to grand. A perennial focal point of philanthropic attention is children believed to be "at-risk" (or, more euphemistically, "at-promise"). That is, youth that are not formally in the juvenile justice system, but, based on their social context, have a high likelihood of coming into contact with criminal courts. A whole political economy of programs, partnerships, and policies is tasked with improving the lot of these children. Some efforts are smaller: offering Friday night basketball in the summer, for example.

Others are more invasive: gang member call-ins, to name another (Papachristos and Kirk 2015; Rios 2011).

For children at the social margins, their experiences of rules and authority often sum to what Victor Rios calls a racialized "youth control complex." Relationships within the family, at school, and with the police have a combined effect on the social world of young people: children experience ubiquitous punitive social control. At their worst, policies aimed at social repair can become part and parcel of the same set of punitive experiences (Rios 2011, 2020; Stuart 2016; Wacquant 2009). At their best, they can offer alternatives and support for children to have an open future (Feinberg 1980).

Underpinning reform efforts like the Winterhill School, the central case in this study, is a strategy of cultural intervention with far-reaching consequences for even smaller youth policy reform efforts.[1] Administrators and staff alike at the school embrace the belief that the cultural practices embedded in the daily lives of children should be points of systematic intervention. These practices range from proper dress to eating habits to eye contact to vocal inflection. They aim to modify those practices to create new norms that promote desirable behavior and build human capital.

Efforts to intervene in children's cultural development through schooling are controversial.[2] Educational curricula often prioritize the values and experiences of dominant racial and cultural groups, potentially marginalizing minority or indigenous perspectives (Bonilla-Silva 2015). Scholarly work on race and politics has emphasized the role of everyday experiences of authority in eroding democratic cultural norms, along with the importance of racial and ethnic identity in mediating those experiences (Valenzuela 2005; Cohen 2011; Soss & Weaver 2017). For many young black children, for example, interactions with school resource officers (SROs) do not foster a sense of safety but instead feed perceptions of criminality and unworthiness, often for behaviors as minor as missteps in classroom decorum. These works complement an older, field-spanning empirical literature about the educative function of local institutions (e.g., Lipsky 1968). For the most part, the broader academic discussion has focused on *what* messages are communicated to children. Less attention, however, has been given to *how* cultural messages are conveyed, and their consequence for a young person's sense of self. Exploring their transmission reveals key processes shaping identity during adolescence.

Below, I suggest the Winterhill School is an extreme example of a more general strategy of cultural intervention. The school affects change by creating tension between the cultural norms of the institution and a child's home community. This tension induces "social liminality," a pervasive sense of being stuck in-between, that is used as leverage to guide children towards institutionally defined ends. However, children respond and adapt to reduce the ambivalence created by this strategy, with a variety of effects. Those less-appreciated adaptive responses, I'll argue, linger with children as they enter young adulthood. A key consequence is a persistent sense of disconnection from family and community. In the final pages, I emphasize how that finding calls for a critical examination of institutional practices designed to support youth, particularly those that may unintentionally reinforce cycles of disconnection and marginalization.

Employing extensive fieldwork and unique longitudinal data, my central analytic strategy below is interpretive.[3] That is, to understand how young people experience

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and interpret their social world requires context-specific insights gained from close observation and participation in the field. In the following pages, I detail the cultural interventions at Winterhill I witnessed in 2013-14 and the general institutional mechanisms that supported and sustained those interventions. Following up a decade later, in 2023-24, I re-interviewed a subset of the children that I observed (now young adults) to reflect on the broader policy and ethical significance of their experiences.

Passages to adulthood

Adolescence is often framed as a passage that links childhood and adulthood. However, that passage is far from fixed, as its currents are shaped by material conditions that change over time. In the United States, for example, traditional markers of adulthood such as leaving home, completing school, attaining financial independence, getting married, and having children have become increasingly delayed, disorderly, reversible, and even forgone for the working class over the last half century. Changing political economic conditions have pushed young people to rely on new landmarks—alternative cultural models—to form an "independent, transformed, and adult self" (Waters et al. 2011; Silva 2012; Archard 2004, 37ff). A large body of work on socialization is devoted to describing how adolescents develop a unique sense of self and personal values, along with the ways they consciously or unconsciously adjust aspects of their identity in different contexts to align with social expectations (Willis 1981; MacLeod 2018).

For black and Latino children on the social margins, the journey to adulthood presents particularly urgent challenges. These youth are more vulnerable to exploitation, whether through labor, human trafficking, or gang involvement. They also experience increased rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges, which often go untreated. These compounded difficulties often bring young people into contact with systems of control, such as the juvenile justice system, where early encounters frequently lead to negative consequences. A generation of scholarship has emphasized the biography-warping impacts of early contact with the carceral state (Zimring 2005; Scott and Steinberg 2008; Western 2006; Soss and Weaver 2017; Knight 2024). The passage to adulthood can be perilous.

These challenges underscore the urgent need for interventions that provide meaningful support to youth at the margins. Scholarly consensus, policy emphasis, and public sentiment have largely continued to move away from juvenile confinement, towards alternative institutions, and onto earlier interventions in the lives of children (Zimring 2005). At places like the Winterhill School, identity development is not just delayed or disrupted—it is actively managed, potentially creating lasting effects on students' sense of self and social belonging. Yet, a number of works have raised critical questions about whether such interventions are genuinely reparative or merely extend the reach of punitive control under the guise of reform (Cate 2023). Many worry that institutions nominally in place to support youth at the social margins serve as outpatient forms of incarceration—reproducing exclusion and disadvantage, rather than promoting social repair. The wider civic implications are troubling. Cathy Cohen, for example, points to increasing

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alienation among black and Latino youth as community institutions are "remixed" under neoliberal governance (Cohen 2011).

This concern over exclusionary practices highlights a broader tension: young people must navigate multiple, often competing, institutions vying for their allegiance (Côté 2000). Roberto Gonzales's now-classic study of undocumented early childhood arrivals (DACA youth) is instructive. Gonzales describes how adolescence is a jarring time when undocumented children come to discover their undocumented status. These emerging adults must navigate formal institutions—such as applying for college loans, obtaining a driver's license, and submitting job applications—in ways that significantly shape their passage into adulthood and their understanding of ethnic identity (Gonzales 2016; Ruszczyk 2021). Danielle Allen's description of the short and tragic life of her young cousin, Michael, in *Cuz*, offers another illustration. She describes Michael as pulled between the norms of the community (school, work, church, family) and the even stronger pull of a less visible "para-state" of gang authority (Allen 2017).[4]

These works and others make clear that the social or psychological reality of being "betwixt and between," or *liminal*, is crucial to understanding how adolescents form and manage their self-understanding. The experience of liminality is important for initiation into group life, self-experimentation, and stepping outside rigid social roles (Turner 2017:172). While the feeling of being situated in-between occurs in the typical development of all children, it can also be intentionally elicited by institutional arrangements.[5] Religious rituals, military boot camps, and restorative justice programs all create conditions that deliberately place children in spaces to foster growth, reflection, or change in status. Because a child's character is seen as less fixed, liminal spaces are viewed as opportunities not only to influence a child's transition to adulthood but also to shape their broader cultural attachments in the process.

