

The Myth of Meritocracy: Institutional Power, Race and Educational Inequality in Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé's *Ace of Spades*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the myth of meritocratic neutrality in Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé's *Ace of Spades*, focusing on how an elite educational institution can reproduce racial and class inequality while presenting itself as a space of achievement, excellence and legitimate selection. The study addresses a gap in existing criticism, which has established the novel's engagement with institutional racism, class privilege and white supremacy but has paid less attention to the relationship between meritocratic discourse and the institutional reproduction of inequality. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and social reproduction, the study employs qualitative textual analysis and close reading of purposively selected passages concerning institutional values, academic recognition, class privilege, racialised experience, surveillance, discipline and institutional silence. The analysis demonstrates that Niveus Academy's meritocratic structures do not operate independently of social inequality. Academic achievement is recognised within an institution characterised by unequal economic and cultural resources, while race shapes students' access to belonging, security and institutional recognition. The study further shows that surveillance, disciplinary practices and the control of institutional information contribute to sustaining this unequal order. The novel therefore does not reject merit itself; rather, it exposes the institutional conditions under which merit is defined, recognised and rewarded. The study concludes that *Ace of Spades* offers a sustained critique of meritocratic neutrality by demonstrating how claims of excellence and fairness can coexist with, and help legitimise, the reproduction of racial and class inequality within elite education.

Keywords: Meritocracy; Cultural Capital; Institutional Racism; Educational Inequality; Elite Education; Class Privilege.

INTRODUCTION

Education is commonly associated with meritocratic principles: academic achievement, ability and effort are expected to determine access to educational opportunities and subsequent rewards. Yet scholarship increasingly demonstrates that educational institutions do not operate independently of the social inequalities surrounding them. Batruch et al. (2023), for example, show that belief in school meritocracy can reduce perceptions of social-class inequality and support for policies intended to address inequality. Their findings are significant because they demonstrate that meritocracy functions not only as a principle for distributing educational rewards but also as a belief capable of legitimising existing inequalities.

The problem becomes particularly significant in elite educational institutions, where selectivity, academic excellence and institutional prestige are central to the school's identity. Recent research on elite schooling demonstrates that such institutions can simultaneously promote meritocratic selection and reproduce social advantage. A Castillo, Salgado, Carrasco, and Laffert (2024) study of elite public high schools, for instance, found that school habitus and cultural capital can contribute to the reproduction of social and economic inequality even where admission is organised through ostensibly meritocratic procedures. Similarly, research on school segregation and elite reproduction in post-apartheid South Africa demonstrates how access to prestigious schools can become a mechanism for reproducing racial and class privilege (Sass & Aga 2026).

Race further complicates the assumption that educational institutions constitute neutral sites of opportunity. Recent scholarship conceptualises educational inequality not simply as an outcome of pre-existing racial

differences but also as a process through which institutions themselves reproduce and reinforce racial categories and hierarchies. Rochmes (2024), for example, demonstrates how schooling can racialise achievement hierarchies, naturalise racial difference and distribute institutional resources unequally. The

implication is that educational inequality cannot adequately be explained through individual attitudes or isolated discriminatory encounters alone; attention must also be given to the organisational processes through which inequality becomes normalised.

These concerns provide a productive framework for reading Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé's *Ace of Spades*. Set principally at Niveus Private Academy, an elite educational institution whose identity is closely associated with academic excellence, prestige and privilege, the novel follows Chiamaka Adebayo and Devon Richards, two Black students whose experiences progressively expose contradictions within the institution's apparently orderly and merit-based environment. Existing criticism has already established the novel's engagement with racism, white supremacy, classism, trauma and institutional oppression. Adewuyi (2024), for instance, examines the novel through multidirectional memory and Rothberg's theory of implication, concentrating on trauma, racism, white supremacy and resistance.

The present study approaches the novel from a narrower institutional question. Rather than treating racism or privilege as isolated themes, it examines how meritocratic educational ideals interact with institutional power to reproduce racial and class inequality. The concern is therefore not simply whether discrimination occurs at Niveus, but how an institution that presents achievement and excellence as neutral principles can sustain unequal relations while maintaining the appearance of fairness.

The study argues that *Ace of Spades* exposes the myth of meritocratic neutrality by revealing the institutional structures, expectations and practices through which racialised and classed inequalities are produced and normalised. In doing so, the novel shifts attention from discrimination as an individual act to inequality as an institutional process. The study consequently investigates the relationship among merit, institutional power, race and educational inequality, demonstrating how the apparent neutrality of elite education can conceal mechanisms of unequal recognition, opportunity and treatment.

Research Objectives

The study therefore seeks to:

1. examine how *Ace of Spades* constructs the ideology of meritocracy within an elite educational institution;
2. analyse how institutional practices in Niveus reproduce racial and class inequalities;
3. examine the relationship between meritocratic claims and institutional power in the novel; and
4. demonstrate how the novel challenges the assumption that educational achievement and opportunity are distributed through neutral merit-based processes.

