# Embodying ‘Britishness’: The (re)making of the Contemporary Nigerian Elite Child

## Abstract

Existing studies on the role of schooling in the formation and (re)production of elite identity have focused almost entirely on the reproduction strategies of Western elites. Consequently, the distinction strategies employed by non-western elite parents to maintain and/or advance their class positioning –via their children- have remained largely unexamined. Using rare qualitative data from a broader study of the educational preferences of elite Nigerian families, this article critically examines the key processes involved in Nigerian elites’ attempts to protect and/or enhance their children’s future elite status. Combining the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu and Fanon, the paper argues that a significant proportion of elite Nigerian parents opt for UK-based private boarding schools because they believe that these schools will bestow their children with ‘attributes of excellence’ through a highly selective exposure to elite White British lifestyles and practices. These parents believe that placing their children in White (elitist) spaces would allow them to acquire the right dispositions and deportment such as ‘respectability’ and a ‘refined accent’, essential for the (re)production and/or formation of ‘genuine’ elite identity in modern-day Nigerian.

## *Keywords*: Bourdieu, Fanon, ‘Britishness’, Nigerian elites, ‘Whiteness’ and ‘Distinction strategies’.

*We wanted our children to learn the British way. I mean the ‘proper’ British way. The British aristocrats’ way of life, like the royal families and top respectable families like that.* (Mrs Gbenga).

In accepting Bourdieu’s (1984) postulation that “social positions which present themselves to the observer as places juxtaposed in static order of discrete compartments [...] are also strategic emplacements, fortresses to be defended and captured in a field of struggles” (p. 244), this article aims to examine Nigerian elite parents’ attempts to *maintain* and *defend* their social positioning by sending their children to UK-based private boarding schools. I do this by critically examining the strategies of distinction adopted by a group of Nigerian elite parents in their attempt to acquire for their children what they perceived as the “attributes of excellence” (p. 66), to use a Bourdieusian phrase. I argue that these distinction strategies take the form of three key micro-social processes, specifically; minority status, bodily transformation, and refined British accent, which allow parents to reproduce their social positioning as the genuine Nigerian elites while limiting entry into this group at the same time. Furthermore, in this article I contend that the embodiment of what the parents perceived as ‘Britishness’[[1]](#footnote-1) – manifested in White British upper-class’ deportment, decorum and accent – will provide their children with a unique set of Western dispositions, setting them apart from the newcomers within their social field while endowing their children with highly profitable identities[[2]](#footnote-2) such as intellectuals and transnational/global elites. Finally, the paper argues that parental preference for White Britishness is due to the “colonial condition,” which Fanon (1967/2008, p.119) argues had led to the gentrification of Black people’s psyche.

Scholars such as Boyd (1973), Cookson and Persell (1985), and Bourdieu (1984; 1990; 1996) have all theorized the concept of distinction, arguing that it plays a crucial role in the formation and maintenance of elite status. In addition to possessing large amounts of economic capital, elites must also possess the “attributes of excellence”, which are essentially distinguishable deportment, accent and lifestyle; all of which are types of cultural and symbolic capitals in Bourdieu’s frame. In colonial Nigeria, Western education was the main marker of distinction (Smythe and Smythe 1960). Historical accounts of colonial Nigeria have shown that besides weakening the traditional structures, such as marriage, caste, and land ownership, on which traditional elites depended for their reproduction (Simpson, 2003), colonisation also made Western education one of the very few institutions that “allocates and regulates privileges” in Nigeria (Bassey, 1999, p. 45). Bassey (1999) goes as far as to claim that the “White man’s clerk” (p.45) - a member of the indigenous population who had acquired basic primary education - was the embodiment of class, prestige and honour. However, Bassey’s remark that the ability to “read and write” (p.47) was enough to confer someone with elite status in colonial and early post-colonial Nigeria must be understood in the context of the exclusivity and rarity of education during these periods. Indeed, research suggests that the quality of education during these periods was of an arguably low standard (Csapo, 1983). Rather, as Csapo (1983) perceptively notes, the high value of education in Nigeria in those periods was due to “its scarce market value,” which “opened doors to positions of authority” (p. 92).

Obviously, the educational landscape of Nigeria has changed since the colonial and early post-colonial eras of the 1960s and 70s, when the majority of the parents in this study had their education. The introduction of equalisation schemes such as the Universal Primary Education (UPE) (Aigbokhan et al., 2007) and Universal Basic Education (UBE) (Unagha, 2008) after independence has led to an increase in the number of Nigerian families now willing and able to access the education system, weakening the reproductive capacity of education as a site of elite identity formation and reproduction. The massification of education has not only intensified the struggle for elite status, it has also changed the *resources* and *sites* of elite reproduction and maintenance in present day Nigeria. Unlike the colonial and early post-colonial periods when Nigerian educated elites relied on prestigious state education institutions such as King’s College, Lagos, St Andrew’s College Oyo and Methodist High School, Uzuakoli for their reproduction (Bassey, 1999), the current globalization of educational opportunities has meant that elites now utilise the international education market for the reproduction and legitimation of their social and economic positions.

In this paper, I focus specifically on elite parents’ engagement with, and use of, three distinction strategies, obtained through the consumption of British private schooling, as they try to ensure that their children enjoy similar status as them and therefore continue to retain and maximise their “advantage under shifting global conditions” in contemporary times (Weis & Cipollone 2013, p.704). To that end, I present an analysis of British upper-class Whiteness as a source of highly valuable cultural and symbolic capital that is central to the struggle of social distinction in modern-day Nigeria. I draw extensively on and extend Bourdieu’s theorisation of distinction - via Fanon’s theory of colonisation - specifically, its role in elite identity formation and legitimation. This coupling of Bourdieu’s and Fanon’s respective theoretical frameworks provides some answers to important questions that studies such as this one invariably raises; why does Whiteness have “the highest possible concentration of values” (Molande 2008, p.182), and why do Black people accept the hegemonic discourse of West/White is best?