This deliberate use of liminal spaces extends beyond traditional rites of passage; modern educational institutions have also embraced structured liminality as a tool for socialization. By controlling the cultural environment of students, these institutions seek to instill discipline, reshape identity, and prepare youth for specific societal roles. One example of this structured approach is Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools. Those who run these schools believe economic mobility can be achieved through strict discipline and direct intervention in the everyday cultural practices of their students. In a recent work, Joanne Golann describes widely adopted policies at KIPP schools like SLANT, an acronym that reminds students to sit up, listen, ask questions, nod, and track the speaker. These strict policies are adopted to introduce students to an otherwise hidden curriculum that advocates believe will provide a valuable "cultural toolkit" necessary for social mobility (Golann 2021). Schools for Educational Evolution and Development, a unique type of public charter boarding school, operate under similar assumptions (Curto & Fryer Jr. 2014). Both traditional and progressive reformers toe a similar line. Children must be introduced to the often-unspoken culture of power, they argue, to successfully navigate it. To that end, the rules and norms that define power relations inside and outside of the classroom must be made explicit (Delpit 2006; Lugones 2003). One can hear echoes of similar reasoning in other youth-focused organizations; interventions range from enforcing appropriate posture to

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communicating beliefs about the nature of merit and entitlement (Harvey 2022, 2023).[6]

The twin beliefs that cultural practices embedded in the daily lives of children should be points of systematic intervention and that careful institutional design can facilitate those interventions deserve more scrutiny. Despite the emphasis in existing scholarship on adolescent agency, identity, and experience, we know surprisingly little about how children actually navigate educational reformers' cultural engineering efforts (but see McFarland 2004). This is largely because the level of analysis is not amenable to larger surveys, and longitudinal data is difficult to access.

To explore the implications of systematic interventions in children's culture, we ought to turn our attention to "total institutions"—environments where work, play, and sleep converge under one roof. These institutions, including boarding schools, group homes, juvenile detention centers, and reform schools, are rooted in the early nineteenth-century belief that a well-organized environment can address the specific influences that lead to mental and social disorder (Goffman 1961; Rothman [1980] 2002; Berk 2023). While the number of children in these institutions in the United States is relatively small, they play an outsized, recurring role in the imagination of reformers. From racial uplift, such as Mtoto houses in 1960s Detroit, to cultural erasure and genocide in the case of reservation boarding schools, to the care of orphans at the Milton Hershey School, these efforts inform policy in meaningful ways. They've left lasting legacies, shaping contemporary debates on how state and private actors address structural inequality while also raising concerns about reinforcing cycles of disconnection and dependency. Examining the Winterhill School, a contemporary example of an educational total institution, helps us better understand the pressures cultural reform efforts exert on children's identities and the various adaptive responses they generate.[7]

Drawing from Erving Goffman's seminal work, *Asylums*, the relationships among institutional design, liminality, and identity management come into view. When a ward enters a total institution, Goffman writes, they bring with them a presenting culture rooted in their home environment that then comes into conflict with the institution. The total institution does not seek a complete cultural victory; rather, it sustains a particular kind of tension between the ward's home world and the institutional world.[8] Over time the ward's "self" is, in steps or leaps, peeled away. They are progressively stripped of the support relationships that constituted their self-image before entry. Borrowing from the religious practice of mortification of the flesh, whereby subduing bodily desires and suffering voluntarily one can achieve a higher spiritual state, Goffman refers to this process of identity change as mortification *of the self* (Goffman 1961:13–17).

Grounded in fieldwork at the Winterhill School, I argue here that mortifying processes represent the primary conditions to which children must adapt and respond. By generating ambivalence, mortification exerts pressure on the identity of children and, consequently, incentivizes various lines of response to reduce or resolve that pressure in ways that have lasting consequences. Among those consequences is a lingering sense of disconnection from family and community that persists after leaving the school.

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Setting, data, and approach

The case study presented below is based on a year of ethnographic observations at a boarding school in the United States, the Winterhill School, along with a ten-year follow-up study.[9] At Winterhill I observed classes and cottages, interviewed students and staff, administered two school-wide surveys, and collected various institutional records.

The bulk of my time at the school was spent as a non-participant observer. In the back of the room, moving from class to class and cottage to cottage, I took notes on what happened and the general features of classroom governance. For the final third of the year, I selected a focal group to follow in depth. With this group (middle school students, grades 6 through 8), I additionally recorded their informal conversation networks in the classroom and cottage. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with students and staff. For students, I decided to use a random sample, recruiting five students from each grade level, thirty students total. I asked about their perception of the rules, punishments, and rule-breaking along with what they liked and disliked about various parts of Winterhill, focusing on their concrete experiences in classes and cottages. The length of student interviews ranged from 15 to 45 minutes. I interviewed almost all (90 percent) of the teachers and administrators that work directly with students. These interviews focused on their relationship with students, the types and causes of school misbehavior, the needs of children, and their style of classroom governance, along with a variety of questions about the wider Winterhill organization. I also interviewed houseparents[10] about cottage governance, student disobedience, and their experience as employees at the school. Finally, I interviewed several administrators in management roles about the wider purposes and objectives of a Winterhill education.

The institutional records of Winterhill were particularly helpful. I've gathered records on disciplinary incidents in class and the cottages, demographic information, and students' grades and absences over the year. The school also keeps an intricate merit system in an electronic database, which the school administration allowed me to access. Teachers enter a merit when they want to reward good behavior, a "merits used"[11] or a detention if they want to note bad behavior. Consider these entries: "Worked hard all hour," "polite and pleasant in the hallway," "opened a door for another teacher on the way to lunch," or, more negatively, "refusing to accept the consequences of her actions," and "being mean and saying hurtful things." There are over twenty thousand entries in the merit system database for the 2013-14 school year. The database is organized by kind (merit, demerit, or detention), time and date, and by the teacher who wrote the entry.

The sum of these data sources is a detailed snapshot of the organization, though only a fraction of that data collection effort is presented below. In the fall of 2023, I returned to Winterhill and interviewed staff, administrators, and teachers to look at changes in the organization. Most significant for my purposes here, I caught up with many of the children (now adults) that I met and interviewed a decade ago. The interviews presented in the latter section of this article are from a subset of five alumni from that group who stayed at Winterhill through age 18.[12]

There are a number of limitations to this study. For one, I've only included the sub-sample of follow-up respondents who stayed at Winterhill through high school.