Working thesis: *Ace of Spades* represents elite education not as a neutral mechanism for rewarding merit but as an institutional field in which meritocratic discourse can obscure and legitimise the reproduction of racial and class inequality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Meritocracy and Educational Inequality

Meritocracy presents educational achievement as the outcome of individual ability, effort and competence. However, scholarship increasingly questions the assumption that educational institutions operate as neutral mechanisms for rewarding merit. Clycq (2014) demonstrates that meritocratic discourse can make systemic inequalities less visible by explaining educational success and failure primarily through individual or family characteristics rather than through inequalities within the educational system. Xiong (2023) similarly argues that meritocratic evaluation can obscure the influence of family capital, cultural capital and social class, thereby

attributing educational outcomes disproportionately to individual effort and legitimising forms of symbolic violence.

More directly, Batruch et al. (2023) show that belief in school meritocracy has consequences beyond academic achievement. Across four studies, including international data involving more than 88,000 participants in over 40 countries, they found that stronger belief in school meritocracy was associated with lower perceptions of social and income inequality as unfair and lower support for measures intended to reduce such inequalities. Their findings therefore position meritocracy not merely as a principle of educational selection but as a discourse capable of legitimising existing inequality. Dekkers et al. (2022) reinforce this position, showing a significant relationship between meritocratic beliefs and the acceptance of inequality. Importantly, their analysis suggests that the relationship may be circular: meritocracy can obscure and legitimise inequality, while existing inequalities can in turn reinforce meritocratic perceptions.

Jin and Ball (2020) similarly argue that meritocracy can function as a means of legitimising class inequality by presenting educational success and upward mobility as evidence of a fair system. Their analysis of working-class students who reach elite universities is particularly relevant to the present study because it demonstrates that individual educational success does not necessarily displace the class relations embedded within the institution. Owens and De St Croix (2020) likewise show that meritocratic educational discourse can place responsibility for success and failure on students and schools while obscuring the structural inequalities that shape educational opportunities.

These studies establish an important distinction for the present research: merit and meritocracy are not synonymous. The issue is not whether students possess different abilities or whether achievement matters, but how institutions define, measure and reward merit within already unequal social conditions. As Xiong (2023) observes, performance criteria can appear objective while remaining shaped by unequal distributions of family and cultural resources. Dekkers et al. (2022) further indicate that the social acceptance of inequality may depend less on explicit ideological commitment to meritocracy than on the perceived existence of a meritocratic order.

The relevance to *Ace of Spades* lies precisely in this tension. Niveus Academy can therefore be examined not simply as a setting in which discrimination occurs, but as an institutional environment in which claims of merit, excellence and fairness potentially coexist with unequal racial and class relations. The scholarship on meritocracy provides the conceptual basis for investigating that contradiction without reducing the novel's critique to individual prejudice.

Elite Education, Cultural Capital and Institutional Reproduction

Elite educational institutions are not simply places for the transmission of academic knowledge; scholarship shows that they can also participate in the reproduction of social advantage. Domina et al. (2017) conceptualise schools as “sorting machines” that create and reinforce social categories through institutional practices, thereby producing inequalities within and beyond the school.

Research specifically on elite education strengthens this argument. Sullivan et al. (2018) demonstrate that educational pathways, including private and selective secondary schooling, mediate the relationship between social origins and later elite occupational destinations. Similarly, research on elite schools identifies the role of cultural capital and institutional habitus in reproducing social and economic inequality. Gruijters, Elbers, and Reddy (2024), for example, show how the institutional habitus of elite high schools can reinforce students' identification with elite status and contribute to the reproduction of cultural capital. Košutić (2017) likewise found that cultural capital was significantly associated with educational achievement and with students' intentions regarding higher education, supporting the broader argument that educational trajectories are socially differentiated through inherited and acquired cultural resources.

Börjesson et al. (2016) provide a particularly useful account of how elite higher education links embodied and institutionalised cultural capital. Their study shows that selective educational programmes are not merely sites for the acquisition of credentials but also environments in which distinctive tastes, practices and forms of field-specific capital are produced and reproduced. Their findings suggest that educational institutions can transform students' inherited resources into institutionally valued forms of distinction. Sawert (2021) similarly

demonstrates how privileged families employ distinctive child-rearing practices to transmit symbolic capital across generations, including through forms of knowledge that function as markers of educational distinction.

The relationship between elite schooling and meritocracy is therefore particularly important. Kennedy and Power (2010) describe meritocratic discourse as a mechanism that can legitimise class privilege within elite education: educational attainment is presented as individual achievement even when elite schools provide institutional and cultural advantages that shape students' opportunities. Geven and Zwier (2025) further show that students' educational knowledge and familiarity with school expectations are positively associated with academic performance, indicating that seemingly individual achievement can also depend upon culturally differentiated capacities for navigating educational institutions. More broadly, Gamsu, Courtois, and Boden (2024) argue that elite schools are materially connected to capital and the state and can function as institutions through which economic resources are converted into educational and symbolic power.