In the section that follows, I attempt to conceptualise ‘distinction’ from Bourdieu’s and Fanon’s respective theoretical frameworks. I then provide an overview of the literature on elite studies, specifically, the role of elite schools in elite identity formation and (re)production. The second section briefly explains the research design and sampling framework used in the study. The third section presents an in-depth analysis of the data, focusing on the three micro-social processes through which Nigerian elite parents are attempting to maintain their social positioning while trying to transform their children into global elites at the same time. Finally, the chapter notes a major implication of parents’ preference for British Whiteness, and concludes with a Bourdieusian/Fanonian analysis of why Black people are accepting of Western hegemony.

Theorising ‘Distinction’

Bourdieu (1984) defines distinction as “the transfigured, misrecognisable, legitimate form of social class” that “only exists through *the struggles for the exclusive appropriation of the distinctive signs* [such as accent, deportments and dispositions] which make natural distinction”(p. 250 original emphasis). According to Bourdieu (1984), no one can escape class struggle over legitimate taste and social prestige. Crucially, Bourdieu asserts that distinction is an integral part of this struggle. To ‘win’ the struggle, Bourdieu contends that individuals and groups unconsciously or consciously distinguish themselves from other groups viewed as beneath them while simultaneously aligning themselves with those perceived as equals. He posits that “symbolic goods, especially those regarded as the attributes of excellenceconstitutes one of the key markers of ‘class’ and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction” (p. 66). These attributes of excellence usually include aristocratic aesthetics, which are manifested in comportment of dress, walking and speaking (Bourdieu, 1984, 1991, 1996).

Membership of an elite group is dependent on, and regulated by, the acquisition of authentic aesthetic taste and distinguishable deportment and dispositions (Boyd 1973; Cookson & Persell 1985; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009). Bourdieu (1996) argues that;

No noble title suffices in and of itself […]. So, for example, the highest academic title are necessary but insufficient, possible but not inevitable, conditions for access to the establishment. And wealth, when it is not accompanied by the appropriate “manners” is even less sufficient. (p. 315)

Making a similar point, Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) argues that “having access to economic resources alone does not give a person elite status; rather, the ability to demonstrate particular behaviours, dispositions, knowledge, and aesthetic choices is essential in order to assert particular kind of status-group membership” (p. 11). Specifically, Gaztambide-Fernández contends that “status groups are formed around status signals and behaviours that symbolically limit who can access membership in such groups” (p. 11). This echoes Bourdieu’s (1996) postulation that “all reproduction strategies imply a form of *numerus clausus’”* (p. 286), which he describes as “a kind of protectionist measure, analogous to immigration restrictions, a riposte to ‘overcrowding’ provoked by the fear of being ‘overwhelmed’ by invading hordes” (p. 179). Boyd (1973) puts it succinctly;

 if a reward is to be considered a due recognition of status, and consequently bring prestige to its recipient, it must be desired by others and it must be difficult to obtain [because] symbols that may be readily acquired by anyone who is willing and able to pay the price are subject to status deterioration*.* (p. 24)

Crucially, Bourdieu (1984) asserts that the manner in which these dispositions and deportments are appropriated - early or late exposure to culture, “prolonged contact with cultured people” (p. 66), or through imitation - not only determines the “seniority in admission to the nobility” (p. 2), but also distinguishes the old from the new establishment and the “distinguished possessors” from the “pretentious challengers” (p. 251). Furthermore, Bourdieu (1984) contends that “the manner in which culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it” (p. 2). Early acquisition of elite culture brings about ease*,* which isan integral element of authentic elite identity (Bourdieu, 1984).

Bourdieu’s form of social analysis has been very influential in sociology of education, particularly research on social reproduction (see Forbes & Lingard, 2015). However, Bourdieu’s analysis of elite formation and reproduction pertains specifically to the French society. Focusing primarily on the role of the state in elite education and formation, Bourdieu’s schools were unavoidably “national to the core” (Kenway & Koh, 2013, p. 287). Scholars have argued that such focus has led to what Johnson (2013, p.178) calls “methodological nationalism,” which is “founded on the idea of the sovereign, bounded state and its primacy in forming subject-citizens” (Tarc & Mishra Tarc, 2015, p.36). As a consequence, this approach assumes wrongly that the so-called attributes of excellence needed for the formation of elite identity are generated by, and acquired only within national (local) elite schools. Methodological nationalism is particularly problematic given that it does not account for the global context where certain ‘Western deportment’ is advantageous. To put it differently, this approach fails to conceive a global context where “capitals with the greatest exchange rate in a particular society’s field of power are not necessarily found in that society alone” (Kenway & Koh, 2013, p. 287).

As shall become clear, race is a major theme in this study, but unfortunately Bourdieu’s analysis does not account for how race and class intersect, particularly as “expressed in objectified form in styles of life and lifestyle choice” (Moore, 2008, p.110), but also in objective life chances. Bourdieu’s failure to incorporate race in his analysis indicates that he did not consider the fact that “[Black] capitals are not valued equally to White capitals” (Maylor & Williams, 2011, p. 350), and that Blacks who sought distinction and status have to appropriate White culture (Lacy, 2007).Indeed, the ‘*White* *facto*r’ was instrumental in making Western education an emblem of high status in colonial Africa (Swatridge, 1985).