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There are numerous others who, for various reasons, left or were forced to leave the school at earlier points. My aim here is to emphasize those who successfully exited the school. In so doing, we will have better footing to understand the strategy of using total institutions for cultural repair on its own terms. Future work, however, will expand this scope.[13] Moreover, while the qualitative, single-case approach used here has the advantage of unearthing relationships that would otherwise be invisible, it can only gesture towards broader generalizability. More work remains to be done. However, a number of the particular processes I'll describe as part of the mortification process are amenable to formalization and could be used to compare across institutional contexts.

In addition, while there are limits to what one can generalize from a single school, organizational ethnography can reveal features of a social order otherwise invisible to studies that focus on routine practices across institutions. Ethnographic observation provides the ideal means to observe the links between attitudes, ideology, and institutional practices—precisely my aim here.[14]

The Winterhill School

Walking on the grounds of Winterhill, one catches a glimpse of what the utopian architects of the first almshouses and asylums had in mind: to bring discipline to the victims of a disordered society through a well-ordered institution that isolates itself, and its members, from chaotic conditions (Foucault [1977] 1995; Rothman [1980] 2002:138). An iron fence once lined the property, but no more; now all that encircles the school is one hundred acres of grassy fields and groves. Lush lawns and flowerbeds line a series of paths connecting the various red-brick buildings that define life at Winterhill: the main academic building, the recreation hall, the administrative building, the chapel, and the dozen cottages that are home to the school's young boarders. The main academic building would be the envy of any neighboring public school—multiple computer labs, a small but functional library, classrooms with computers and computer-assisted technology, a fully stocked music room, a dining hall, and a gymnasium, among other amenities.

The bucolic, tranquil grounds of Winterhill stand in stark contrast to students' home neighborhoods. Pulling from two states, and mostly from one metropolitan area, Winterhill takes in (in the words of one staff member) children in "disadvantaged situations, not disadvantaged children."[15] Many of the students come from city neighborhoods and suburbs where violence—peer violence, police violence—is a reality lived daily. With millions in private funding, parents or guardians are only required to pay a relatively small sum to send their child to Winterhill; a sliding scale based on income that rarely goes above 5 percent of the actual cost of boarding and educating their child. About 90 percent of the young people at Winterhill qualify for reduced or free lunch from the federal government. The vast majority of students come from single-parent homes,[16] including cases where one parent is incarcerated or struggling with drug addiction, and almost all enter the school testing below their academic grade level. Winterhill is not a reform school. Students with serious mental health issues and those with prior contact with the juvenile justice system are not considered for admission. The target population is students, and families, that are "at-risk" based on their socio-economic context. In

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the eyes of many donors and school staff, these are the "savable," "reachable" youth that public services have failed.

A concern for class, however, is intimately bound up with race. During the late 1990s, the racial and ethnic composition of the school began to shift. In 1994, the student population was about one-third black and Latino and two-thirds white. By the early 2000s, those numbers flipped—two-thirds black and Latino students and one-third white. During the 2013-14 school year, where this study begins, the student population of Winterhill was roughly 80% black, 15% Latino, and 5% white and Asian.[17]

The Winterhill School is a particularly ambitious effort at social repair and transformation. As a community boarding school, it seeks to influence every aspect of its students' lives, from familial interactions to broader community engagements. Winterhill's five-day program keeps students close to their home communities, allowing them to return home for two nights each week and, in theory, to maintain and strengthen family ties. The school is the concrete form of a fantasy held by many social reformers: to re-engineer a child's environment. Its ethos is not just to sway or guide, but to act as a robust agent of change. The school imagines itself as a kind of cultural splint: an orthotic device designed to guide the healing limbs of a broken democratic culture.

In all, Winterhill is tasked with housing, educating, and molding the characters of over a hundred primarily black and Latino youth.[18] And the staff are diligent. From students' 5:45 a.m. wake-up to their 8:30 p.m. bedtime, a company of teachers, houseparents, and administrators shuffle the children through a highly regimented day. No part of the day is unscheduled, no part is unsupervised. The school is the fulfillment of many educators' fantasies—close regulation of student behavior inside and outside of class, consistent communication between teachers and caretakers, a guarantee that students eat three nutritious meals a day, that they have a stable and safe environment at home, that they've slept a full night, that there is someone after school checking to see if children have completed their homework. In fact, one of the dominant complaints of teachers at Winterhill is that the regimentation of students' week is incomplete—many attribute student misbehavior in class to the two nights a week (Friday and Saturday) students are *not* on campus.

To understand the processes of identity management at Winterhill, I focus on two related domains: punishment practices and oppositional behavior. Following Goffman's original formulation of the total institution in *Asylums*, these areas serve as pivotal arenas where the dynamics of mortification are actively played out.

Punishment

In a total institution, penalties and privilege systems provide the backbone of institutional order.[19] These systems operate through a tiered set of rewards and punishments, conditioning behavior and shaping wards' sense of agency within the institution. They encourage compliance with institutional rules by linking privileges to conformity, Goffman notes, while simultaneously reinforcing the loss of autonomy that defines the mortification of self. Importantly, penalties and privileges are expressive. Punishment, in particular, is nearly as much about communication as it is

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about power, and individual punishments are often the source of narrative conflict. The sum of those conflicts comes to define the world of the institution to its wards.

The detention hall nicely illustrates this point. One message, the view of the teacher who runs the central detention hall, is that kids should be socialized to accept what they'll experience in the real world. Implicitly, the model is the criminal law: classroom peccadilloes, small offenses, should be punished, but only administratively. As with a traffic ticket, children should pay a fine ($2 per infraction) and carry on. However, more significant offenses ought to result in actual *detention*, in the traditional meaning of the word; being detained for a period of time (stacking chairs, cleaning the computer lab, writing a "respect lesson" essay). Other teachers see detention as a means to teach life lessons, particularly about work. "When you have a job, do you think your boss will accept your excuse for being late?" "Time is money. If you want to waste it, you'll have to pay."[20]

Students offer their own interpretations. Marvin, for example, believes it's important to serve detention respectfully. However, the primary lesson he takes away is not to get angry when he feels powerless: "Winterhill sometimes can crack down hard. Sometimes not. Really depends who is working [. . .] I don't sweat it too much. Like my mom told me. She cares if I get in trouble, but she said don't keep getting angry about it, 'cause nothing is going to change. It's set in stone."[21] Other students, like Ashley, are more defiant; "They go [to detention], and then it's over with. Doesn't really matter. You go, it happens, go back. You just spent a little more time at school."[22] Bluster and belief, however, are not so easily separated. One eighth grader explains: "Kids all talk like they don't care, but at the end of the day, they still have to go to the place. They still pout and whatever."[23] Both students and staff attempt to make sense of punishment at Winterhill, framing the detention hall as a space for moral and social lessons about work, law, and power.

