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Place, Privilege, and Possibility:
An Examination of Elite Students’ Neighborhood Narratives

Qualifying Paper

Submitted by
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Abstract

As young people interact with their local neighborhoods, they engage in boundary work to define in-groups and out-groups, position themselves in society, and develop ideologies about the world. Research on boundary work can offer insight into a range of social processes and relations of power. However, few studies have explored how young people conduct boundary work based on place. Informed by scholarship in cultural sociology and critical geography, this study examines young people’s neighborhood narratives—which I define as the descriptive accounts that individuals use to represent their neighborhoods and to discuss the significance of these places in their lives. In this empirical paper, I focus on the neighborhood narratives of 23 students who live in affluent areas and attend an elite private school in Mumbai, a population-dense global city with increasing levels of inequality. Through inductive analysis of students’ multimedia posts in an international online learning community, I investigated how students described their local areas and negotiated boundaries through their neighborhood narratives. Findings revealed that students constructed their city as an exceptional place; their selves as members of an educated, cosmopolitan, and conscientious elite; and their nation as a country rising in status on the world stage. Based on these findings, I argue that neighborhoods served as a toolkit for these young people to “place” themselves within local and global society. I conclude by discussing the educational implications of this research, and by suggesting paths for future scholarship on boundaries, place, and privilege in young people’s lives.
During adolescence, young people actively construct their identities, interpret their surroundings, and create the worlds they inhabit. As developmental contexts, neighborhoods play an important role in young people’s growth and meaning-making processes (Allison et al., 1999; Bass & Lambert, 2004; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993). Yet despite growing recognition of the need to understand how people make sense of their local environments, few studies have focused on young people’s perspectives on where they live. My research centers on high school students’ neighborhood narratives—which I define as the descriptive accounts that individuals use to represent their neighborhoods and to discuss the significance of these places in their lives. The narratives that individuals construct about their neighborhoods can reveal their particular frames for understanding their local environments, and predict their participation in the local community (Small, 2004). In this way, neighborhood narratives offer insight into the unique links between individual perception, thinking, and civic action (Cresswell, 1996). Informed by scholarship in sociology, geography, and psychology, I conceptualize neighborhood narratives as a window into how young people draw from their local surroundings to define in-groups and out-groups, position themselves in society, and develop ideologies about the world.

This study uses the concept of boundaries to closely examine what young people’s neighborhood narratives suggest about their notions of group membership, and how they might understand and enact their responsibilities to others. Although boundaries are neither natural nor fixed, they are a permanent feature of social practice (Lamont & Fournier, 1992), a tool for individuals and institutions to construct a sense of order in their social worlds. One aim of this paper is to build knowledge on how young people engage in boundary work based on place, which geographers define as “space invested with meaning in the context of power” (Cresswell, 2014, p. 12). Space is a vital force shaping social life and identity (Soja,
1989), and the way that young people interact with places can reflect, reinforce, or resist relations of power in society at large. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in a world in which inequality is growing, and social differences are increasingly spatially inscribed (Massey, 1996; Sampson, 2012). Through focusing on the boundary work of young people who live in affluent neighborhoods and attend an elite private school, this research contributes to burgeoning scholarship on the interplay of place, privilege, and power.

In this empirical paper, I present original qualitative research on the neighborhood narratives of 23 students who attend an elite private high school in Mumbai, India. This study uses data from an international online learning community I call Connecting Worlds, Connecting Stories (CWCS). As participants in the CWCS pilot, students in this study engaged in a series of activities to explore their neighborhoods and share their narratives with diverse groups of peers from around the world. Through inductive analysis of the Mumbai students’ online posts, I examined how these young people described their local neighborhoods and negotiated boundaries through their neighborhood narratives. Findings revealed that students constructed their city as an exceptional place; framed themselves as members of an educated, cosmopolitan, and conscientious elite; and represented their nation as a country rising in status on the world stage. Based on these findings, I argue that neighborhoods served as a toolkit for young people to “place” themselves within local and global society. I demonstrate how through their neighborhood narratives, young people engage in a complex process of boundary work that is meaningful on an individual level, and consequential for the world that we all share.

1 Pseudonym used to protect the identities of students involved in the project.
2 To further protect the identities of students involved, this paper uses different pseudonyms for each of the research participants, and de-identifies their school as well as the project as a whole.
3 http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/topic/Mumbai%E2%80%99s-per-capita-income
In the first section of this paper, I present the theoretical foundations of this research, explaining how this study partakes in the recent “spatial turn” in the human and social sciences (e.g. Charlton et al., 2011; Gupta, 1992; Parker & Karner, 2010; Soja, 1989). Next, I discuss how this study responds to existing literature on elites broadly and in the Mumbai, India context specifically. I then detail the methodological approach of the research, including the data collection and analysis methods, and how these methods were tailored for the online research setting and for adolescent participants. I present my findings and discuss them in relation to scholarship on elite students, place and identity, and cosmopolitanism. Finally, I suggest directions for future research, and explore how the boundary work of elite students generates knowledge that educators can use to open up possibilities for social change.

**Theoretical Foundations**

**Symbolic Boundaries and Place**

Various scholars of adolescent development have viewed identity construction as an inter-relational process, closely linked to the “relational connectedness” that is valuable for individuals during adolescence and beyond (e.g. Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). It is this social process of relationality that some social scientists have examined using the concept of boundaries (e.g. Barth, 1998; also see Lamont & Molnar, 2002). According to Harding, Lamont, and Small (2010), symbolic boundaries define hierarchical relations between groups, often based on judgments of moral worth. Whereas social boundaries are objective categorizations used to define different class groups in a stratified society, symbolic boundaries convey an internal sense of group-ness, based on feelings of belonging and a shared set of behaviors and ideas. As cultural constructs, symbolic boundaries do not necessarily correspond with social boundaries, but they are real and can hold strong social
significance. Studying how people conduct boundary work can offer key theoretical insights into a range of social processes and macro-level cultural structures related to identity, power, and inequality (Lamont & Molnar, 2002).