All that said, the analytical mileage of Bourdieu’s concept of distinction in the formation of elite identity cannot be overemphasised. Besides revealing elites and their so-called distinguished lifestyle and practices as merely social constructs, Bourdieu’s analysis has the capacity to engender a more nuanced understanding of elite identity formation by paying close attention to the subtle ways through which elites reproduce and legitimate their social and economic positioning. However, the colonial history coupled with the prominence of Whiteness in parents’ narratives requires that Bourdieu’s frame of reference be extended to include race, and this is where Fanon is helpful.

Whiteness: A Symbol of ‘Distinction’

*One is White as one is rich, as one is beautiful, as one is intelligent* (Fanon, 1967/2008, p. xiii).

 Based on the logic of difference, perpetuated through colonisation and the universalist claims to science and religion, Fanon (1967/2008) argues that the coloniser (Whites) effectively construct the colonised (Blacks) as the ‘Other’. Consequently, Black or Blackness has come to be perceived, by Blacks and Whites, as the antithesis of White or Whiteness (Fanon, 1967/2008).[[3]](#footnote-3) Hence, Fanon posits that “Blackness [is] at best a figure of absence, or worse a total reversion” of Whiteness (p.xv).

Integral to Fanon’s (1967/2008) overall argument is the idea that colonisation destroyed the “corporeal schema” (p. 84) of the colonised, which he argues is “a definitive structuring of self and the world” (p. 83), and an essential element to any sense of self. Instead, colonisation “creates a real dialectic between the body and the world” (p.83) for the colonised, and consequently a ‘normal’ or normative subjective self could not be formed. In the place of the normal subjective self, Fanon argues, arises the “historico-racial schema”, which has meant the colonised can only have “a relationship to self, to give a performance of self which is scripted by the coloniser” (p. 112), thus producing in him the internally divided condition of “absolute depersonalisation” (p. xxxii). To put it simply, Blacks have internalised the hegemonic discourse of White superiority and thus see themselves as inferior (Fanon, 1967/2008).

As a consequence of this internalisation, Fanon (1967/2008) argues that the colonised wants to be able to flee Blackness. He goes on to assert that the colonial condition, that is, the internalisation of inferiority complex by Blacks, has meant, “the other [the coloniser] alone can give him [the colonised/Blacks] worth” (p. 119). Extending Fanon’s argument, Goldberg (1996, p. 185, quotes in Puwar 2004) writes;

 Black people are faced with the dilemma that the principle mode of progress and self-elevation open to them is precisely through self-denial, through *the effacement, the obliteration, of their Blackness*. They are predicated, that is, upon the possibility of rendering a significant feature of their self-definition invisible, if not altogether effaced. This invisibility, in turn, is effected through the necessity of recognition by Whites which is begrudgingly extended only at the cost of the *invisibility* of Blackness. (P.116-117 original emphasis)

 Both historical and contemporary literature on race and ethnicity has argued that Blacks appropriate White culture or Whiteness in order to survive and be successful in what is essentially a “White World” (Rollock, Gillborn, Vincent & Ball, 2011, p. 1085; see also Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), and that Blacks’ alignment and association with White upper-middle classes confer them with what one might describe as “social estimation of honour” (Weber, 1930/1978, p. 89, quoted in Holme, 2002, p. 180). For example, Bassey (1999) argues that in their bid to legitimate their newfound status, Nigerian educated elites “adopted European styles of dressing” and “maintain[ed] nuclear families”, rather than the traditional practice of polygamy (p. 51). In his research on the consumption pattern of the new Zimbabwean elites, Belk (2000) observes that this group has as its reference the former colonists and the West in general.

 Speaking specifically about the Martinicans; whose country had been colonised by the French, Fanon (1967/2008) contends that the “[Black] of the Antilles will be proportionally Whiter – that is, he will come closer to being *a real human being* – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language” (p. 8 my emphasis). That is to say, “the Antilles [Black] who wants to be White will be Whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is” (Fanon, 1967/2008, p.25). Following Fanon’s work, many studies have also alluded to the significance of English language and other Western deportment as a marker of, and tool for, gaining prestige and high status in former British colonies (De Mejia, 2002; Simpson, 2003). For example Hunter and Hachimi (2012) found that in addition to being “a key index in differentiating better off from poorer Black South Africa” (p. 553), the acquisition of a refined English accent confers on its possessor the image of respectability and sophistication. They conclude that, the more refined one’s accent is, that is, no trace of local accent, the higher the possibility of gaining employment in one of South African’s most prestigious call centres.

 Although Bourdieu and Fanon had focused on different factors in their respective social theory (Bourdieu on ‘class’ and Fanon on ‘race’), central to their theorisation of distinction is the notion that cultural capitals such as accent with the greatest value *always* belong to the dominant group. Historical factors for example, colonisation and imperialism as well as the continuous perpetuation of hegemonic discourses such as ‘West is best’ have not only made the West dominant and non-western countries like Nigeria the dominated, these factors have also successfully constructed Whiteness and White culture as a highly valuable symbolic and cultural capital.

Elite schools as status seminaries

*Where one goes to school can be very important in determining his or her life-styles and life chances* (Cookson & Persell, 1985, p.16).

 In *The State Nobility*, a study which examined the role of the state in elite (re)production in France, Bourdieu (1996) discusses the central role of French elite universities in the formation and maintenance of elite status. According to Bourdieu (1996) these elite institutions do not only enable exclusion, but are also capable of producing distinction. Studies on elite (re)production in the UK (Boyd, 1973) and US (Cookson & Persell, 1985) also found that elite private schools are sites for elite identity formation and (re)production. Scholars such as Scott (1991) and Musgrave (1970) have also argued that the emerging new rich rely on elite private schools to imbibe and accustom their children to the appropriate dispositions, attributes, and lifestyle necessary for entry into elite groups.