Detention, however, is only one part of a wider contingency management system at Winterhill. Teachers and houseparents are asked to "catch" children being good in addition to noting misbehavior.[24] The ratio between merits to demerits (detentions, merits used) issued during any given school day is about 3:1.[25] The underlying logic behind this approach is that the quickest and most effective way to promote the display of appropriate behaviors is to reward them. Students accumulate or lose merit points over the school year, and those merits are intended to function as currency in the token economy of the school.[26]

What warrants a merit? Consider a few examples of students "caught being good" from the 20,682 entries in the school's merit system database: "on task during math," "did not make a fuss about re-doing an assignment," "polite in the hallway," "turned in money found in hallway," and "picking up a tray left by another student." Students are also rewarded with merits for high scores on assignments, homework, and tests. For merits concerning character, the central aim is to reinforce the "four basic skills": following instructions, accepting criticism (accepting "no" for an answer), accepting a consequence, and disagreeing appropriately. The aim of these skills is to model constructive disagreement and reinforce the role of teachers and staff as the ultimate arbiters of proper and improper conduct. Interactions, of course, vary by person and place. My field notes contain many, many examples of houseparents and teachers talking with students about various personal issues and problems. A common theme, however, is that the staff member rarely reverses their

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decision. Instead, the student is given merits (as a kind of consolation prize) for accepting an unfavorable outcome. As another student stresses, sometimes the incentives work in the other direction: "Here's an example. Like in our cottage we have to run a lap if we're late. We can "disagree appropriately," and if we disagree, it's like we then have to run three laps, or write four papers. [My houseparent] just makes it harder than it was to accept the consequence in the first place."[27]

The category "merits used" has two general functions in the school.[28] The first is a kind of in-class currency that students can spend. Students *buy* "a washroom break during class," *rent* a calculator or pencil or pen, or *purchase* "a second copy of the assignment sheet given out yesterday." The second purpose of merits used is an intermediate punishment between a verbal warning and a detention. Students lose merits for, roughly, five types of behavior: being defiant or disruptive, being out of uniform, poor etiquette, not following classroom instructions, or physically or emotionally harming another student. When these behaviors are severe enough, a teacher will give out a detention or a more serious consequence. Classroom grades arguably serve a similar function; grade point average is closely correlated with merits used and detentions.[29] Unlike other kinds of total institutions, suspension and expulsion are a distinct possibility within boarding schools. While the numbers may seem small (fewer than 10 in-school suspensions, 2 out-of-school suspensions, and 2 expulsions), they're outsize in importance. This is because, first, they consistently figure in students' minds as a *possible* punishment. And second, they define an absolute ceiling or limit to the institutional tolerance of oppositional behavior.

The merit token economy is not intended to be an end in itself. The goals are recognizably Lockean.[30] That is, the logic of contingency management is put in service of a more ambitious set of classical liberal pedagogical objectives. One sees this most clearly in the cottages. Houseparents are trained to use a variation of the "teaching-family model" (TFM) developed for the Boys Town residential facility in Nebraska. The TFM relies on detailed behavioral treatments in a structured, family-like atmosphere with the use of full-time married couples. The following description is from the foundational study of the TFM by University of Kansas researchers:

> The Teaching-Family program has four main elements: a comprehensive skills training curriculum, a motivation system (token economy), a self-government system, and the development of a reciprocally reinforcing relationship between the youths and the teaching-parents (Wolf et al. 1976:95)

The goal, the authors continue, is to allow a gradual shift from the use of token-based incentives and disincentives to a more "natural style" where the motivation for compliance becomes the affection and regard of the houseparent.

At Winterhill, houseparents tell a similar story:

> "Basically, we have a structure. It's the Family-Teaching Model. And we try to deal with the students in that capacity. [. . .] We teach simple things, help them learn different skills they may lack. Communication skills. Coping skills. Things of that nature. We are responsible for building their character to the best of our ability. We're eventually responsible for transitioning them out of

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> Winterhill and into society as a single person. Out there, they need to care-give and motivate for themselves, know how to live on their own."[31]

Success is defined by transitioning students from external incentives to internal motivations. More specifically, as the quotation from the houseparent above illustrates, life-skill training at Winterhill is based on a "behavior deficiency" model of deviant behavior. That is, a "model of deviant behavior by which the youths' behavior problems are viewed as due to their lack of certain essential skills. These deficiencies are considered to be a result of inadequate training and histories of ineffective incentive and example rather than due to internal psychopathology" (Wolf et al. 1976:94).

The result is a scene like the following:

> "Good afternoon Mr. and Ms. Jones!" It's 3:15 and the kids start trickling in from the main school building down the street. Some are energetic, skipping and smiling to the front door from class; others look tired, dragging their feet and mumbling. When students enter the cottage, they're expected to give a formal greeting to the houseparents, check the chore sheet, then, after asking for permission, put their school items away in their dorm and wash-up. This ritual is deceptively simple. If students fail to give a proper greeting—if they didn't walk up (not run) to the houseparent, didn't make eye contact, didn't have a respectful tone, didn't wait for a response, or didn't speak with enough volume—they're asked to repeat the greeting again. If they fail once more, they'll likely receive "cottage consequences." Consequences range from running a lap around the administration building, to extra chores, to missing out on cottage activities, to writing an essay on the four basic skills. Despite the rigid concept of what constitutes a proper greeting, children's greetings vary. Some answer minimally (chin down, straight face, eyes glancing up, in a flat voice: "Hello, Ms. Jones."), others are more relaxed and open, giving a smile and an enthusiastic salutation ("Good afternoon!"). Still more push the boundaries; speed walking to the front of the cottage, speaking softly, giving a forced smile, or giving the greeting in a more familiar tone ("What's up, Mr. Jones"). This afternoon no student is told to repeat her greeting.[32]

Adult-child interactions, like the greeting just described, sustain a particular kind of tension between the child's desired self-presentation and the roles and expectations of the institution. In Goffman's terms, the overarching aim is to shift the moral career of the child. Over time, a child's allegiance should shift from his, her, or their "home world" to the world of the institution. While this change in allegiance is the express goal of most total institutions, a narrow focus on rules, privileges, and even messaging misses how students oppose, adapt, or otherwise respond to mortifying processes.