In their review of recent literature on boundaries, Pachucki, Pendergrass, and Lamont (2007) concluded that more research is needed to unpack the influences of social distance, symbolic distance, and spatial distance on how people experience and negotiate boundaries. A growing body of research has shown how physical space can both reflect and shape how people understand the differences between themselves and others (e.g. Kato, 2011; Leonard, 2008; Riesch, 2010; Valins, 2003). Much of this research has its theoretical underpinnings in symbolic interactionism—a paradigm that conceptualizes space as “a medium through which we explore our identities” (Kato, 2011, p. 244). Other writings emerge from critical geography, which is concerned with the socially constructed and historically contingent nature of borders, or the geographic lines that separate “us” from “them” (e.g. Valins, 2003). Critical geographers point out that places are “mutable ongoing productions” that are neither rooted nor static, but rather “forged in and through relations” (Massey, 2004, p. 5; also see Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989). This process is what some have termed “place-making”: an exercise of human agency that shifts focus away from how contexts affect people in a unidirectional sense, and towards how people define and give shape to the context itself.

A major contribution of this burgeoning scholarship is its attention to the subjective construction of neighborhood and community—spheres of belonging that residents often define differently from how outsiders, such as university-based researchers, might assume (Campbell, Henly, Elliott, & Irwin, 2009; Coulton et al., 2001). Studies have shown that regardless of how official maps may define their neighborhoods, the way that people imagine
their geographic communities influences how they understand their obligations to others, and shapes their civic orientations and actions (Wong, 2010). For example, a resident of New York City might imagine her community to be anything from a transnational diaspora to simply the few blocks around where she lives. The way she chooses to define her community can influence everything from her day-to-day helping behavior to her opinions about how governments should allocate resources. As young people navigate their own sense of citizenship and their power as social agents, they similarly draw such “boundaries of obligation” (Wong, 2010) within their social worlds. This makes their boundary work an important subject for ongoing research.

As a study of the boundary work that young people conduct through their neighborhood narratives, this paper builds upon research by Kato (2011) and Leonard (2008). Kato (2011) found that the socio-spatial context played a significant role in the symbolic boundaries that suburban adolescents drew between themselves and others. Through their neighborhood narratives, young people in Kato’s (2011) study articulated their values, navigated identities, and experimented with a spatial metaphor (e.g. “the bubble” of the suburbs) as a tool of social distinction. Situated in a different socio-spatial context, Leonard (2008) conducted research on the neighborhood narratives of teenagers living in segregated areas of Belfast. Leonard (2008) found that young people drew upon discourses of inclusion and exclusion in their neighborhood narratives, but also challenged existing boundaries by questioning the assumptions that older generations made about “other” groups. The works of Kato (2011) and Leonard (2008) signal the promise of further research into how adolescents negotiate boundaries as they make sense of their local surroundings. Grounded in the idea that young people are knowledgeable agents who can critically engage with dominant messages in society, this area of study illuminates how young people’s
narratives may reinforce or resist the boundaries that mark the contexts in which they live.

Informed by scholarship in cultural sociology and critical geography, I posit that boundary work may become a particularly salient feature of life for adolescents living in places of high population density, where people who occupy different social locations share physical space. Further, given contemporary contexts of inequality, I argue that there is a special need to study the boundary work of groups who occupy high positions in hierarchies of status and power. As I explain in the next section of this paper, it is for these reasons that I focus this study on the neighborhood narratives of elite students in Mumbai, India.

Background and Context

Place and Privilege

Although elites—“those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource” (Khan, 2012, p. 362)—comprise a relatively small part of a given population, researching this group is key to understanding the workings of contemporary social life. Through studying elites, we learn about privilege, or the advantages that are granted to a group solely because of the social categories to which they belong (Howard, 2010). Gaztambide-Fernandez and Howard (2010) have argued that the sociology of elites can build knowledge on how the “advantages of the few [may be] related to the predicaments of the many” (p.1). As levels of income and wealth inequality increase across the world, this area of study takes on added urgency. Yet despite the geographic and racial diversity of elites in today’s society, little has been written about elite students outside of the Western context (Khan, 2012). Because students attending elite high schools tend to take on positions as members of the power elite (Cookson, Cookson & Persell, 2008; Mills, 1999), there is a strong need to build knowledge on the identity constructions, ideologies, and meaning-making of these adolescents.
Much of the existing scholarship on young elites has focused on the school as a mechanism of upper class reproduction. Using ethnographic research, Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009) has demonstrated how elite schools embody cultural practices through which students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds internalize a sense of distinction and entitlement, and easily envision themselves taking positions of power and leadership in the future beyond their schooling. In his research on affluent students attending an elite private high school in the U.S., Howard (2010) studied the ideological work that young people engaged in to justify their schooling and life advantages. Drawing upon scholarship in developmental psychology, Howard (2010) argued that understanding how young people make sense of their elite status requires attention to their modes of ideological operation, for “[ideologies] provide individuals with a coherent worldview…a compass in a contradictory and complex world” (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 90). This process of “ideological becoming” plays a central role in elite students’ identity formation, enabling young people to construct privilege not simply as resources that they possess, but as a fundamental part of who they are (Howard 2008; 2010). By focusing on how elite students understand their local neighborhoods, this paper illuminates place as another important arena, outside of the institution of school, through which privilege can be constructed as a dimension of identity.

Scholars have established that neighborhoods can serve as “a mark of distinction” or a “check on social mobility” for residents (Parker & Karner, 2010, p. 1458). For high status groups, neighborhoods can function to demarcate and maintain residents’ “position at the top of the societal pyramid” (Higley, 1995, p. 31). Like elite schools, affluent neighborhoods are socializing institutions that can strengthen group boundaries and cohesiveness, transmit values and beliefs to residents (Higley, 1995), and compound the advantages of the
privileged (Massey, 1996). Given their status as minors, young people typically do not make their own residential choices, and their geographic location is largely beyond their control. Yet for this reason, I argue that it is instructive to attend to how young people might choose to integrate their neighborhoods as a meaningful part of their identities.

By examining the neighborhood narratives of young people living in affluent neighborhoods and attending an elite school, this paper helps shed light on the links between place and privilege. Although the process of boundary work is neither unique nor exclusive to young elites, I argue that the narratives of these adolescents can reveal ideologies that hold profound consequence for society.