These studies are significant for the present study because they establish that institutional reproduction does not necessarily require the rejection of meritocratic language. An institution can maintain a strong commitment to achievement and selection while simultaneously reproducing advantages associated with social background, cultural capital and institutional privilege. This provides the precise conceptual bridge to *Ace of Spades*: Niveus Academy can be examined as an elite institution whose claims to excellence and merit must be considered alongside the unequal experiences of the students within it.

The issue, therefore, is not whether merit exists, but how an institution defines, distributes and legitimises merit under unequal social conditions. This distinction is central to the study's examination of Niveus and prevents the analysis from reducing the novel's institutional critique to individual acts of prejudice.

Race and Institutional Inequality in Education

Racial inequality in education cannot be adequately understood as the result of individual prejudice alone. Educational institutions can reproduce racial hierarchies through organisational practices, norms and assumptions that appear neutral. Noguera (2017) demonstrates that racial disparities in educational outcomes are closely connected to the unequal distribution of resources, segregation and institutional arrangements rather than to differences in individual capacity alone. Similarly, Stoll et al. (2025) show how institutional and systemic racism within educational settings can shape the experiences and wellbeing of Black students. This distinction is important to the present study because the concern is not simply whether racist behaviour occurs at Niveus, but how institutional arrangements can make racial inequality appear compatible with normal educational practice.

This perspective is particularly relevant to *Ace of Spades*. Àbíké-Íyímídé places Devon and Chiamaka among the very small number of Black students within an elite private academy, making their racial position inseparable from the institution's social structure. Contemporary discussion of the novel explicitly identifies its critique as one of institutional racism, rather than merely interpersonal prejudice.

The novel's educational setting also connects race to class. Devon enters Niveus as a scholarship student from a working-class background, while Chiamaka possesses substantial economic and social privilege. Their different class positions demonstrate that racial marginalisation does not produce identical experiences among Black students. The author's own discussion of the novel identifies both institutional racism and classism within the private-school setting. Such differentiation is consistent with Noguera's (2017) observation that racial inequality in education is reinforced through its interaction with wider inequalities in wealth, opportunity and institutional resources.

This intersection is important for the meritocracy argument. A school may formally recognise achievement while students encounter very different institutional conditions because of race and social background. Research on educational inequality further indicates that institutions can privilege forms of cultural knowledge, familiarity and interaction that are unevenly distributed across social groups (Geven & Zwier, 2025). Thus, apparently neutral standards of performance may operate within already unequal social and cultural conditions.

The existing scholarship on *Ace of Spades* has already examined racism and white supremacy. Adewuyi (2024),

for example, approaches the novel through trauma, memory and Rothberg's theory of implication, locating its racial critique within wider structures of historical and contemporary oppression. The present study therefore does not seek to establish racism as a new theme in the novel. Instead, it asks how racial inequality operates within an institution that presents educational achievement, selection and advancement as legitimate expressions of merit.

This distinction leads directly to the next section: the existing scholarship on *Ace of Spades* and what it has, and has not, established about the institutional logic of Niveus.

***Ace of Spades* in Existing Scholarship**

Critical scholarship on *Ace of Spades* has already established the novel's engagement with racism, white supremacy and the experiences of Black students within an elite educational environment. Adewuyi (2024), drawing on Rothberg's theories of multidirectional memory and the implicated subject, situates the novel's racial tensions within wider structures of historical and contemporary oppression. His reading is significant because it moves beyond isolated encounters of prejudice to connect the protagonists' experiences with broader systems of racial power and injustice.

The discussion of the novel also makes race inseparable from class and access to elite education. Devon and Chiamaka occupy different socioeconomic positions despite sharing the experience of being Black students at Niveus. Their contrasting circumstances consequently complicate any reading of racial inequality as a uniform experience, showing instead how racial positioning intersects with material privilege and disadvantage within the same institutional space.

Another significant direction in existing scholarship concerns the systemic character of the novel's racial critique. Adewuyi's (2024) analysis, particularly through the concept of implication, locates responsibility for racial injustice beyond individual actors and connects the experiences represented in the novel to wider structures of oppression. Niveus can therefore be understood as an institutional environment in which racial power is embedded in relationships, practices and histories rather than confined to isolated acts of individual prejudice.

However, existing scholarship has primarily illuminated the forms of racial oppression and historical implication represented in the novel rather than examined in detail how Niveus's educational ideals themselves participate in producing or legitimising unequal experiences. The distinction is important. Identifying Niveus as a site of racism does not by itself explain how an institution can preserve an image of excellence, fairness and legitimate achievement while simultaneously sustaining unequal racial and class relations.

The present study therefore builds on existing criticism rather than rejecting it. It shifts the analytical question from institutional racism as a represented problem to meritocracy as an institutional logic. The concern is how concepts such as achievement, selection, recognition and educational advancement operate within Niveus and how their apparent neutrality is complicated by racial and class positioning.

This provides the basis for the study's specific intervention: to examine how *Ace of Spades* exposes the contradiction between meritocratic institutional ideals and the reproduction of racial and class inequality within elite education.