Opposition and adaptation

While students adjust and adapt to the rhythm of life at Winterhill, the definition of their situation often remains contested. Despite sharing similar conditions, children

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respond in varied and personal ways, such as situational withdrawal, intransigence, and conversion, among others.[33] As I'll describe in a moment, oppositional behavior manifests across a spectrum—from subtle challenges to authority to active defiance. This type of behavior, often labeled as acting out, resistance, misbehavior, or simply "being naughty," plays a significant role in the mortification process. Individual responses reflect personal strategies for coping within the institution, yet they occur within a broader institutional logic that shapes and constrains these behaviors.

The vast majority of staff reference culture (home environment, youth culture) as the source of oppositional behavior. Consider the following interview answers to the question of why children resist:

1. "This stage of their lives, I think it's a matter of developing their place in society. Finding their niche. Are they a class clown? Do they want attention? It's about becoming acceptable to their peers."[34]
2. "I think it's usually interactions with other students. [. . .] With boys, it's sports; with girls, it's social drama."[35]
3. "I think that it has a lot to do about what goes on at home. The expectations of the parents. If the parents aren't willing to reward or enforce expectations for schoolwork, there is no reason for students to put in the time and energy."[36]
4. "If you see your mom curse the check-out lady at the [grocery], you know, that's what you see. Mouthy parent, mouthy kid."[37]

More generally, staff narrate oppositional behavior at Winterhill as a three-way struggle between staff, representing the classroom or cottage-level implementation of various institutional curricula; other children, representing the social relations, cultures, and roles that constitute the child "social system"; and home, representing knowledge of, and access to, alternative norms and organizational forms. Opposition, in this view, is a kind of remainder left by the exercise of pedagogical authority. Child resistance is evidence of a partial, or incomplete, cultural victory.

Consider the out-of-earshot spaces where children share grievances about the school and staff—bathrooms, gym, and dorm rooms after bedtime. These spaces provide a kind of infrastructure for public expression, children's culture, and the negotiation of social ties. They are spaces carved out of a planned community where children have more room to maneuver. I don't mean to hold up these spaces as uniformly positive. Children in one cottage, for instance, were found routinely fighting after quiet hours to resolve interpersonal conflicts lingering from earlier in the day.[38]

Daniel McFarland usefully distinguishes between passive and active opposition. He writes that passive opposition "is a tacit, indirect subversion of the normative codes of schooling and is at most an expression of malcontent and critique." Active opposition, in contrast, "is more serious since it openly undermines the normative codes of schooling and attempts to posit a new framework of interaction on the situation" (McFarland 2004:1263). In my field notes, examples of passive opposition that parallel McFarland's definition are legion:

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1. When a student was asked to turn around in his seat, he sits up straight in an exaggerated manner and makes a 12-point shuffle until he is facing forward.
2. A student was given permission to disassemble presentation boards from the school science fair. He skips across the room and sings "liiiiiike a wrecking ball!" in a mocking falsetto and kicks a hole in the cardboard.[39]
3. Student twists hall pass in hand, wanders around the room. Looks at teacher. "Please sit down." "I need to stop by the office." "No, sit down!" Continues wandering around the room. "Fine, go." Once the student is in the hall, he makes a basketball shot gesture to his friend still sitting in class and then walks on. [Alluding to fact he is actually going to go to the gym.]
4. Teacher: "Please get back to work, Dina." Under Dina's breath, "there she goes, hissing at me again."
5. The following exchange in a session on budgeting in a life skills class. Teacher: "Remember, time is money. You need to look at where you're putting your effort each day." Student: "Yeah. Time is money, . . . but money also makes time!" [Boys in the room laugh.]

These acts are transgressive in feeling because in them someone is asking for something she ought not to; someone is admitting to impulses and ideas authorities would rather not have considered. These acts are forms of passive opposition because they draw attention to the illegitimacy of school affairs, but do not call for their transformation.[40] They allude to children's culture and the social ties on which that culture is built.

While I've only presented a few examples, these acts express an unease about the proper role of children, about what constitutes appropriate child knowledge, speech, and action. Mocking conformist behavior (the 12-point shuffle) and using humor to reframe the meaning of classroom discussion ("money makes time") are just a couple of the techniques used to call into question the legitimacy of the school's interpretation of proper behavior. Passive opposition increases the "friction of appropriation" of children's preferences, abilities, and culture (Scott 2012:208). In response to the pressures of the institution, children act to reduce tension between their self-understanding and institutional norms. Importantly, these acts are less *resistance* and more secondary adaptations to challenges to identity (Rubin 2015). Those adaptations, with some exceptions, actually facilitate and extend the school's authority—not challenge it. Passive opposition creates room to maneuver but doesn't halt classroom and cottage instruction.

One situation I often witnessed is a teacher makes a request or assigns a punishment, a student mumbles something under his breath (often loud enough so even the teacher can hear), and the teacher expresses disapproval but does not acknowledge what she (most likely) heard. That is, teachers would often protect the stability of the definition of the situation by not recognizing open defiance by students. Take another situation. A new student, Anika, spent the entire language arts period doodling instead of doing her assignments. The teacher had, unsuccessfully, tried to get her to engage with lessons over the previous week. Rather than scold Anika, the teacher complimented her on the doodle, then put the drawing up above her desk. In an interview, the teacher explains that her goal was to redirect the student, to "get buy-in," because previous strategies didn't work. In both

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situations, there is an implicit recognition that there is a bigger opponent than any one student: the utter disintegration of order itself.

Sometimes, of course, the definition of the situation completely breaks down and there is active opposition. Consider the following excerpt from my field notes:

> *23 Apr. Period 8.* The sixth-grade students are talking as they come in the room. The atmosphere is lively; a couple of students are dancing and skipping. This period is "Life Skills" and is a combined session with the entire 6th grade class of 23 students. There are two teachers for this period, Mr. Jay and Ms. Wilson. The lesson is on nutrition and the dangers of eating too much fast food. As the students are sitting down, one of the teachers sets up the video. The other tries to calm the class down: "Everyone, please sit down!" Most of the students are seated, but a few are still standing and chatting. There is still a lot of low-level noise in the room. "Malachi! Go to your seat!" Under his breath, but loud enough that I can hear from the corner of the room, Malachi turns his head to the side and says, "Bitch." Angry and sulking, he goes to his seat. The volume of casual chat in the class continues to rise. The other teacher, Mr. Jay, "Quiet! We're starting the video." Students look up front but continue to chat, only temporarily lowering their voices. A minute later, Ms. Wilson calls out two names: "Tom, Naomi. No gym tomorrow!" She then writes their names on the board. "Ella, merits for you for sitting quietly." Within a few minutes, two more names are added to the board. "Mark! Sit down!" Mark stares back, then sits on a counter nearby. "That's not sitting, put your butt down." He walks by his chair, then sits on the ground instead. Ms. Wilson gives him a harsh stare. He then turns towards the video, as if he's watching. By the time John's name is added to the board, he barely looks up, shaking his head, and continues chatting with his friends. The period, which is the last of the day, is almost over. A handful of students are watching the video which, as it turns out, wasn't the intended video,[41] and the teachers seem to have given up trying to maintain order. They, too, start chatting among themselves. Over half the class's names are on the chalkboard by the time class is dismissed.