**Contextualizing Mumbai, India**

The present study focuses on the neighborhood narratives of young people attending an elite high school in Mumbai—one of the world’s densest mega-cities, and home to over twenty million people. Mumbai is India’s business and financial capital, as well as the hub of India’s advertising, media, and film industry (Prakash, 2010). Reflecting upon the popular meanings attached to Mumbai, Prakash (2010), a historian of modern India, writes:

> We spoke of Bombay’s charms with signs and gestures, with wistful looks and sights, expressing desires for self-fashioning and deprived pleasures. We knew of New York, Paris and London, but they were foreign places, holding no emotional resonance...Bombay held the promise of exciting newness and unlimited possibilities. It reached out across the physical and cultural distance to stir desires and kindle imaginations. (p. 3)

Prakash’s (2010) scholarship probes and unpacks the symbolism of Mumbai, the “mythic city” and “city of gold” whose allure and promise of opportunity continues to draw growing numbers of immigrants. Mumbai has been constructed as a gateway to the West and doorway to modernity; a “city of many tongues and many cultural expressions” (Patel, 2003, p. 3); a “cosmopolis of commerce,” and a meritocratic culture where people from all over can become upwardly mobile (Boo, 2012; Chandavarkar, 2009; Patel, 2003). As I show in the
findings section of this paper, these frames for understanding Mumbai persist in the neighborhood narratives of the young people who participated in this study.

Like other major cities in developing regions, Mumbai is currently experiencing explosive growth and persistent class hierarchy amidst trends of urbanization. In recent decades, Mumbai has come to symbolize growing gaps between rich and poor in urban India. Both popular and academic literatures have called attention to Mumbai as a highly segregated city where land is a scarce resource; where people of different classes coexist while occupying vastly different economic and social locations; and where elite agendas have had particularly strong influence on culture, economic structures, and the social geography of the city (Chandavarkar, 2009; Patel, 2003). Tenements and slums—which constitute only 6% of the land area of Mumbai, but house over half of the city’s population (Bharucha, 2009; Patel, 2003)—“hold up a mirror to elite spaces, reflecting the grotesque other side of colonial and capitalist spatialization” (Prakash, 2010, p. 66). Many view the class disparities that exist in contemporary Mumbai as a consequence of market-oriented reforms and a crisis of globalization that have exacerbated inequalities in cities across the world (Hansen, 2011; Patel, 2003; Sampson, 2012). Scholars and policymakers have commented that the way Mumbai incorporates its poor and moves forward into the future will be instructive for all global cities that suffer similar inequities.

Consistent with dominant trends in sociological research, existing literature on India has largely focused on the conditions of the poor. Although research has been targeted towards intervention for socially disadvantaged groups, this scholarly work has had little success in empowering the historically marginalized communities that it seeks to benefit (Chaudhury, 2004). Calling for a turn of focus towards elite groups, Nanjunda (2014) found that the majority of elites in urban India believed that poverty is not a serious issue, and
claimed that they would like to keep a distance from the poor—a group they felt was not their concern or duty to care for. To date, little to no research has explored the perspectives of young people attending elite schools in this context. This study begins to address this gap in knowledge, viewing young people who attend an elite private school in Mumbai as a group defined not only by their status in society, but also by their power to promote change.

**Research Design and Methods**

This study focuses on the neighborhood narratives that elite high school students in Mumbai shared with young people in other countries, through participation in an online learning community called *Connecting Worlds, Connecting Stories* (CWCS). Based on student posts in CWCS, this study sheds light on boundary work as it unfolds in interactions online—a context that is increasingly pervasive in the lives of today’s students (Ito, 2007). Although situated in virtual space, online settings constitute social contexts in which young people construct their identities and worldviews (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). In international online learning communities such as CWCS, boundaries are intrinsically unclear and in flux, and students actively negotiate the lines drawn between groups in society. I became involved with CWCS during its pilot phase, driven by interests in how young people understand their neighborhoods, as well as by an enduring belief in the importance of creating safe spaces in which young people can engage in identity exploration and reflective dialogue with peers.

Through CWCS, young people participate in an online learning experience structured around a curriculum that invites them to investigate their own neighborhoods and their various connections to place. Using a social media-inspired platform built for educational use, students in the CWCS pilot study responded to prompts related to their neighborhoods, local-global connections, and the learning they find valuable in today’s world. The CWCS
pilot group included 23 students in Mumbai, in addition to over 100 secondary school students in the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Consistent with the goals of the CWCS project, the student groups that connected with one another in the pilot study hailed from a wide range of cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds. In addition to posting their responses to prompts in the CWCS curriculum, students were encouraged to comment on one another’s posts. For anonymity, all participants created user names that did not include any part of their real names, but did include reference to the countries in which they lived.²

The young people in Mumbai elected to participate in CWCS as an extracurricular activity, taking part in lunchtime meetings and responding to prompts independently and on their own time. They were a mixed-grade level group attending a co-educational, English-language, elite private school in the city. Founded in the 19th century, the school has been consistently ranked among the best in Mumbai and in India at large. The campus provides students with large libraries, computer and science laboratories, and recreational centers. Strong emphasis is placed on extracurricular activities such as Model United Nations, and the school’s alumni have included many prominent leaders in fields ranging from politics to the arts. In a city where the per capita income is Rs 88,583 (~$1398 USD), the yearly tuition for the school is approximately Rs 100,000 (~$1568 USD).³

Through CWCS, young people attending this high school wrote and shared their neighborhood narratives in a student-driven learning environment that had already become integrated into their educational experience that semester. Situated thusly, this project provided an ideal opportunity to research the following question: In an international online

² To further protect the identities of students involved, this paper uses different pseudonyms for each of the research participants, and de-identifies their school as well as the project as a whole.
³ http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/topic/Mumbai%E2%80%99s-per-capita-income
learning community, how do students attending an elite high school in Mumbai describe their local neighborhoods? Additionally, this paper addresses the following sub-question: How do these young people conduct boundary work through their neighborhood narratives?