 More recent studies that have investigated the role of elite private schools in elite identity formation and acquisition as well as (re)production include: Forbes and Lingard (2015), Kenway and Fahey (2014), Maxwell and Aggleton, (2013), and Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009). Emerging literature from Kenway and her colleagues who have explored elite private schools in non-western countries such as Singapore (Kenway & Koh, 2013), Hong Kong (Kenway & Fahey, 2014), India (Fahey, 2014) and South-Africa (Epstein, 2014), have also examined the role of colonisation and by association, Whiteness in the construction of elite schools in former British colonies (Epstein, 2014).

 Reporting on the key findings from their innovative and unique multi-sited ethnographic study, which explores elite schools in globalising circumstances, Kenway and Fahey (2014) assert that elite schools in non-western countries like Hong Kong are, “through non-mother tongue curricular”, able to imbue their pupils with the confidence and assurance to “imagine themselves as cosmopolitan subjects who can completely, comfortably and full of understanding move effortlessly cross and between different locations and cultures” (p. 190). More importantly, through the participation in “global youth leadership programme”, students in this school were “offered a strong sense of their own competence, agency and entitlement” which in turn allows them “to imagine themselves as global leaders in various fields” (p. 191). Crucially, Kenway and Fahey (2014) explain that “through an orientation to so-called Western knowledge [and] Western schools and universities,” students in the elite school in Hong Kong “are invited to continue to think that the West knows best and is the best” (p. 190).

 Apart from the emerging work by Kenway and her colleagues, existing studies on elite identity formation and (re)production have focused entirely on the West. While I accept that there would be some similarities between the type of distinction strategies for example, sending their children to elite schools, employed by Western and non-western elites for their social reproduction, I will argue that historical and cultural differences between both societies would undoubtedly result in a more localised understanding and perception of distinction and distinguishable features. In the same vain, perception of capital as well as suitable sites for generating and/or acquiring valuable cultural capital will also vary between Western and non-western elites (Prieur and Savage, 2011).

 By analysing the ‘choices’ made by a group of Nigerian elite parents who have opted to send one or more of their children to private boarding schools in England, my research makes two significant contributions to the field of elite study. Firstly, it provides an understanding of African elites’ perception of valuable capitals and more specifically, what they perceive as distinguishable features and traits needed for reproducing their social positioning. Secondly, it examines the views of parents’ rather than students’ views, which is the common focus of existing studies of elite schools. Parents’ narratives provide us with useful insights into reasons for their school choices and what they consider to be the specific benefits of educating their children in certain schools. Without such insights our understanding of elite identity formation and reproduction remains partial.

Research Design

This study focused on elite Nigerian parents whose primary place of residence was Nigeria and who had primary and/or secondary aged children in UK-based private boarding schools. I used Boyd’s (1973) nine characteristics of elites in modern democratic society as a framework to develop a sampling frame for recruiting parents in my study. These defining features include holding high occupational positions, a distinctive life style, group consciousness, a sense of exclusiveness, being seen to hold a functional capability and positioning of moral responsibility within society. Some of Boyd’s characteristics of elites have been supported by other writing which emphasises minority status and the exclusivity of holding such a positioning (Ellersgaard, Larsen, & Munk 2012; Keller 1963/1991).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Elites are notoriously difficult to identify and access, and they are also keen to avoid research being conducted on them (Odendahl & Shaw, 2002). In order to gain access to this group, I used friends and relatives who knew and had access to these parents as middlemen. Some of the parent participants recruited via my ‘contacts’ also recommended other parents for the study creating a snow-balling effect (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

In all, thirty-nine participants were recruited for the study. The participants consisted of twenty-six parents (eleven fathers, four of whom had sent their children to Canada, and fifteen mothers, one of whom had sent her daughter to Ghana) and thirteen gatekeepers (defined as education agents and consultants, head-teachers, Heads of department, Head of visa section, British High Commission, Lagos). Twenty-one of the twenty-six parents had educated their children in the UK. However, only data from parents who had sent their children to private boarding school in the UK are presented in this article. The fathers who had sent their children to the UK tended to be directors or CEOs of major organisations or owned their own companies. Two of the mothers held political appointments at federal and state government levels while the rest either ran their own medium-size businesses and/or were married to senior business executives.[[5]](#footnote-5)

To maximise the number of parents recruited through the various channels, recruiting letters were sent through social network to potential parent participants. The recruiting letter contained, amongst other things, information of the university institution that I was affiliated to at the time. Studies have shown that belonging to a ‘reputable’ institution can be an effective tool to gaining access to elite members (Harvey, 2009). The high esteem in which Nigerians in general hold British education institutions I believed also facilitated my gaining access to this group of parents. In the study I employed semi-structured interviews with all the participants. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Nigeria (Lagos, Abuja and Port-Harcourt) between 2012 and 2014 with a few in London, and all the interviews, with one exception, were held with only one parent.

Acquiring minority Status

*I found out he will be one of the few Nigerians in that school and one of the very few Nigerians that have been to Holyhouse and that is why I chose Holyhouse because I like to think my son is one of the very few Nigerians to have been to that school* (Mr Okon).