The Unresolved Question: Meritocratic Neutrality and Institutional Reproduction

The existing scholarship establishes that *Ace of Spades* is centrally concerned with racism, white supremacy, class and institutional oppression. Adewuyi (2024), for example, examines the novel through multidirectional memory and Rothberg's theory of implication, emphasising trauma, racism, white supremacy and the wider structures through which racial injustice is reproduced. Such scholarship provides an important foundation for understanding Niveus as more than a neutral educational setting.

What remains less specifically examined, however, is the relationship between Niveus's claims to academic excellence, selection and achievement and the inequalities experienced by its students. The issue is therefore not simply that Niveus is represented as racist or unequal, but how institutional ideals that appear neutral can coexist

with, and potentially help normalise, unequal racial and class relations. This shifts the analysis from the presence of discrimination to the institutional logic through which inequality is reproduced and legitimised.

This study therefore does not claim that meritocracy, institutional racism or educational inequality have not been considered in relation to *Ace of Spades*. Its intervention is narrower: it examines how the appearance of meritocratic neutrality operates within an elite educational institution whose practices are already structured by unequal racial, class and cultural relations. Merit is consequently treated not as a self-evidently neutral standard, but as a category whose meaning, valuation and effects are produced within an unequal institutional environment.

The literature reviewed in Sections 2.1–2.4 therefore converges on a specific unresolved question: how does meritocratic discourse interact with the cultural, racial and institutional processes through which inequality is reproduced within Niveus Academy? Addressing this question provides the basis for examining how Abiké-Íyímídé represents institutional power through the school's structures, expectations, recognition practices and responses to racialised disruption.

Summary of the Literature Review and Research Gap

The reviewed literature establishes three interconnected positions. First, scholarship on meritocracy demonstrates that educational achievement is not always separable from the social conditions within which achievement is produced and evaluated (Batruch et al., 2023; Clycq, 2014; Jin & Ball, 2020; Xiong, 2023). Second, research on elite education, cultural capital and institutional reproduction shows that educational institutions can reproduce social advantage through their organisational cultures, selection processes and forms of recognition, even while presenting themselves as merit-based (Domina et al., 2017; Sullivan et al., 2018; Börjesson et al., 2016; Košutić, 2017; Gamsu et al., 2024). Third, research on racial inequality demonstrates that educational institutions can reproduce racial hierarchies through organisational practices and apparently neutral norms, while existing criticism of *Ace of Spades* has already established its engagement with institutional racism, white supremacy, trauma and oppression (Noguera, 2017; Stoll et al., 2025; Adewuyi, 2024).

The remaining question is therefore more specific: how does the meritocratic appearance of an elite educational institution participate in the reproduction and normalisation of racial and class inequality? This study addresses that question by examining Niveus Academy not simply as a setting in which discrimination occurs, but as an institutional structure in which merit, cultural capital, recognition, privilege and power interact.

Accordingly, the study does not claim that racism, classism or institutional oppression in *Ace of Spades* are unexplored. Its contribution lies in examining the contradiction between meritocratic institutional neutrality and the unequal racial, class and cultural conditions revealed within the institution. The literature review thus provides the basis for the theoretical framework and subsequent textual analysis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital and Social Reproduction

This study adopts Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and social reproduction as its principal theoretical framework. The framework is appropriate because the study is concerned not simply with whether inequality exists at Niveus Academy, but with how an elite educational institution can convert existing social and cultural advantages into apparently legitimate educational distinctions.

Bourdieu (1986) conceptualises cultural capital in three forms: embodied dispositions and competencies, objectified cultural resources, and institutionalised forms such as educational credentials. These forms of capital are unequally distributed across social groups, yet educational institutions can recognise particular forms as legitimate competence and achievement. Consequently, what appears as individual merit may be shaped partly by students' unequal access to the cultural resources, dispositions and forms of knowledge valued within an educational field. Cultural capital therefore provides a means of examining how apparently neutral standards of competence can reflect wider social inequalities.

The framework is particularly relevant to elite education because institutional recognition does not occur in a

social vacuum. Students enter educational spaces with different levels and forms of cultural and social resources, while institutions establish the standards through which competence, distinction and achievement are valued. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) further demonstrate that educational systems can contribute to social reproduction by legitimising particular forms of knowledge, language, behaviour and cultural competence as if they were universally valid. Through this process, socially differentiated resources can be transformed into apparently legitimate educational distinctions, making structural advantage appear as individual accomplishment.

Applied to *Ace of Spades*, the framework directs attention to the ways Niveus Academy defines and distributes recognition, prestige, opportunity and belonging. It enables the analysis to examine what forms of knowledge, conduct, achievement and social positioning are institutionally valued, how these resources are differently available to students, and how their unequal distribution may be converted into distinctions presented as merit-based. The framework thus provides a conceptual basis for examining the relationship between meritocratic discourse and institutional reproduction.

The framework does not require the study to assume that merit is entirely fictitious. Rather, it permits examination of the social conditions under which merit is defined, recognised and rewarded. The central concern is therefore not whether students differ in ability or effort, but whether the institutional standards through which such differences are interpreted and rewarded are themselves socially and culturally structured. This distinction is crucial to the study's argument concerning the limitations of meritocratic neutrality at Niveus Academy.