Incidents like this are both extreme and rare. Nonetheless, they are significant. Sometimes direct challenges snowball, and the techniques teachers use to secure a particular interpretation of events fail. Here, students were able to redefine the situation and undermine the classroom authorities—in this case, two teachers.

Discussion: Liminality and weakened ties

Passive and active forms of opposition highlight not only the tension between institutional authority and personal identity but also the ongoing negotiation required to sustain institutional messaging. They're a reminder that an ideology requires an active effort to maintain, whether the agent in question is a teacher, houseparent, or student. Sometimes the techniques that secure a particular interpretation of events function smoothly, other times there is friction, and occasionally they fail outright. Rather than seeing opposition solely as resistance, it becomes evident that many of these behaviors are secondary adaptations—

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strategies that simultaneously create space for individual maneuvering while, paradoxically, reinforcing the authority of the institution. In this dynamic interplay, mortification emerges as an incomplete process, one that is constantly contested, negotiated, and reshaped by both children and staff.

What should we make of the back-and-forth struggle to secure a particular ideological order at the school?

To start, it's useful to think of the ideological order at Winterhill as consisting of an overt and a latent curriculum.[42] By overt curriculum, I mean the intended, explicit messages communicated to children. The survey of punishment practices earlier makes plain a number of these messages. You'll recall students must pay, in cash, to avoid punishment in the detention hall ("time is money"). Likewise, the merit system rewards behavior like turning in a lost wallet and deters behavior like lying about having completed homework ("value of honesty"). Reflecting back, ten years later, all of the alumni who stayed at Winterhill mentioned that the school taught them that they need to earn status of "adult" and that discipline, structure, and hard work are the way to achieve that status. Importantly, alongside the overt school curriculum, there is a *latent* one. That is, messages that are communicated through unspoken practices, or informal interaction. Those latent messages span concerns like belonging, appropriate romantic relationships, masculinity, the meaning of virtue, and the significance of race.

These two levels, overt and latent, bubbled to the surface in my conversation with Dylan, now in his early 20s. Dylan expressed ambivalence about the strict rules at Winterhill. While the overt messaging of the school around hard work and self-discipline was well received, and he felt the pressure of the strict environment ("pressure makes diamonds, and all that"), he emphasized a different point in our conversation about the merit system:

> Yeah, in the merit system, [you] will get rewards, for, you know, getting certain amount of merits, and I think, showing like, you know, good character or just good motives overall just would pay off in the long run. There would be awards at the end of the year, you know, about how someone acted all around the year. And I feel like, seeing your parents there and like just being happy that your parents are acknowledging, or someone else is acknowledging you, that you're doing good. So I feel like that was good.[43]

More than the explicit life lessons, or messages, communicated by the school through merits, demerits, or "consequences," what Dylan remembered from his time at Winterhill was the recognition that came from his family by following school rules and routines. He took to heart the latent message that acknowledgement is not an entitlement, but something that must be earned and repeatedly demonstrated. The broad message from his time at Winterhill was clear: to be a successful adult you must hold yourself accountable for your past, present, and future actions.[44] This observation echoes other recent studies that find upper-middle-class children are taught to see themselves as "always-already special," while working-class school-children are taught to see themselves as "conditionally good" if they adhered to external rules (Harvey 2023).

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The overt and latent curricula provide an alternative set of norms, values, and practices that compete for students' attention and adherence. More significant than *what* messages are sent, for our purposes here, is how those messages are sent and received. The children of Winterhill are not passive; the various curricula at the school are met with friction and, at times, active opposition. As we learned above, even if students don't fully accept the program, they submit to the basic authority of the school. To repeat the words of one young student mentioned earlier, even if kids say they don't care about serving detention, "they still pout and whatever." Students live within the value system of the school, even if they are not true believers, and even if they are able to "get by on the sly." By giving lip service to the ideology of the school, by "living in the lie," the school maintains pressure on a student's identity.[45]

For those children I interviewed who stayed at Winterhill through adolescence, one consequence was to complicate students' relationships to their family and home community. What I'll refer to as social liminality. As a *community* boarding school —a 5-day program in contrast to 7-day—Winterhill is designed, in principle, to preserve boarders' relationships with their loved ones back home. As time progresses, however, the institution comes to dominate its boarders' social world.

Now a young adult, Malik reflects on how his relationship with his mother changed while he attended Winterhill:

> You know, even the concept of family is different. I'd go home to my mother [on the weekends], and you've got a family. [. . .] But if I was realistically looking, I'll say that my family was at [Winterhill]. Because, again, you know, these are the people I spent all of my time with. My great years. Yeah, these other folks are blood or whatever, but they don't know you.[46]

As he got older, he "bought into the structure" and it became harder and harder to go home on the weekends. Malik expressed that he now understands that he, then, harbored a hidden resentment towards his mom for sending him to Winterhill. This would express itself, for example, by him using the routines of the school against her. He explains,

> I could use the structure at school to my advantage when I got home because I knew, there, it was much less structure. When [my mom] got mad at me, I had a way I would respond when at school. I would just say "okay," in passive aggressive sort of way, and that's it. But she, she wanted something more. She wanted what most parents want, an acknowledgement. Like, "okay, I know what I did was wrong and I'll fix it." But for me, with the resentment, I just say to her that's the way we do it [at Winterhill].[47]

Malik goes on to describe that his biological family didn't have annual traditions, so the holiday meals eaten with his cottage-mates at Winterhill became core family rituals. While memories of the school continue to be a source of anxiety for him, he emphasized to me his gratitude for all the opportunities that Winterhill provided to him.[48]

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Dylan, mentioned earlier, tells a similar story. Some of his favorite memories of Winterhill are eating cookies and treats at Christmas, along with game nights. While not blood, the students and staff of Winterhill became his world. His family would attend events and ceremonies, but he felt distance. His mother would "financially and materially provide, but not mentally." He did feel that love with his father when he was able to see him, and until he passed, but had to find it in other places at the school.[49]

Jonathan's memories are less sanguine but strike a similar chord. He recalls being tagged as a "troublemaker" early on and having consistent problems with self-esteem throughout his time at the school. In his words: "I feel like they expected a robot" and it took leaving the school to learn more about "self-love." He came to see his mom as always siding with the school, he lost faith in her as a separate source of authority, and over time became less likely to rely on her judgment.[50] This tension became more painful and memories of the school less fond over time. Jonathan described to me increasing alienation as he entered adolescence; a feeling like he was just a number to the Winterhill organization. In his words, "a tool," "a token," and fuel for a "donate so you can help this kid here" campaign.