 Exclusivity and minority status have been found to be key features of elite status (Boyd, 1973; Ellersgaard et al., 2012). To gain access to exclusivity however, individuals must have distinctive and distinguishable lifestyle that put them in the minority in any given society. Substantial evidence in the data indicate that the ratio of Black to White pupils in a school is a significant factor influencing parents’ school choice in the UK.As well as preferring schools with fewer Blacks, the data show that these parents are more content when the Blacks in the school are not Nigerians, but from other African countries like “South Africa [and] Kenya” (Mrs Philips). Specifically, parents wanted their children to be “one of the very few Nigerians” (Mr Odili) attending these schools*.* Mrs. Bridge, for examples, says they chose the school for her first daughter “because the school is an international school […] with very few Nigerians there”. Mrs. Nwankwo was more explicit, explaining that they “didn’t really want a place where we have a lot of Nigerians.”

 It is very clear that parents are seeking ‘minority status’ for their children. From a Bourdieusian framework, the imposition of ‘minority status’ could be described as a form of symbolic capital through which parents confer distinction to their children in order to achieve a sense of exclusivity. Furthermore, this is a type of “symbolic confinement” (Bourdieu, 1996, p.75), which not only enables their children to appropriate these so-called attributes of excellence, it will also, arguably, enable them to become aware of their social status (as the few privileged Black) and life trajectory as transnational/global elites. Symbolic confinement also allows the child to affirm a sense of confidence in her or his own value (Bourdieu, 1996). Self-confidence and confidence in their value as elites is crucial if their children are to acquire and exude the type of ease and naturalness necessary for, and associated with, authentic elite identity.

 From a Fanonian lens, having their children positioned in a place that allows them to assume minority status allows these parents to effectively construct their children as “the exceptions to the rule” (Kendall, 2002, p.15). That is, one of the few Black people with similar moral values and intelligence as their White counterparts (Wise, 2009). Equally, by seeking minority status for their children, these parents are constructing their children as the few Blacks that can, and have “*transcended* their Blackness” (Wise, 2009, p.9 emphasis in original), thereby expunging or minimising their ‘Otherness’ at the same time. If we consider the historical construction of Western Whites as superior and Black people as inferior (Fanon, 1967/2008), one can also infer that by choosing predominantly White schools, these parents are in effect assigning their children to “a group of superior essence” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 112).

 ‘Minority status’ acquired in this manner – deliberately choosing places where one’s own ethnicity is not largely represented - is indeed a kind of “defensive necessity” (Demaine, 2001, p.185) or more accurately, a numerus clausus, which has been necessitated by the democratisation of education and status. The consumption of British private schooling is a symbolic act intended to help construct parents and their children as the ‘distinguish possessors’ of high taste and the emerging rich as ‘pretentious challengers’. That is, consuming a predominantly White private schooling allows these parents to claim seniority within national/local elite groups.

Whilst parents were eager to acquire for their children minority status through eliteness, they refused to allow their children to “mix with most Nigerians in the UK” because, as Ms. Ambrose explains, they considered them “very bush [and] very local.” Distancing their children from their ethnic types is perhaps one of the means by which parents wish to reduce their children’s Nigerianness. In sum, parents rejected the minority status earned through identification as Black Nigerians while embracing minority status as an elite.

 Paradoxically, in order to ensure that their children are recognisable and accepted as local elites, these parents also attempted to retain some of their children’s ‘Nigerianness’ by ensuring that they were “more grounded in Nigerian culture” before sending them to the UK, as Mrs. Adu contends. Retaining their cultural heritage is crucial to their children’s identity as local elite since “total otherness, like total individuality, is likely to be unrecognisable and hence without value” (Featherstone, 1991, cited in Skeggs, 2004, p. 149). This highlights the complex relationship between race and status, particularly in elite identity formation in African societies. To position their children as the ‘genuine’ Nigerian elites, parents needed to efface their children’s Blackness. Paradoxically, their children rely on their ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ for the formation and legitimation of their status as local elites. What has become clear nonetheless, is that these parents are selecting what they perceived as the most valuable aspects of different cultures in order to create the greatest value; thus highlighting the fluidity of identity construction.

 Interestingly, there is no evidence in the data to suggest that parents were concerned about the potential racism that their children might experience in a predominantly White boarding school. Instead, as already argued, these parents were keen to prevent their children from mixing with other Nigerians. Ironically, this can be construe as a form of racism. A plausible reason for parents’ lack of concern about their children experiencing racism in a UK-based British boarding school can be found in Mrs Ayo’s remark: *“*if we were to look at his background back home, it’s more of an elitist Nigerian and then you bring him here and you put in a situation where is likely to mix with the elitist British.*”* One could deduce from this comment that parents are not concerned about their children experiencing racism because - in their eyes - they are simply placing their children among their kind; albeit, of a different colour. Given the high esteem with which these parents hold the White British upper-class (as shall be shown later in the paper), it is not unreasonable to infer that they perceived the White British upper classes as a moral and respectable group that is incapable of racist acts.

‘Bodily’ Transformation

These [how to speak and dress properly] are the things that separate me from others who may have more money but not class. I don’t value material things which most of those *so-called* rich women are mostly concerned with. You see them in parties wearing layers upon layers of jewellery and they are quite loud […]unfortunately most of these women don’t have *elite background*. They are not from elite families just fortunate to marry a man with money, and you can always tell when you meet them. The way they speak, their *diction* gives them easily away. [The way] they carry themselves tells a lot about where they are from. Believe me it shows. You can tell when a person is from a lower class. You know, ‘money miss road’ [a term used in Nigeria to describe people with money but not class] (Mrs Gbenga).