Application to the Study

Bourdieu's framework guides the textual analysis by examining three interconnected questions: what forms of cultural and social capital Niveus recognises as legitimate; how these resources are distributed and made meaningful among its students; and how their unequal distribution is transformed into apparently merit-based distinctions. The framework is therefore applied selectively to analyse institutional power, class privilege, recognition and educational inequality, while interpretation remains grounded in the language, narrative events, institutional practices and character experiences represented in the novel. The principal theoretical authorities are Bourdieu (1986) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis of Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé's *Ace of Spades* (2021). The method is appropriate because the study is concerned with how the novel constructs and represents institutional power, meritocratic discourse, race, class and educational inequality through narrative events, character interactions, institutional practices and forms of discourse. Rather than treating the novel merely as a source of examples of racism or inequality, the study examines how these elements are narratively constructed and how they interact within Niveus Academy.

Close reading constitutes the principal analytical procedure. The primary text is read purposively to identify passages that are directly relevant to the study's focus, particularly representations of academic achievement and institutional excellence, selection and recognition, exclusion and differential treatment, racialised and classed experiences, access to privilege and protection, and institutional responses to actions that challenge the school's established order. Attention is also given to moments in which the apparent neutrality or fairness of Niveus is placed in tension with the experiences of its students. The selected passages are analysed in relation to one another in order to identify recurring patterns in the construction of merit, privilege and institutional power.

The interpretation is guided principally by Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, institutional legitimacy and social reproduction. These concepts provide a framework for examining how forms of competence, behaviour, recognition and educational success acquire value within an institutional field and how such value may reflect or reproduce unequal social relations. The analysis therefore moves from textual evidence to interpretation, ensuring that arguments about meritocratic discourse and institutional inequality remain grounded in the narrative and are not imposed upon the novel. Direct quotations are used where necessary to demonstrate the textual basis of the interpretation and are cited with page numbers from the edition of the primary text used.

The scope of the analysis remains deliberately focused on the relationship between meritocratic discourse and

the institutional reproduction of racial and class inequality. Issues such as racism, sexuality, trauma and identity are not treated as independent thematic concerns but are considered where they illuminate the central institutional relationship under investigation. This focused approach enables the study to examine Niveus Academy not simply as a setting in which discrimination occurs, but as an educational institution whose claims to merit, excellence and legitimacy may coexist with, and contribute to, unequal experiences and outcomes.

TEXT ANALYSIS

Meritocratic Ideology and the Construction of Niveus

Niveus Academy constructs its institutional identity through a formal vocabulary of excellence and moral distinction. Its stated values include “Generosity, Grace, Determination, Integrity, Idealism, Nobility, Excellence, Respectfulness, and Eloquence” (Àbíké-Íyímídé, 2021, p. 15). Yet Devon immediately observes that these are qualities “most people at this school lack.” The contrast establishes an important tension between institutional self-representation and lived institutional reality. Niveus presents its values as universal standards, but the narrative already signals that these standards do not describe the social relations through which the school operates.

Academic achievement constitutes a more concrete basis for institutional recognition. Devon explains that the prefects chosen by teachers “always have high GPAs” and therefore become likely candidates for valedictorian. This appears to provide a straightforward meritocratic mechanism: academic performance leads to recognition and advancement. However, the narrative places this system within a sharply unequal social environment. Devon identifies himself as a “scholarship kid” while describing classmates whose wealth gives them access to drivers, household staff and virtually unlimited financial resources. Academic merit is consequently recognised within conditions in which students do not possess equivalent material resources.

The tension becomes more pronounced when Chiamaka associates institutional contribution with deservingness. She argues that students who win competitions and “contribut[e] something to the school” should receive priority for institutional funding. Her reasoning reveals that merit at Niveus is not merely an abstract academic principle; it is a criterion through which institutional resources and recognition are justified. In Bourdieu's terms, the institution converts particular forms of achievement into legitimate distinctions, making the resulting hierarchy appear deserved rather than socially produced.

The novel therefore does not simply portray Niveus as an institution that fails to practise its own ideals. More significantly, it exposes the limits of the meritocratic logic through which the institution understands achievement and deservingness. Academic success is real, but the conditions in which it is achieved and institutionally rewarded are unequal. Niveus's meritocratic appearance can consequently obscure the social differences that shape who enters the institution with advantage, who receives recognition, and who experiences belonging as secure. This contradiction provides the foundation for examining cultural capital and class privilege in the next subsection.

Cultural Capital, Class Privilege and Educational Recognition

Class inequality at Niveus is not presented as an external condition separate from educational achievement; it is embedded in the social environment through which achievement is recognised. Devon describes the school as dominated by students who live in “huge houses with white-picket fences,” have “cooks,” “drivers” and “credit cards with no limit,” while he identifies himself as a “scholarship kid” (Àbíké-Íyímídé, 2021, pp. 16–17). The contrast is significant in Bourdieusian terms because students do not enter Niveus with equivalent economic and social resources. The school's meritocratic environment therefore operates within an already differentiated field of advantage.