Data Collection

To investigate these research questions, I analyzed data collected through a series of CWCS curricular prompts. This approach was informed by research methods that were tailored to the digital platform and to adolescent research participants (Hollingworth & Archer, 2009; Kinloch, 2009; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007). For this study, I operationalized students’ neighborhood narratives as their responses to the four prompts in the CWCS curriculum that explicitly asked participants to engage with what they considered to be their local neighborhood. These prompts were delivered to students on a weekly basis through the online platform. One strength of this design was that students shared their narratives with peers in an authentic learning context, rather than directly with an adult researcher largely disconnected from their everyday lives and educational experience.

The first prompt I analyzed asked students to sketch mental maps of their neighborhoods, imagining that they were taking a friend to this place for the first time. Particularly in the fields of environmental psychology and children’s geographies, mental maps have been used as an elicitation technique for young people to talk about their neighborhoods (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2007). The second prompt I analyzed asked students to take photographs of their neighborhoods, to select a few images that they wished to share with the learning community, and to justify their choice of photos. This prompt was informed by scholarship documenting the effectiveness of visual methodology in engaging youth research participants, and in eliciting deep and authentic engagement with place (Hollingworth & Archer, 2009; Trell & Van Hoven, 2010). Photographic images are seen not
as illustrations of “reality,” but as representations that “carry particular ways of seeing the world that reflect and support certain visions of social relations” (Rose, 2008, p. 154). The third prompt I analyzed asked students to interview an older resident in their local area, and to share what they found interesting in the discussion. This prompt reflected the notion that places are a bundle of multiple histories, identities, and selves (Charlton et al., 2011).

The last prompt I analyzed asked students to brainstorm and observe possible connections between local and global contexts. Students reflected upon their own local neighborhoods to examine what global connections might exist in their own areas. To provide students with a range of options for their self-expression, this activity invited participants to use a visual representation, a written piece, or an audio recording to communicate their ideas. Although this activity was focused on identifying evidence of global forces, it ultimately involved students sharing detailed descriptions of their local neighborhoods. I incorporated students’ responses to this prompt into my analysis to attend to the depth and breadth with which students wrote about the places in their lives.

**Analytical Strategies**

To analyze students’ responses to these four prompts, I closely examined how students represented their selves, neighborhoods, city, and nation to their peers in the learning community. Using DeDoose, I coded the various multimedia posts of all students in the Mumbai group. Informed by grounded theory (Charmaz 2000; 2006), analysis was conducted iteratively. Three rounds of coding were completed on the photographs, maps, and writing in each student’s post, and a combination of etic and emic codes was used in the final analysis. In the open coding phase, I did line-by-line coding to describe what I thought was happening, and to note possible leads to pursue. I developed action codes to attend

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4 Please see Appendix A for the codebook used in the analysis.
closely to what students were *doing* in their written and visual language—examining how they mobilized their neighborhood narratives and what their talk achieved (Hugh-Jones & Madill, 2009). During focused coding, I examined the initial codes that occurred frequently, and developed refined codes to capture the data in succinct and compelling ways (Charmaz 2000; 2006). Some examples of these refined action codes include: “stating prominence,” “claiming cultural identity,” and “aligning to the West.” Throughout the multi-stage analytical process, I engaged a “constant comparative method” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to compare different students’ narratives as well as the shifts in an individual’s narratives across various posts.

To advance my analysis, I wrote memos to analyze codes; to think about connections, comparisons, and gaps; and to reflect on how my beliefs and ideas were shaping my interpretations of the data. As a researcher who has not lived in Mumbai, I drew from my outsider status as a tool to sharpen a fundamentally emic approach to the data, and to remain closely attuned to how the students were constructing their realities. At the same time, I engaged a vast and multidisciplinary body of literature, and my own experiences as a student in elite schools, as a lens through which to note patterns that might exist across groups and settings.

The next section of this paper organizes the findings of my analysis around major themes in the data. Broadly I found that through their neighborhood narratives, students constructed their city as an exceptional place; their selves as members of an educated, cosmopolitan, and conscientious elite; and their nation as a country rising in status on the world stage. As I will show, their narratives positioned their local areas at the top of symbolic hierarchies of place. Yet while students maintained boundaries that exist in their local society, they also leveraged their neighborhood narratives to call attention to issues of wealth disparity, and to question the symbolic distance between high status and low status...
groups. In these ways, students engaged their neighborhood narratives to reflect upon
difference and at times call for change, given the status they claimed as future leaders of
India and the world.

Findings

The “Incredible Character” of Mumbai

Across the data, there was strong consistency in how students constructed what Max
N. called the “incredible character” of their local areas.\(^5\) Out of 23 students, 16 students
highlighted the prominence or uniqueness of the places they called their own. Often using
comparisons between their local area and the larger city in which they lived, students made
claims that their neighborhoods included the “best,” the “first,” the most “major,” the
“oldest,” or “the most beautiful” places around. A sense of enthusiasm and humbled pride
suffused students’ descriptions of their neighborhoods. As one student voiced, “I have so
much to share about my neighbourhood and city - it is like no other.”

Many students emphasized the plurality of peoples and cultures in their local area as
a way of pointing to the exceptional nature of where they lived. For example, in describing
his neighborhood walk, Max N. highlighted different places of worship as a sign of the
“spirit” of the city: “in my opinion, the close proximity of the mosque to the temple shows
the strong, unified spirit of Mumbai, and disproves the beliefs that these two communities
cannot peacefully co-exist.” Focused on the backgrounds of local residents, Angelika Y.
wrote: “I believe that the building I live in itself is the perfect example of global harmony…it
houses people from countries such as America, Mexico, and Spain as well as families from
India.” Angelika Y. also described the harmony of her neighborhood in terms of the

\(^5\) All of the students who participated in this study lived in neighborhoods in South Mumbai, which is the
richest urban district in India. Prakash (2010) has noted that these “elite spaces”—formally occupied by
Europeans during the British colonial era—are now home to elite Indians, many of whom were wealthy
merchants and industrialists during the colonial period.
coexistence of Indians from “all walks of life.” She highlighted this aspect of her neighborhood by describing the public buses that carry “housewives with bundles of shopping, noisy schoolchildren, businessman, all travel[ing] together as one.” Like other students, Angelika Y. described these buses—and her neighborhood—as a “uniting force.” Such narratives represented Mumbai as a model of peaceful coexistence. They reflected boundaries based on occupation and age, while challenging notions of the city as irreparably divided along lines of class, religion, and ethnicity.