For Malik, Dylan, and Jonathan, the world of the school became the dominant frame by which they measured their family and social relationships. One can see this in other domains as well. Perhaps most powerfully, their understanding of place. Once students complete the 8th grade, they attend an external high school while still boarding at Winterhill cottages.

> CB: What did it mean to blend in at [the public] high school?
>
> M: We wanted to be, we were from, like our real environment. Like, from the 'hood. I remember going to [the local high school, while still boarding at Winterhill] and remember going to my dad's on the weekend. I'd be going outside to take out the trash and seeing a cop down the street, knowing that my dad was selling drugs out the door. It was very weird. At Winterhill, there was a separation that we didn't need to deal with.[51]

Malik described to me how he would leverage his home in a grittier city neighborhood for status among the suburban black kids who were now his high school classmates. They wanted to be "street," and he wanted the life of a suburban kid. While technically street, Malik didn't feel that way when he entered the local public high school. He continues:

> M: When we went to high school, it was a public school, and we saw people of all sexualities, stuff we've never seen before. Of course, when you don't understand, you joke and make fun. Then you begin to see, yo, this is the reality. And it's kind of scary. It's a jungle. You see people fighting for no reason. We were from this school where we thought we were hard and tough and things like that, but the reality of it was different. At the time, we learned, which was smart, to hold on to each other. We would always say, "we [W'hood]." But we were kind of embarrassed that we were from [Winterhill].

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CB: Why were you embarrassed?

M: Because *we* were the coddled ones, getting picked up and dropped off on a separate bus.[52]

A lasting impact of growing up in a total institution for these youth, even one with a strong social reform mission like Winterhill, is a dissonance created by being situated between social worlds. For Malik, this dissonance carried a racial dimension. At Winterhill, the norms and rhythms of institutional life prioritized respectability and uplift, but they left little room to explore or affirm the racial identities that mattered deeply in other social contexts, such as his neighborhood or high school. At the public high school, racial belonging could become fraught, particularly when being from Winterhill was coded as soft or sheltered, in contrast to the imagined "authentic" toughness of urban blackness.

Total institutions have a troubled relationship with community. They try to support youth by individualizing the project of uplift, and in so doing, actively rend the connections that link child to place. The lingering feeling of being stuck in-between described by the students at Winterhill matters in at least two ways. For one, we might find it unacceptable or unfitting, in itself, for young people to have that feeling. Others have highlighted the significance of the "aptness" of particular emotions as important for responding to calls for restitution by victims of violence, for instance, or healing trauma (Sered 2019; Srinivasan 2018). For another, emotions matter because they have social consequences—the feeling of dissonance might lead to divestment in one's home community, for example, or snowball into guilt or alienation that impacts a young person's life projects.

The young adults I interviewed expressed ambivalence about their time at the school. They were grateful for the resources provided to them, but acknowledged feeling a loss. To highlight the feelings associated with social liminality is not to make a claim about how, precisely, the costs and benefits of total institutions for children should be evaluated. Nor is it to make a claim about the value of a Winterhill education.[53] Rather, it is to make the basic point that the process of mortification, the tension it creates and sustains, and the social liminality it ultimately produces in wards *is a cost that must be weighed*. For many, that cost might appear necessary to respond to the difficult circumstances that brought parents, grandparents, or caretakers to the steps of Winterhill in the first place. For others, it's an opportunity or call for institutional reform. And for some, it may cast broader suspicion on the strategy of using total institutions for children in need.

The socialization processes described here directly bear on a host of other policy interventions that matter for the well-being of youth. Most directly, other total institutions: not only community boarding schools like Winterhill, but group homes, children's hospitals, therapeutic boarding schools (TBSs), immigration detention, tribal schools, residential schools, and even elite preparatory schools and colleges. However, the processes of mortification, identity negotiation, and adaptation evident in the Winterhill case also extend beyond the walls of total institutions. They reveal patterns of socialization and control that emerge whenever youth are subjected to sustained authority structures and separated, even temporarily, from their familial or community networks. Public schools in low-

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income areas, for instance, often employ strict disciplinary policies that resemble those in total institutions. Likewise, youth intervention programs—whether job training initiatives, military academies, or juvenile justice diversion programs—often seek to reshape identity and behavior in ways that echo the mortification process detailed earlier. The Winterhill case underscores the psychological and social costs of interventions designed to "save" or "reform" youth. When interventions overlook the cultural, racial, and social ties that anchor a young person's identity, they invite not just momentary dissonance but a lasting fracture—one that erodes a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The children of Winterhill might be situated in a no-man's-land between the aspirations of reformers and the pull of outside community, but rather than simply accepting their situation, they often remake it—sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Mortification exerts pressure on young boarders' identities and, in turn, incentivizes various responses to reduce that pressure. We've now seen how that process works, some of its concrete mechanisms, and one lesser-understood consequence: social liminality. For the young alumni I interviewed a decade later, the school's intervention has played a significant role in shaping their adulthood.

More broadly, the case of Winterhill speaks to the deep tension between care and control that underlies many youth-focused interventions. The institution sets out to guide young people toward stability, yet the very structures intended to provide support may also sever critical ties to family, culture, and community. This paradox extends beyond boarding schools and into the broader landscape of education, juvenile justice, and social policy.

By shifting our attention to the microlevel processes of identity negotiation, we gain a richer understanding of how young people remix, contest, and adapt to cultural expectations under institutional pressure. My aims have been diagnostic, and the analysis I've provided is suggestive. While the patterns I describe require further empirical testing, they offer an entry point for rethinking the trade-offs embedded in institutions that seek to reshape, rather than merely support, children's development. They encourage us to reconsider how programs and policies are designed to support youth, ensuring they strengthen connections rather than unintentionally deepening the disconnections they seek to heal.

Notes

1 By culture, I broadly mean "the processes of meaning-making in which agents' practices (e.g., their work habits, self-policing strategies, and leisure patterns) interact with their language and other symbolic systems" (Wedeen 2002).

2 Likewise, political theorists argue about what right, if any, public and private institutions have to steer identity formation. See Kwame Anthony Appiah on *soul-making*, for example (Appiah 2005). Identity formation, broadly, refers to the intertwined processes by which individuals first develop a unique and coherent sense of self.

3 I draw from a social theory tradition anchored in the works of Erving Goffman, David Rothman, and Michel Foucault to help identify key processes of cultural reproduction and change.

4 Willis's classic descriptions of the "lads" and the "ear'oles" and MacLeod's "hallway hangers" and "brothers" provide two others (Willis 1981; MacLeod 2018).