Devon's experience in the music room makes this distinction more explicit. Although he has been granted access to the same institutional space as his wealthier peers, he says that being there makes him feel “like I'm more than a scholarship kid” and “like I belong here,” only to qualify the statement immediately: “Even though I know that isn't true” (p. 19). The passage reveals that institutional access does not automatically produce an equal sense of belonging. His exclusion is therefore not simply material; it is also symbolic. The institution provides

the space, but Devon remains conscious of the social distance separating him from those for whom such spaces are culturally familiar.

Chiamaka's account of Niveus further demonstrates how status is converted into educational and social distinction. She describes advancement at the school through a hierarchy in which students at the top gain access to “the best colleges” and “the best jobs,” while popularity depends on “looking the part,” having “the best grades,” and “dating the right people” (p. 20). Academic performance is therefore only one component of institutional distinction; appearance, relationships and social visibility also constitute forms of value.

The novel consequently complicates a purely meritocratic understanding of educational recognition. Niveus rewards measurable achievement, but it also operates through economic resources, social networks, cultural familiarity and status. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital illuminates this contradiction: what appears to be individual distinction is produced and recognised within an institutional field where students possess unequal resources. *Ace of Spades* thus shows that educational recognition at Niveus is inseparable from the class relations that structure who can comfortably inhabit, navigate and benefit from the institution.

Race and the Unequal Experience of Merit

The novel complicates Niveus's meritocratic appearance by showing that Devon and Chiamaka occupy a distinctly racialised institutional position. Devon eventually recognises that they are not simply two students experiencing an anonymous school-wide problem: they are the only Black students at Niveus. Terrell makes the structural pattern explicit: “you go to a white school, in the white part of town, where bad things are happening to the only Black students” (Àbíké-Íyímídé, 2021, p. 26). The significance lies in the convergence of race, institutional location and unequal treatment. What initially appears to Devon as an individual problem is progressively revealed as a structural one.

Devon's resistance to this interpretation is itself important. He insists that “Not all of them are bad” and identifies Mr. Taylor as a teacher who supports his musical ambitions and allows him to use the practice room. The novel therefore avoids reducing institutional inequality to uniformly hostile individuals. Terrell's response provides the conceptual distinction: “racism isn't just about that—it's not about being nice or mean. Or good versus bad. It's bigger than that.” (p. 26). This distinction is central to the present argument because it moves the analysis away from interpersonal prejudice towards structures of power that can operate despite individual relationships that appear benign.

The institutional dimension becomes unmistakable when Devon discovers evidence suggesting that the targeting of Black students has occurred repeatedly. He recalls that they may have been “admitting two Black students” every ten years and subsequently attempting to force them out. He further suspects that “the teachers are involved too.” The pattern fundamentally disrupts the school's meritocratic self-presentation: students who have successfully gained entry and demonstrated academic ability are not simply competing within the same institutional field; their racial identity places them within a recurring institutional pattern.

The historical dimension reinforces this contradiction. Devon discovers that Niveus was founded by wealthy figures who financed slavery and reflects on the money his mother invested to secure his scholarship: “All for nothing. We have struggled every day, every fucking day, and it won't mean a thing.” The passage connects the school's contemporary prestige to a historical structure of racialised wealth. Thus, *Ace of Spades* presents educational merit as operating within an institution whose social and historical foundations are themselves unequal.

The novel consequently does not argue simply that Black students are denied merit. It exposes a deeper contradiction: their merit is formally recognised, but their racial position determines the conditions under which that recognition is experienced and sustained. Niveus can admit, recognise and reward Black students while simultaneously reproducing a structure in which their presence is exceptional and vulnerable. Merit therefore does not neutralise institutional inequality; it operates within it.

Surveillance, Discipline and Institutional Power

Surveillance is embedded in the organisation of Niveus. Devon notes that the school's back entrance is “one of the rare places in Niveus without any CCTV” (Àbíké-Íyímídé, 2021, p. 27). The observation establishes CCTV as a normal feature of institutional space and positions visibility as part of how Niveus regulates movement.

The significance of surveillance becomes clearer when Devon suspects Headmaster Ward of manipulating the school's systems. Ward, he reasons, has access to “all our files” and could “play with the CCTV, shut the lights off, create anonymous school accounts” (p. 24). The passage shifts surveillance from a neutral security mechanism to a potential instrument of institutional power. Control over information, visibility and access gives those who administer the institution the capacity to shape what can be known and who can be held responsible.

This power is accompanied by unequal disciplinary judgement. Devon specifically recalls how Ward was “quick to blame us for the USBs” (p. 24). The significance is not merely that Devon and Chiamaka are suspected; it is that institutional authority appears to establish culpability before evidence is produced. Surveillance consequently operates alongside a process of classification in which particular students become objects of suspicion.

The Aces files ultimately reveal that this process is organised rather than accidental. Devon discovers lists assigning tasks to students, including the “Distribution of DR's messages,” and recognises numerous Niveus students among those involved. The discovery exposes an institutional environment in which information, observation and targeted action are systematically coordinated.