Nearly half of all students highlighted the abundance of options around them, oftentimes in connection to the convenience of their neighborhoods. These narratives contained descriptions of being “surrounded” by temples and churches, with roads “lined by residential sky-scraper buildings,” and “many shops” to fulfill the wants and needs of residents and visitors alike. Features that were frequently noted on students’ maps were recreational centers (on 11 students’ maps), the Arabian Sea and Chowpatty Beach (on 11 students’ maps), and green spaces (on 13 students’ maps). Describing Malabar Hill, the most exclusive residential neighborhood in Mumbai, Claudine L. wrote: “This neighbourhood is equipped with all the necessary facilities and shops and hence you really don’t need to go too far to meet your requirements.” As exemplified by Claudine L.’s neighborhood map (Figure 1.0), students’ neighborhoods were illustrated through colorful images that indicated a wealth of resources for life and leisure.
In addition, 13 out of 23 students emphasized the picturesque aspects of their local area, referring to landmarks in the built environment as well as features of the natural landscape as spectacular and universally pleasing. Several students asserted that their
neighborhoods were more “developed and clean” and “peaceful” compared to the rest of Mumbai, and that they lived in the city’s “greenest” area. Many students mentioned the “breathtaking Mumbai skyline,” and highlighted the scenic Marine Drive, which Imran B. defined as a “beautiful promenade along the road where many of the pedestrians take in a breath of fresh air and view the setting sun.” Various others included mention of the neighborhood as an access point to captivating views. Bambi W. described the Mumbai sunrises and sunsets as a “visual treat”; Max N. marveled that the Mumbai sunset is one that “never fails to leave [him] speechless.” Students’ descriptions of local places as ineffably beautiful imbued their neighborhoods with an almost mystical quality, recalling ways that Mumbai has been constructed as a “mythic city” in the Indian imagination.

Students also talked about their neighborhoods as a source of pride and distinction due to the cultural and historical significance of these places. For instance, Jennie J. remarked that walking around her neighborhood felt like a “heritage walk.” Other students described the trees and green space in their local areas as an important symbol of their heritage. In her neighborhood map, Cecilia G. depicted and wrote about a Neem tree that is native to India:

This particular tree in our neighborhood is one of the oldest trees over here. For me it is like a mark of my ancestors. I believe we should preserve the trees here in India. Many trees are cut due to construction of skyscrapers and buildings. Trees are not only fantastic for the environment but they add beauty to this world.

Ava W. similarly wrote about trees in her neighborhood as a communal treasure, imperiled by tides of change. “Malabar Hill was a thickly forested area that overlooked the Arabian Sea….sadly, aside from protected parks and private lands, every inch of our city is being constructed upon…I have drawn a map showing you parks which still have specimens of stunning old Rain trees, Brownea, Amherstia, Barringtonia, Bauhinia, Gulmohar and other
flowering trees.” Ava W.’s depictions of the “open and forested” and “lush” neighborhood align with popular characterizations of the local area as filled with beauty and abundance. They also demonstrate the ideological nature of students’ neighborhood narratives, wherein students problematized aspects of the present reality of their places, and advanced ideas about the way things should be.

Another way that students expressed the prominence of their neighborhoods was through references to notable people who have occupied the same space. Discussing his neighborhood of Napeansea Road, Python G. pointed out, “the area is extremely secure as it houses many of our important politicians”; he also referenced the reputation of a local park as “the morning haunt of India’s who’s who.” Writing about his interview with his grandfather, who moved to Mumbai from a “cozy little village in South Gujarat, India,” Bowzer A. described his street as “an island of greenery in the concrete sea of downtown Mumbai due to the…almost hallowed sanctity it possesses, as it was Mahatma Gandhi’s home in Mumbai.” Imran B. discussed the “wealthy Parsis” who settled his neighborhood and the “Saudi King” who used to own the building where he now lives, and a few students mentioned the vestiges of British colonialism in the local environment. Through establishing how their neighborhoods are prominently situated within Indian history, as well as how their neighborhoods continue to be the chosen residence of important figures in contemporary society, students engaged in boundary work that aligned themselves with the existing power elite. These narratives created a logic in which it becomes a given that elite students are located where, as one student noted, “there is always something important happening at any time of the day.”

Given their neighborhoods’ status as prime attractions, students tended to frame the “downsides” of their local areas as a function of the their popularity and importance. Seven
students discussed the vast numbers of people gravitating to their neighborhoods, a phenomenon some linked to issues of traffic, pollution, and overcrowding. To accompany his photograph of the view from his building (Figure 1.1), Python G. shared: “The panorama of colours makes it a memorable sight. Visitors come from all over the world for this view. It makes up for any kind of befalling that may be present in my neighbourhood.” Similarly, Jewel T. wrote: “The main road passing under my building is one of the busiest in the city as it connects a lot of places and you have to drive through it to reach most of the important places in town. The downside of this is that there is a lot of noise and air pollution and it often takes a lot of time to reach home.” Such narratives legitimized the status and significance of students’ neighborhoods, portraying these places as not only different, but superior to other places around. They highlighted a boundary between people who go elsewhere for resources, culture, and beauty; and people who have it all at home.

Figure 1.1: Python G.’s neighborhood photograph
Vantage Points of the Educated Elite

As students constructed the exceptional nature of their neighborhoods and their city, they also conducted boundary work to define in-groups and out-groups, and to signal their own position within local society. In this section, I explore how students engaged their local environments—as well as one another—in the process of fashioning their identities as the educated elite, and developing ideologies about the workings of local society.

One way that students distinguished themselves from other groups was through delineating the geographic borders of their local areas. Through their neighborhood maps, students differentiated their sphere of belonging from that of those who are poor—maintaining boundaries along the lines of class. Given the social geography of Mumbai, all residents lived in some proximity to the slums. However, only two students chose to include the slums or the poor in their map (see Figures 2.0 and 2.1).