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5 Turner explicitly connects his analysis of liminality to Goffman's account of mortification in *Asylums*, which I'll describe below (Turner 2017:183).
6 Philosophical works like María Lugones's *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*, along with studies mentioned earlier (e.g., Waters et al. 2011, Gonzales 2016, and Knight 2024), focus our attention on how institutions shape the cognitive resources and interpretive frames young people use to make sense of their life situation.
7 Boarding schools are not the dominant response to poverty and crime in the United States, with only about 300 nationwide – a small fraction of private schools overall. Many are remnants of an earlier era with more utopian aspirations. In a recent work, Robertson (2024) details how Black Christian Nationalists in the 1960s and 70s established Mtoto schools to preserve and promote Black culture. Between 2000 and 2020, youth incarceration in the United States declined by 77%, leaving a detention population of about 25,000 (Puzzanchera 2022). Therapeutic boarding schools (TBS) number in the hundreds, though exact figures are unclear due to inconsistent definitions and limited regulation (e.g., Pfaffendorf 2017). Schools like Winterhill only number in the dozens, and these vary widely in instructional methods and chartering principles (e.g., D'Antonio 2006).
8 In contrast to, for example, some contemporary uses of Michel Foucault's account of 'discipline' in *Discipline and Punish*.
9 "Winterhill" is a pseudonym. The Social and Behavioral Sciences Internal Review Board (SBS-IRB) protocols for this project require the school to be anonymous. University of Chicago, IRB13-0945. George Mason University, IRB2081817-1.
10 Houseparents are the couples that take care of students before and after school at Winterhill.
11 Student: "why do they call it a 'merits used'? What's the difference between that and a demerit?" T: "Well . . . that's just what they're calling it now." fieldnotes_2014Apr08.
12 These students have had prolonged exposure to the school environment, including its culture, teaching methods, relationships with peers and teachers, and overall atmosphere. Their insights can provide a better understanding of how the school environment has shaped their development and educational experiences over time.
13 This article is part of a larger in-progress book project.
14 Single-case ethnographic work has proven instrumental to theory building. Foucault's discussion of Mettray can't stand in for all reform schools; Khan's examination of St. Paul's can't stand in for all elite education; MacLeod's 'Hallway Hangers' and 'Brothers' of Clarendon Heights can't stand in for the situation of all working-class youth. These works can (and do), however, provide the thick descriptions of institutional practices that are grist for exploratory analysis, testing existing theories, and generating new ones.
15 The reason for not mentioning the particular states and metropolitan areas is to preserve the anonymity of the school.
16 15 percent married, 70 percent separated, 12 percent divorced, and 3 percent widowed. My point, of course, is not to prioritize one kind of family structure over another. 'Single parent' is simply an imperfect proxy for the pressure put on primary caregivers. Parents are often the primary source of income for their wider families, and many send their children to Winterhill because they feel unsure about their ability to adequately supervise their child.
17 While I don't explore the reasons for this shift here, there is a large literature on 'tipping points' and white flight from schools. See generally, Card et al. (2008).
18 More precisely, 128 students attended the Winterhill over the 2013-14 academic year.
19 See Goffman (1961), 48ff.
20 fieldnotes_2014Apr04_3. I use codes to refer to adult and child interviews, as well as for my field notes. The first letter is whether the interview subject is a staff member (a), student (c), or alumni (y), the second is a randomly generated code to protect anonymity (in this case 814). Between the underscores is the general position of the person (administrator, teacher, staff) or level of schooling (elementary or middle school), and the final number is a reference to where in the interview the relevant remark was made (in minutes). Field notes are referenced by date. All teacher and student names are pseudonyms, and I've changed the class subject when mentioned (math to science, etc.).
21 c814_middle_7
22 c1056_middle_3
23 c539_middle_6

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24 The philosophy of "caught being good" is part of a wider educational philosophy called character education that rose to prominence in the 1990s.
25 This figure applies to the school day; the merit system is only used in school, not in the cottages.
26 The cottages are less standardized than the classrooms. Some houseparents try to use a similar system, giving students, for example, "Vin-cents" (trying to be true to the actual name, which is a pun off the actual cottage name) which can be redeemed for privileges or snacks. Others are more informal, adding or subtracting time at the recreation hall, on the computer, or on the gaming console based on behavior in the cottage or reports from school.
27 c1331_middle_2
28 This likely reflects a transition in emphasis. In previous years, merits used were simply called demerits and just concerned misbehavior. The school has tried to transition. I was told by staff that, in prior years, some students were so far in the hole that the system stopped functioning appropriately.
29 More precisely, $\rho = -.61$ and $\rho = -.58$.
30 Summarizing Locke's views in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Jonathan Marks writes, "Here, in any case, is Locke's recommended approach to teaching liberality. One should encourage children to 'part with what they have easily and freely to their friends.' One should reward liberality with 'great commendation and credit,' and make sure that the liberal child 'loses nothing by his liberality,' even that 'all the instances he gives of such freeness be always repaid, and with interest.' In this way, the child will find 'by experience that the most liberal has always most plenty, with esteem and commendation to boot.' Finally, the parent or tutor should make giving 'a contest among children,' so that liberality will be a pleasure to learn, a kind of game, and so that the impulse to get the better of others can manifest itself in kindness, liberality, and civility toward others." See Marks (2012), 697.
31 a55-56_cottage_1
32 fieldnotes_2014May14
33 Goffman 1961, 60f.
34 a41_teach_5.
35 a65_teach_7
36 a77_teach_4
37 a42_teach_4
38 Account taken from Winterhill's disciplinary incident files.
39 Reference to a then-popular song by singer Miley Cyrus.
40 See generally McFarland (2004).
41 The video was about the history of fast food. As a consequence, most of the conversation among the students was about how much they liked fast food and how they were looking forward to having a cheeseburger over the weekend.
42 On the latent or 'hidden' curriculum, see the work of Philip Jackson. For the role of the hidden curriculum in modern debates in social theory, see Giroux (1983). For subtractive schooling, see Valenzuela (2005).
43 y12_alumni_0:22
44 y12_alumni_0:18
45 See Václav Havel's essay, "Power of the Powerless" in Havel (1992).
46 y11_alumni_2:08
47 y11_alumni_0:14
48 y11_alumni_2:09
49 y12_alumni_0:13
50 y13_alumni_0:27
51 y11_alumni_0:30
52 y11_alumni_0:31
53 While Winterhill advertises high rates of college attendance and improved test scores, the empirical story is much more ambiguous. Selection problems, student attrition, in addition to various and sundry measurement issues make a precise evaluation difficult. That said, there are scholarly assessments of the community boarding school education model in the context of SEED schools. See Curto & Fryer Jr (2014).

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