Through this pattern, *Ace of Spades* presents institutional power as the capacity not only to recognise merit but also to monitor, classify and discipline. The school's meritocratic appearance is therefore complicated by unequal control over surveillance and judgement. In Bourdieusian terms, institutional authority determines whose behaviour becomes legitimate and whose becomes suspect, demonstrating that educational recognition operates within a broader structure of power

Institutional Silence and the Protection of Privilege

Institutional silence in *Ace of Spades* is represented not simply as the absence of speech but as a mechanism through which disturbing events are contained, normalised and removed from public attention. After the first wave of attacks, Devon observes that the posters have disappeared and that the school is “so spotless, it's like yesterday never happened” (Àbíké-Íyímídé, 2021, p. 24). The deliberate restoration of visual normality is significant: rather than confronting what has occurred, the institution appears to erase its visible traces. Silence therefore helps preserve Niveus's public image.

The pattern extends beyond the immediate incidents. When Chiamaka and Devon investigate previous Black students targeted by Aces, their searches produce almost no meaningful information. Patricia Jacobs, for example, appears in association with “Aces,” “Bullying” and “dropout,” but Chiamaka concludes, “It's like they don't exist” (p. 29). The disappearance of these students from the accessible institutional record suggests that exclusion is accompanied by the disappearance of evidence. What has been institutionally suppressed becomes difficult to reconstruct as history.

The silence is also connected to the authority of those who control institutional knowledge. Devon notes that Ward has access to “all our files” and could manipulate CCTV and school accounts (p. 24). Thus, control over information is inseparable from institutional power. If records, surveillance and official accounts can be controlled, the institution possesses considerable power to determine what becomes visible and what remains concealed.

This becomes the clearest contradiction to Niveus's meritocratic image. Chiamaka ultimately declares that “by design, we are the only Black students at Niveus Private Academy” and identifies a recurring pattern in which Black students are subjected to abuse and forced out before graduation (p. 29). The institutional pattern has therefore been able to persist precisely because its victims disappear without an adequate public account of what happened to them.

The novel consequently presents silence as productive rather than passive. By removing traces, obscuring histories and controlling institutional information, Niveus protects the legitimacy of its existing order. The meritocratic institution can continue to appear successful and fair because the experiences that would challenge that image are rendered difficult to see, remember or officially acknowledge. This reinforces the study's central argument that institutional inequality is sustained not only through discriminatory practices but also through the management of what the institution permits to become visible and knowable.

Meritocracy and the Reproduction of Inequality

The preceding analysis demonstrates that Niveus does not simply fail to achieve meritocratic neutrality; its institutional structures help produce the inequalities that the language of merit appears to transcend. Chiamaka describes the school's hierarchy in explicitly competitive terms: "The people at the top in high school get into the best colleges, get the best jobs," while those at the bottom face sharply different futures (Àbíké-Íyímídé, 2021, p. 20). Merit is therefore represented as the decisive route to social mobility, but the narrative simultaneously shows that access to this hierarchy is shaped by class and race.

Devon's experience exposes the class dimension of this contradiction. Although his academic achievement earns him the position of prefect, he continues to describe himself as a "scholarship kid" and recognises that he does not possess the material resources available to many of his classmates. His academic recognition therefore does not eliminate class difference; it exists alongside it. His statement that the music room makes him feel as though he belongs "Even though I know that isn't true" (p. 2) further demonstrates the gap between formal inclusion and substantive belonging.

Race makes this contradiction structural rather than merely socioeconomic. Chiamaka's public exposure of Niveus states that "by design, we are the only Black students at Niveus Private Academy" and that the school accepts two Black students every ten years before subjecting them to a campaign intended to force them out (p. 43). The claim fundamentally destabilises the school's meritocratic premise: admission does not guarantee equal participation in the institution, and academic qualification does not protect Black students from an institutional process designed to undermine their educational trajectories.

The novel's final extension of this pattern makes the argument broader than the individual experiences of Devon and Chiamaka. The epilogue describes Niveus as an institution that systematically targeted Black students and attempted to sabotage "academic records, college applications, and employment possibilities," before identifying other schools continuing similar practices. The reproduction of inequality therefore operates across educational and post-educational opportunities.

Read through Bourdieu's framework, the novel's central contradiction becomes clear: Niveus converts educational achievement into legitimate distinction while simultaneously structuring the conditions under which different students can attain, experience and retain that distinction. Merit does not disappear; rather, it is embedded within unequal distributions of economic, cultural and institutional power. *Ace of Spades* consequently exposes meritocracy not as a neutral solution to inequality but as an institutional logic capable of making unequal educational experiences appear compatible with fairness, excellence and legitimate achievement.

DISCUSSION

The textual analysis demonstrates that *Ace of Spades* constructs Niveus Academy as an institution where meritocratic recognition coexists with the reproduction of racial and class inequality. This finding is strongly consistent with Batruch et al. (2023), who demonstrate across four studies, including international data involving more than 88,000 participants, that belief in school meritocracy can reduce perceptions of social inequality as unfair and weaken support for measures designed to reduce inequality. Their findings are particularly relevant to the novel because they establish that meritocracy can function beyond the allocation of educational rewards: it can provide a framework through which unequal outcomes become easier to regard as legitimate.