![Figure 2.0: Sigma Q.'s neighborhood map](image)
Sigma Q.’s map included a strong distinction between what he claimed as “my neighborhood” and the slums outside. The ruler-drawn line separating these areas was coupled with a note that the slums—illustrated as a tight, homogenous cluster of small dwellings—were his “least favorite place” and “should be re-located.” The contrast between the areas was further highlighted through the representation of his own neighborhood as a relative open space, adorned by sunshine, birds, a garden, the city skyline, and neat and orderly skyscrapers. Here the drawing of the spatial boundary indicated not only the construction of difference within the neighborhood, but also a hierarchical ordering of places within. In Bambi W.’s map, this hierarchical ordering of place was more explicitly linked to an ordering of peoples: she designated the small square diagonal from the large rectangle of her building as a “covered area for the poor & strays.” Bambi W. thus signaled the marginalized space of certain groups of people in local society—alluding to a boundary.
between those who share and occupy an area in a transitory fashion, and those who can lay claim to their home (e.g. “my apartment complex”). This boundary work reflects the particular workings of power in Mumbai, where people who live in slums typically do not have rights or status as citizens, making it so that claiming ownership to a home becomes imperative to claiming belonging in the city (Echanove & Srivastava, 2012).

By excluding slums all together from their sketch maps, all other students participating in this study drew boundaries along such pre-existing lines of social and spatial distinction. Indeed, students engaged a different symbol to define the neighborhoods they called their own: out of the 23 students participating in this study, 12 students noted skyscrapers and tall buildings as a defining feature of their local areas. Six students mentioned the noteworthy height of their buildings or the floor on which they lived. Referencing the height of buildings is symbolically significant, given that the height of residential buildings in Mumbai tends to be relative to the status of their residents (Echanove & Srivastava, 2012). Relatedly, Cecilia G. wrote of her neighborhood: “[Altamount Road] is actually a hill. This is quite convenient as India experiences heavy rainfall and severe floods. However the rainfall slides down the slopes of this hill and so my neighborhood is not prone to floods.” The physical elevation of Cecilia G.’s residence signals broader patterns of how, across national contexts, the upper class tends to build homes in geographically advantageous locations (Higley, 1997). Whether mentioned with the intention to emphasize status or simply to state fact, these details of height and elevation pointed to students’ position in local society, leading readers to understand their perspective as a view from the top.

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6 According to urban planners Echanove and Srivastava (2012), high-rise buildings in Mumbai are a “ubiquitous symbol of modernization.” As products of legal, economic, and technological protocols that are globally standardized, they are often framed by elites as a solution to other forms of housing (e.g. slums), which are then constructed as problematic.
Given these forms of spatial distance between the Mumbai students and other groups in their neighborhoods, engaging in neighborhood-based activities through the CWCS curriculum became a unique experience for many students to encounter “pedestrians” and the “people on the street” with whom they do not normally cross paths. Students’ neighborhood narratives revealed a variety of ways in which they made sense of the differences between themselves and other groups, as well as the often contested nature of the boundaries they drew. Recounting his neighborhood walk, one student portrayed himself in contradistinction to the “endless wave of children” attending the municipal or local schools included on his sketch map; these children were associated with issues of commotion, traffic, litter, and “spit stains.” This kind of boundary work was also evident in 4 students’ descriptions of the “small colony of resident fishermen” in their local area. As an example, Figures 3.0 and 3.1 show Joey E.’s neighborhood photographs, which he split into a juxtaposition of neighborhood dislikes (Figure 3.0) and likes (Figure 3.1).

Joey E. differentiated himself from the fishermen by describing them as “uneducated,” claiming that they “dirty the place.” He explained: “As most people know India is one of the
world’s most populated countries and this is an undesired side effect, although they are hardworking and have as many rights to be here as any other Indian, rich or poor, intelligent or unaware.” This narrative exemplifies how some of the Mumbai students reinforced boundaries based on class, lifestyle, and “intelligence,” engaging in critiques of people in their neighborhood while marking themselves as culturally and socially distinct.

Notably, there were cases where the Mumbai students engaged one another in dialogue to disagree with negative representations of other groups. For instance, in response to Joey E.’s discussion of the fishermen and a milkman who he encountered on his neighborhood walk, Python G. wrote:

Although I respect your opinion, I do think it’s a bit harsh to classify these fishermen in such a way. They are merely victims of circumstances. They have also changed greatly in the recent years. They do whatever they must to survive and to try and imagine their plight would be impossible. Many of them are also extremely conscious of their surroundings and you will often find educated ones! Also, I do believe that a milkman, who is so essential to our life, deserves to have shelter although I do agree that it is a little unfair to the pedestrians but in this case, I feel the milkman does deserve importance!...Hopefully, I have managed to change your perspective, even if marginally so.

Python G. articulated values of being “conscious” and “educated,” and extended respect to the workers who are “so essential to our life.” He called attention to the importance of those who make the lives of the upper class comfortable and possible, and drew upon his own historical knowledge to provide context for the “circumstances” of other people. In doing so, Python G. challenged Joey E.’s negative portrayal of groups in lower status positions, but ultimately did not question the existence of a boundary between these groups and his own.

Echoing ideas in Python G.’s narrative, several other students used their neighborhood narratives to cast light on the interdependence of different groups within their local area. Reflecting upon her neighborhood walk, Vera R. wrote about her experience observing a “uniformed chauffeur” as he climbed aboard a public bus after exiting the Audi
he was driving for work:

I considered how he was probably coming to work from the other end of the city, and how hard he probably had to work. I stopped walking altogether when I realised that many other drivers were in the same position as he was. I had never really stopped to respect chauffeurs for working so hard. It was only beginning to occur to me that without them, we would never get anywhere (both literally and metaphorically). As I resumed walking, I mulled the idea over and over in my head, once again. I have realised that a fact of the matter is that chauffeurs are, undoubtedly, the unsung heroes behind the existence of any wealthy neighbourhood, such as mine.