Mrs. Gbenga’s comment above, which is an attempt to distinguish herself from other women within her social circle, illustrates Bourdieu’s (1996) claim that “wealth, when it is not accompanied by the appropriate manners,” is insufficient “conditions for access to the establishment” (p. 316). Also implied in the comment is that Mrs. Gbenga had gained the know-how of the game of high culture through early socialisation. Hence, she was aware that outlay of money, for example, “wearing layers upon layers of jewellery”, is not necessarily a sign of nobility. Rather, such overt display of wealth is considered ostentatious and indicates a lack of taste and class (Bourdieu, 1996).

 Evidence from the data indicates that not all the parents have elite backgrounds. For example, one of the reasons that Mrs. Okwu gave for sending her children to the private boarding school in England was in order to “pick up some good habits,” like “how to talk, how to interact with people.” When I asked her whether her children could have learnt these behaviours in Nigeria, she replied, “I don’t know, it [the correct manner and style], that means they won’t know it if they stay in Nigeria.” The abstract below suggests that by sending her son to the ‘right school’, and in the ‘right place’, Mrs Okwu’s son had not only been exposed to high culture, but had also gained “the know-how and feel for the game of high culture” (Sayer, 2005, p.78). Mrs. Okwu explains,

If he were to be here [Nigeria] I don’t think he would know what a Ball is until he is out of the university. And now he can say I’m going to a Ball and this is how we dress for a Ball (Mrs Okwu).

Even though it was not explicitly stated, the fact that Mrs. Okwu was keen for her children to acquire the correct manner and style suggests that like Mrs. Gbenga, she too acknowledges that having large volume of economic capital does not automatically makes one an elite (Bourdieu**,** 1984). Rather, economic capital needs to be transmuted into other highly valuable forms of capitals. The consumption of British private schooling is an effective way by which these parents are attempting to convert their economic capital into valuable cultural, symbolic and social capitals. In their embodied and objectified states, cultural capital helps to distinguish genuine elites from “wannabes,” to use Mrs. Ayo’s terminology, while instigating social closure at the same time (Parkin, 1979).

 It has become clear however, that while elite parents like Mrs. Gbenga are relying on the international education market through UK-based private boarding schools, for their reproduction, others like Mrs. Okwu - who were not born into nobility/upper-class - used the international education market for social ascension. By sending her children to England for their schooling, Mrs. Okwu is investing her children with class. This reinforces the point that the old and new establishment in contemporary Nigeria rely on the international education market for the (re)production of elite status.

 Evidence in the data also suggests that parents sent their children to the UK-based private boarding schools because they wanted to transform them into “respectable gentlemen and ladies” (Mrs Kuti). To become a respectable lady or a gentleman, children needed not only to avoid “dressing like tarts,” which Mrs. Tosin described as “revealing clothes” for girls and Mrs. Ayo described as wearing clothes with *“*hoods” and the “pierc[ing] of ears and nostril” for boys,but individuals must also have knowledge of what Mrs. Chuka described as *“*appropriate dress code for the different [social] outings.”

 Specifically, parents perceived respectability to be synonymous with Englishness. More significantly, parents perceived respectability as the exclusive attribute of the White British upper-classes. Mrs. Chuka explains,

I am not talking of the ordinary British people you see on the streets of London, who live on benefits. No, I want my son to copy the British aristocrats. I am talking about respectable gentlemen and ladies. Children who are well brought up and know how to dress and talk in public.

Similarly, Mrs. Adu draws comparisons to Royalty,

You see how the princes dress […]. How they always look posh. You don’t see them piercing their ears or smoking in public like those boys and girls in London. Children from those kind of families know how to comport themselves in public. You won’t see the girls dressing anyhow. They dress like proper ladies and gentlemen.

 Parents’ views of the class-specific nature of respectability resonates with Skeggs’ (1997) argument that respectability has historically been constructed “as the property of the middle-class individuals” (p. 3**)**. A broader implication of perceiving respectability as a distinctive trait of the White British aristocrats is that it invariably constructs it as a natural distinction of White people. In other words, by saying that “the British aristocrats” are “respectable gentlemen and ladies,” Mrs Chuka, like the other parents, is constructing respectability as an exclusively White attribute, albeit of a certain class. I would argue that the perceived racial-specific nature of respectability is what makes it both desirable and highly valuable. Crucially, it is this racial element of respectability, which makes it an attribute of excellence and subsequently, an ideal weapon in struggle for elite status and distinction in present-day Nigeria.

 The discourse of bodily transformation is further illustrated by Mrs Adu, who explains that;

This school [UK-based British private boarding school] has polished him, which is what I expected as opposed to the ruggedness he got from Lagos [Nigeria] some of the brashness is gone. He is more of a gentleman and has some more values.

Besides providing some support to the ‘right school’ thesis with regards to entry into elite circle, the comment also shows that these parents are aware that a “personality change” (Fanon, 1967/2008, p.14) or “a change of nature” is essential if one is to achieve “social promotion” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 251). Also indicated in Mrs Adu’s comment is the idea that UK-based private boarding schools are among the few White spaces that are “associated with refinement” and therefore capable of “civilis[ing] otherwise wild bodies” (Puwar, 2004, p.113).

 In the case of Mrs Adu’s son, the “ruggedness” and “brashness”, characterised here as typical of African or Nigerian disposition, is “polished” away and replaced with Western gentility in order that he may become a gentleman, and therefore enable him to acquire a transnational elite identity. Fanon (1967/2008) asserted;

every colonised people […] is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s [the mother country being the colonisers’ country of origin] cultural standards. He becomes Whiter as he denounces his Blackness, his jungle[ness] (p.9).