This dynamic is evident in Niveus. The school publicly associates achievement with excellence and recognition, while the narrative simultaneously reveals substantial differences in students' economic resources, social position

and security within the institution. Devon's status as a scholarship student does not prevent him from attaining academic recognition, but neither does that recognition erase his awareness of class difference. The novel therefore complicates the assumption that educational achievement necessarily demonstrates an equitable institutional process. In this respect, it corresponds with research showing that educational institutions may reproduce inequality even while formally endorsing meritocratic principles. Batruch et al. (2023) themselves note that schools can contribute to the reproduction of social inequality despite their meritocratic objectives.

The findings also support a distinction between merit as an educational principle and meritocracy as an institutional ideology. The novel does not deny that Devon and Chiamaka are academically accomplished. Instead, it exposes the conditions surrounding the recognition of their accomplishments. This distinction is important because Batruch et al. (2023) define school meritocracy specifically as the belief that educational rewards are determined by ability and effort rather than group membership. Niveus formally operates according to this logic, yet the experiences of its Black students demonstrate that group membership remains consequential. The novel therefore reveals the gap between the principle of meritocratic allocation and the social conditions in which that principle is enacted.

The racial dimension further extends the argument. The discovery of successive Black students in the Aces files transforms Devon and Chiamaka's experiences from isolated incidents into evidence of a recurring institutional pattern. This finding is consistent with recent research showing that students' understandings of meritocracy and racial inequality are shaped by their experiences within institutional environments. Saperstein et al. (2023), for example, find that exposure to different racial and socioeconomic experiences in college can significantly affect beliefs about meritocracy and racial discrimination. *Ace of Spades*, however, Àbíké-Íyímídé reverses the direction of this insight: the narrative makes the structural inequality visible by placing Black students inside an institution whose apparent homogeneity initially conceals the pattern.

The findings consequently extend rather than simply reproduce the existing scholarship. Research on school meritocracy establishes that meritocratic discourse can legitimise inequality; the novel gives this process a concrete institutional form through Niveus's systems of selection, recognition, surveillance and exclusion. The textual evidence shows that the problem is not merely that unequal treatment occurs within a supposedly fair institution. Rather, the institution's claims to excellence and merit help sustain the appearance of fairness while unequal racial and class relations remain embedded within its structures.

The study therefore makes a narrower contribution to the existing criticism of *Ace of Spades*. Rather than treating racism, classism or institutional oppression as isolated themes, it demonstrates how they intersect through the institutional production of merit. Niveus's power lies partly in its capacity to determine what counts as achievement, who is recognised as deserving, whose conduct becomes suspect and which inequalities remain compatible with the school's public identity. The novel's critique of elite education is consequently a critique of meritocratic neutrality itself: an institution can appear to reward achievement fairly while the conditions governing achievement, recognition and belonging remain structurally unequal.

This interpretation gives the study its principal contribution: *Ace of Spades* presents meritocracy not simply as a promise of educational fairness but as a discourse whose apparent neutrality can coexist with, and help legitimise, the reproduction of inequality.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé's *Ace of Spades* as a critique of the myth of meritocratic neutrality within elite education. Through a qualitative close reading of Niveus Academy, the analysis has demonstrated that the school's language of excellence and achievement exists alongside unequal distributions of class privilege, racial vulnerability, institutional recognition and power.

The findings show that merit at Niveus is not meaningless; rather, its institutional recognition is socially conditioned. Devon's academic achievement does not erase his position as a scholarship student, while Chiamaka's status and resources provide forms of cultural and social capital that shape her experience of the institution. This supports scholarship demonstrating that meritocratic educational discourse can obscure or legitimise structural inequality (Batruch et al., 2023). It also accords with Napoletano's (2024) distinction

between the distribution of educational goods according to merit and the broader requirement of genuine equality of opportunity.

More significantly, the study establishes that race fundamentally conditions the operation of merit at Niveus. The recurring targeting of Black students reveals an institutional structure in which academic qualification does not guarantee equal belonging, recognition or opportunity. This extends the existing criticism of the novel, including Adewuyi's (2024) examination of racism, white supremacy, trauma and implication, by directing particular attention to the relationship between institutional meritocracy and the reproduction of inequality.

The study therefore contributes a more specific understanding of *Ace of Spades*: the novel's institutional critique is not simply that Niveus is racist or classist, but that its claims to excellence, achievement and legitimate selection coexist with structures that reproduce racial and class inequality. The significance of the novel lies precisely in exposing this contradiction. Meritocracy becomes problematic when institutional conditions are unequal but the resulting distinctions continue to be presented as naturally deserved.

Ultimately, *Ace of Spades* challenges the assumption that an institution becomes equitable merely because it formally rewards achievement. Its representation of Niveus demonstrates that who is recognised, under what conditions, and with what consequences remains inseparable from institutional power. The novel consequently offers a sustained critique of meritocratic neutrality and reveals elite education as a contested site where achievement, privilege and inequality are simultaneously produced and legitimised.

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