Vera R. openly acknowledged the affluence of her neighborhood, and described it as an economic and social system in which the life advantages of the wealthy are made possible by the hard work of people like chauffeurs. Relatedly, Jimmy R. wrote about dabbawalas, who he described as the “extremely disciplined” people who carry lunch boxes to satisfy “the hunger pangs of thousands of office goers.” He asserted: “Though their work may sound simple, the dabbawala’s have paved the gastronomic highway of one of the busiest cities of the world, Mumbai… even though the job of the dabbawala’s does not require much intelligence, they use low technology but modern management practices, using the basics of supply-chain management.” By holding up groups such as chauffeurs and dabbawalas as “unsung heroes” of their local areas, these students challenged the alignment of class status with character or moral worth.

Seven students used their neighborhood narratives to bring visibility to the stories of those who often go unappreciated or unheard. For instance, Ava W. interviewed a gardener who has known her since she was a child—a man she describes as “so humble and quiet,” wearing “plastic slippers and old clothes” while holding great wisdom. Admiring his ability to “connect [his] knowledge with his surroundings and make an effort to change his environment every day,” she shared: “life is a greater teacher than any school or university and we must meet and ask questions of many people because everyone has a story to tell.”
Here Ava W. maintained the boundaries between her in-group and that of the gardener, but questioned the moral and intellectual distinctions that create distance between them. She celebrated the gardener’s commitment to improving the local environment, and appealed to her peer group to be more grounded in their surroundings and more attentive to the experiences and voices of others. Her narrative shows how students engaged their positions as elite students to approach the neighborhood as informed thinkers, equipped with a compassionate gaze and a strong moral and civic stance. By bringing attention to the “humble” and hardworking people who provide for the needs of residents, students like Ava W., Vera R., Jimmy R., and Python G. challenged dominant ideologies that construct these other groups as inferior.

Yet while students generally described other people in their neighborhood with respect and an empathetic regard, they ultimately did not reject the power inequalities that exist between different groups according to class and status. Across the neighborhood narratives, students did not question the conditions of their own powerful position in society. Pointing out persistent issues with government corruption, various students expressed the need for the future to be shaped by people with principles of hard work, integrity, and compassion. They spoke on behalf of other groups as they advocated for forms of change. Jimmy R. wrote, “We need to find ways to bridge the gaps between rich and poor.” Joey E. recommended, “I do hope as the future generation of India and the world we will be the change we want to see and do our bit so [the poor] can live a comfortable life and so can we.” After her interview with a neighbor, Angelika Y. wrote: “Talking to my neighbor…made me realize that complaining about issues around us does in no way help us to tackle them. We need to think of viable solutions to those problems and then try to implement them.”
These narratives reflected students’ identities as thoughtful intellectuals who care about bettering conditions, who can use their knowledge to diagnose issues, and who will lead according to principles of what is morally right. This position of the educated elite distanced them—as individuals and as a group—from accountability for problems that might currently exist, while highlighting their potential as harbingers of new realities. While these narratives ultimately maintained boundaries along the lines of class, education, and lifestyle, they illuminated students’ efforts to be inclusive of other perspectives as they conscientiously move society towards progress.

Visions of India’s Future

*During my [neighborhood] walk I realized that in a country so vast, with innumerable languages, an overgrowing population of people coming from a wide variety of religions, castes and sects encountering problems is inevitable. Yet we take each day as it comes and encounter one problem at a time. It is in these nuances of my neighborhood that I noticed the silent charm of my country.*

– Bambi W.

In nearly half of the Mumbai students’ narratives, as in Bambi W.’s above, there was a direct link between exploring the neighborhood and reflecting upon the nation—with elements of the local environment used to represent salient features of India as a whole. In this section, I discuss how students engaged discourses of modernization, development, and cosmopolitanism to “place” themselves and their country in the larger context of global society. I show how in the process of this boundary work, some students called into question power dynamics that exist in the world at large.
Arnold T. explained his image (Figure 4.0) with the following narrative:

The picture I have drawn (actually, Photoshopped) started out as a picture of what might be called a "typical Indian". I added the briefcase, the iPhone, the suit label, the shoes and the background. This shows how, as previously rural or underdeveloped suburban areas and people are jolted into the Technological Age, the cultural alterations and nuances brought on by this change can be quite incongruous.

In his narrative, Arnold T. provided his peers with an image of India that features signs of commerce, technology for work and entertainment, and the leisure of fashion and recreation. He acknowledged popular portrayals of “typical” or traditional India—as embodied here by a person who wears religious headwear—and moved beyond that representation through symbols of global modernity. His vision is set in a context of urban
wealth, as the man stands atop tall buildings, against a bright blue sky. Echoing ideas in many other students’ narratives, Arnold T.’s picture communicates a story of urban India as rising above its “rural or underdeveloped” roots, and taking its place in global society. Though the journey is not necessarily free of bumps, it is marked by the inevitability of connection with the rest of the world.

Eight of the 23 Mumbai students employed this dichotomy between “third-world,” “developing” countries and “developed” countries in their neighborhood narratives. Scholars of post-modern theory have problematized the discourse of development, pointing out its function as a tool for subjugation of the “Third World” through constructing the West as the standard to which all societies should aspire (e.g. Escobar, 1992; Said, 1993; 1995). Yet the Mumbai students’ narratives demonstrate how this discourse persists in young people’s understandings of their country’s status relative to others. Figure 4.1 shows how Sergey P. constructed his neighborhood narrative around two images of India: one depicting the upscale seaside promenade in his neighborhood, a tourist attraction with “buildings and transportation show[ing] that we are globally connected”; and the other a glamorous, magazine-like image showing two well-dressed members of India’s elite advertising an iPhone 5.

Figure 4.1: Sergey P.’s neighborhood images
Sergey P.’s captions described India “following” trends and becoming visible on the world stage. This narrative, along with that of Arnold T. and others, demonstrates the use of symbols of global commerce and new technology to shine a light on India’s promise, and on Mumbai’s earned position as one of the world’s “progressive” and “advanced cities.”