According to Berghoff (1990), private boarding schools in the UK are “effective instrument[s] for bestowing gentility on the sons of the rough and warty industrial pioneers” (p.150). Given that Mrs. Adu was one of the parents in the study with an elite background, it is curious that she would say she sent her children to English private boarding school so that they could be “exposed to the proper way of doing things.” This suggests that unlike British elites for whom gentility is ostensibly hereditary, Nigerian elites are not born with this trait but rather have to acquire it. This resonates with Fanon’s postulation that Blacks, irrespective of their social status, are deemed ‘rough’ precisely because of the colour of their skin. Nonetheless, parents’ desire to transform their children’s body suggests that they are aware that the body is the most indispensable materialisation of class and taste (Bourdieu, 1977).

‘Refined’ Accent

*Entrance into ‘society’ assumes that one refines one’s upbringing and lose one’s local accent.* (Bourdieu, 1996, p.316)

 All the parents in the study see the acquisition of a foreign accent as one of the main benefits for sending their children overseas for their education. The prevalence of words like “accent”, “intonation”, “diction” in the interview transcripts, indicate that acquiring a refined accent and pronouncing English words “the way it ought to be pronounced,” to quote Mrs. Chuka, is very important to these parents. Moreover, these parents are also very keen to point out that the accent and diction they wanted their children to acquire is that of the White British upper-classes’. For example, Mrs. Ola explains, “What I want them to pick up is the posh British accent, real British accent. I really love it.” Elaborating the point further, Mrs. Kuti remarks,

My children now have the correct proper British accent. The accent of the British aristocrats and that is one of my goals. I love the way the British top class speaks, very proper. This is different from the way most people speak in England. You hear many ‘Have been to’ speaking badly. They don’t speak the correct, proper English, they say ‘init’ instead of isn’t it. Things like that. This is gutter English. It is not how the British elites speak.

Blacks have historically been “devalued, positioned as working class, uneducated, and capable of only conversing using colloquialisms or ‘Negro dialect’” (Rollock et al., 2011, p. 1080) in Europe and the U.S. Thus, a “correct proper British accent” is a type of cultural and symbolic capital that allows “the most fundament social differences to be expressed” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 226). As a type of symbolic capital, a “proper British accent” ensures that these parents’ children can be differentiated from the “Have been to,” which is a colloquial term used to describe ordinary Nigerians who have travelled to Europe and/or the U.S. A refined accent will also make these parents’ children distinguishable from those who belong to other social groups, who, through increased schooling and the mass media, may have acquired fluency in the English language, but not necessarily a “posh British accent.” Thus, as well as being an exclusionary tactic, parents appeared to have conceived a refined British accent as a stronger marker of class boundaries and social status. Research has shown that refined accent is a solid marker of distinction, which qualifies those who have acquired it as elites in contemporary societies (Berghoff, 1990).

 Also, by placing their children in schools which enable them to acquire the accent of the “British top class,” these parents are systematically aligning their children (and themselves) to the White British upper-classes, which in turn accentuates their seniority within local elite groups. A similar finding was made by Rollock, Gillborn, Vincent, & Ball (2011), who explore the public identity of the Black British middle classes. They noted that “language and accent were one of the central tools used by the Black British middle class to signal their class status to White others” (p. 1087). Fanon (1967/2008) argues that as well as giving Blacks “honorary citizenship” (p. 25) to the ‘WhiteWorld’, the mastery of the coloniser’s language, manifested in the form of refined accent and diction, is also one of the ways by which the colonised can prove that “he [or she] has measured up to the [coloniser’s] culture” that they have appropriated (p. 25). Furthermore, acquiring an accent that is “different from the way most people speak in England” once again puts their children in the minority, which, as argued earlier, is important if their children are to maintain their social position at home and presumably gain entry into the circle of global elites.

There is also evidence that parents perceived a Nigerian accent as an “issue”, with the potential of constructing one as lacking in intellect and thus needs to be completely erased or, at the very minimum, concealed. As Mrs. Okwu explains,

when we school in Nigeria we tend to have issues with diction. I know that when you grow up in a particular section of the country; let’s say if you are a Northerner […] and you went to school in the North you’ll have a particular kind of accent. Now that does not necessarily mean that you are not smart, it’s just your background, but I know that when you have the opportunity to school in the UK, no matter the background, to an extent your diction would be affected positively so that was a plus for me too. That was also a reason [for sending her children to the UK]. And I also looked at it that she would be a better lady, in terms of how she composes herself or the way she looks at issues.

Implicit in Mrs Okwu’s comment is the idea that a typical Nigerian accent does not have the same symbolic value as a British accent in the linguistic market. Therefore, in order for one to acquire elite status in contemporary Nigeria, it is imperative to “lose one’s local accent” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 316). Whilst having a local accent “does not necessarily mean that you are not smart”, it is clear from Mrs. Okwu’s comment that these parents strongly believed that the acquisition of “the accent of the British aristocrats” will confer on their children an intellectual identity. Gaining an intellectual identity will be very profitable to their children, as the majority of these parents had expressed a strong desire for their children to become political and business elites upon their return to Nigeria. Mrs. Ayo’s comment is typical of parents’ post-secondary aspiration for their children: “I’m building a leader not just an ordinary man on the road, I’m building a leader. Someone who will come back and be a leader of his country.”

Similarly, Mr. Akpan’s comment that “the school [UK-based] will give him all the skills he needs to succeed globally” also offers an indication that parents desired for their children to become global players. It is not unreasonable to infer that, due to the high currency of the English language (Puwar, 2004), Nigerians with a posh British accent might be considered as better read by their counterparts in the international community than those with local accent. In light of this observation, it is equally plausible to posit that the concealment of one’s local accent is not only necessary, but also essential if one is to gain access into, and acceptance from, the global elites.

By placing their children in White spaces where they can acquire White British upper-class accent, these parents are effectively dressing their children “in the trappings of nobility and intellectual grandeur” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 112), which one might argue is necessary for global elite membership. Although, if as Fanon postulates, the hegemonic discourse of ‘West/White is best’ is driven by the West’s desire to maintain the power structures in the global field of power, then the paradox is that no amount of the attributes of excellence gained from schooling in England can guarantee these parents’ children entry into the global elite group.

Concluding Thoughts

 Parents’ persistent reference to what Mrs. Gbenga referred to as “those with money but no class,” as well as the frequent use of phrases such as the “Have been to” and “Money Miss Road” (terms used to describe the *nouveaux riche*) demonstrates a heightened awareness of social position in contemporary Nigeria. Their desperate search for distinction at any cost is also indicative of the democratisation of status (O’Dair, 2000). The democratisation of status has been caused by an increase in the number of people who, freed from practical necessities, can now take part in, and concern themselves with, the “stylisation of life” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 5). As well as devaluing their social status as the genuine elites, the democratisation of schooling and status may also undermine any claim these parents might have to social and moral superiority over other social groups.

To maintain their social positioning and avoid the real prospect of their children becoming one of the undifferentiated masses, I argue that these parents employed three key distinction strategies namely; achieving minority status, internalizing bodily transformation, and acquiring refined accent, which enabled them to acquire distinction for their children. As well as enabling their children to accrue valuable transnational (Borjesson et al., 2007) and cosmopolitan (Ball, 2010) capitals necessary for membership into global elite circle (Ong, 1999), these strategies of distinction are also a form of numerus clausus that regulates entry into elite group in Nigeria today.

Whilst the embodiment of Whiteness may help to construct their children as ‘genuine’ elites, their legitimation and acceptance as local elites relies on the retention of some of their children’s ‘Nigerianness’. This paradox highlights the complexity in elite identity formation in non-western societies, particularly those with colonial history. It also demonstrates the fluidity of identity formation. Whiteness and Blackness are artefacts or resources, which can be used by individuals with the right kinds of privileges and resources to create profitable identities, allowing them to move easily between different social spheres.

 However, whilst seeking the embodiment of Whiteness might be an attempt on the part of parents to equip their children with the right tools for surviving and succeeding in the WhiteWorld, by engaging ‘in the game’ (the embodiment of Whiteness by non-Whites for instrumental and personal gains) they, like the respondents in Rollock et al.’s (2011) study, become “complicit in misrecognising this form of capital” (p. 1078). That is, they unrecognised Whiteness as a social construct forged by the West mainly through the discourse of difference and with the sole aim of maintaining its dominant position in the global field of power (Fanon, 1967/2008). Bourdieu (1993) posits that “those who take part in [any] struggle help to reproduce the game by helping […] to reproduce belief in the value of the stakes” (p. 74). In Bourdieu’s frame therefore, the consumption of Whiteness for social ascension perpetuates the hegemonic discourse of ‘West is best’ while simultaneously devaluing Blacks and Blackness.

 All that said, given that it is “impossible for [Black people] to get away from [an] inborn complex” (Fanon, 1967/2008, p. 87), and given that Blacks live in “a [WhiteWorld] that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex” (p. 74), then it is reasonable to argue that parents’ acceptance of the superiority of Whiteness over Blackness is due to the fact that the WhiteWorld encompasses them (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). To put it differently, these parents accept the hierarchical structure of the world, specifically; the idea that the dominant class whose cultural practices and accent are worthy of imitation is a Western class, because they are the product of the WhiteWorld and “because it has produced the categories of thought that [they] apply to it” and thus ‘it appears to [them] as self-evident” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p.128). A broader implication of the WhiteWorld thesis is that, Whiteness; specifically, White skin, is not only a symbolic capital and an attribute of excellence; it is also, more importantly, a numerus clausus (Jensen, 2005). Thus, while retaining some aspects of their children’s Blackness/Nigerianness was necessary for maintaining their status as local elites, total effacement of their children’s Blackness is required if they are to gain entry into the circle of global elites. (Un)fortunately, despite their wealth, something these parents cannot buy their children is *White skin*.

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1. Parents’ narratives are permeated by the concepts of Whiteness and Britishness. Interestingly, the data indicate that the parents in this study perceived British and Britishness to be synonymous with English/Englishness. Consequently, they use the term Britishness when in actual fact they mean to imply a degree of Englishness. The fact that all the parents had placed their children in English boarding schools, and made constant reference to the Royal Family as a role model in terms of the type of dispositions and traits they wanted their children to acquire, and were keen for their children to be accent-free, indicate this. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Identities are forms of cultural capital that are worked on and embodied by individuals (Skeggs, 2004). Crucially, identity is not “circumscribed by the borders of the nation-state […] or any narrowly defined race or ethnicity” (Dolby, 2000:12). Therefore suggesting that identity is fluid and not fixed. Instead, globalisation and technological advancement have meant that identity can be created from an array of sources. Specifically, individuals with large volumes of economic capital are able to acquire a multiplicity of identities, which in turn enable them easier movement between and across cultural and racial boundaries (Lacy, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It should be noted thatFanon used the term ‘Blacks’ to refer to non-Western or the *colonised* in general and ‘White’ as a generic term for European civilisations and its representatives or the *coloniser*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. At the time of carrying out the research, it was estimated that there were only 802 Nigerian children in private boarding schools in the UK (Brooks 2011). This indicated, among other things, that the parents recruited for this study were both a minority and an exclusive group. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect the parents’ identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)