In addition to the discourses of modernization and development, cosmopolitanism featured strongly in many students’ narratives. In 12 of the 23 students’ neighborhood narratives, there were repeated mentions of the plurality or diversity of peoples, religions, and cultures that exist in India at large. One way in which students talked about this was through the many cuisines available in their local areas. As Jenny J. noted, “my neighborhood also boasts of excellent Thai, Chinese and Continental restaurants…people in India have been exposed to international cuisines.” Jenny J.’s highlighting of the cosmopolitan nature of her neighborhood was part of a pattern of students associating their places with other major cities, namely those in the West. This kind of boundary work was found in 11 of the 23 Mumbai students’ narratives. Writing about the architecture of a bridge, Dominic N. likened the “Rajiv Gandhi Bridge in my city, Mumbai” to the “Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.” Other students wrote about the kinds of “tall, glass buildings found in all major cities, including London, New York, and Mumbai”; and the “special kind of feeling” that comes “concrete jungle” cities like “Mumbai, New York, and London.” In these ways, the Mumbai students forged a boundary that aligned themselves with individuals and institutions in Europe and the U.S. These expressions of cosmopolitan identity may have been part of students’ effort to connect with other CWCS students who lived in these cities, or to demonstrate their own worldliness, having travelled to some of these places before. Still, these narratives preserved the West as a standard and positioned India as in the process of ascending to these ranks.
At the same time, a number of students used their neighborhood narratives to illuminate a vision for India firmly rooted in their country’s unique history and identity. Sergey P. summarized a theme that emerged across students’ narratives with the following statement: “economic progress has to go hand in hand with adequate concerns towards city planning, attention to preservation of nature as well as our heritage.” Proposing that her peers turn against dominant trends of capitalist thinking, and towards “principles of altruism” and a revival of “Indian culture,” Vera R. voiced: “we, as the new generation, should be aware…and try to perhaps change our attitude towards society.” Similarly, Ava W. mobilized her neighborhood narratives to argue for holding on to “our individuality and original Indian culture.” She lamented that, “small, local shops and bungalows are being torn down to make way for the glamorous, granite and glass-faced buildings.” Further, she problematized globalization by constructing it as a violent force taking over the world, commenting: “India has not been spared.” This sense of the need for India to defend itself and claim control over its own destiny was also reflected in Jimmy R.’s musing about the future of his neighborhood: “Would the grand old tree outside my building still be around, silently recording the goings on? Or would it have surrendered to the unavoidable march of ‘progress?’”

Such neighborhood narratives reveal how many of the Mumbai students conducted boundary work based on national identity: they constructed an in-group of Indian society as a basis for challenging ideologies underlying Western domination, and for standing for the survival of local peoples and places. Another example of this emerged in Max N.’s posts, in which he used his neighborhood narrative to draw comparisons between New Delhi and Mumbai:

All around New Delhi and Mumbai, there are several remnants of ages now forgotten, and reminders of eras now completely erased from the minds of
the cities' current inhabitants. The number of rulers and kingdoms these
cities have seen is unbelievable. This exquisite structure was a house for the
priests of the Lodi dynasty, the rulers of India in the late 15th century.
Monuments like these are pieces of history, and we must try our hardest to
keep them in pristine condition, and not let them fall into disrepair.

Max N. went on to claim the importance of protecting the environment, “the lush greenery
that only a handful of places enjoy today,” due to urbanization and population growth. He
voiced, “it is essential that we preserve and protect any green areas we have left in our cities
because parks like these provide respite for the weary inhabitants of today's urban jungles.”

This neighborhood narrative also shows how students engaged in boundary work to
include themselves in a broader in-group that transcends the local area. Max N. situated
himself and his peers within a larger collective of people who share goals of preserving the
riches of history and of nature, as well as who share an urban experience living “in a world
filled with concrete, plastic, and glass.” This boundary work might be seen as a response to
forces responsible for what Prakash (2010) has called the “double colonization” of Mumbai:
colonization of the people by the British, and colonization of the physical land by the
people—a process through which “the physical space [was] treated as an abstract object that
could be manipulated and reshaped at will…involv[ing] the repression of the existing
meanings of particular cultural significance that people attached to specific spaces” (p. 51).

In expressing their attachments to their neighborhoods, and the myriad symbolic
meanings associated with these places, the Mumbai students constructed visions of India’s
future based on values of global connectedness and rootedness to their own land. They
positioned themselves as individuals who could think and speak in the modes of a
conscientious global elite, and who could advance possibilities that challenged the status quo.
Ultimately, this boundary work served to legitimize the Mumbai students’ status as future
leaders of India and the world.
Discussion and Conclusion

Boundary Work in Elite Students’ Neighborhood Narratives

Drawing upon Lamont and Molnar’s (2002) concept of symbolic boundaries, I investigated how elite high school students in Mumbai conducted boundary work through their neighborhood narratives. Using inductive analysis of their posts in an international online learning community, I examined how students framed their local areas and conducted boundary work based on place. This research addresses a more general gap in the literature on how young elites experience and attach meanings to their local places; and how they maintain, manage and contest boundaries in their social interactions.

Findings revealed that students conducted boundary work through: a) constructing their city as an exceptional place; b) framing themselves as members of an educated, cosmopolitan, and conscientious elite; and c) representing their nation as a country rising in status on the world stage. Through multilayered and complex narratives, students positioned their local areas at the top of symbolic hierarchies of place, and told a larger story about India’s—and their own—ascendance. While students maintained boundaries that exist in their local society, they also used their platform to call attention to issues of wealth disparity, and to question the symbolic distance between high status and low status groups. In these ways, students reflected upon difference and at times called for change, given the status they claimed as future leaders of India and the world.

This research contributes to scholarship in cultural sociology by attending to the role of space and place in the boundary work of adolescents. These findings build upon the work of Kato (2011), who found that middle-class suburban adolescents used their local neighborhoods as a tool kit for identity construction. Expanding upon Kato’s (2011) research, the narratives of the Mumbai students demonstrate how young elites can draw
from urban affluent neighborhoods to construct *privilege* as a dimension of their identity (Howard, 2010). In this study, elite students in Mumbai drew from symbols of their physical environment to interpret, narrate, and imagine their place for outsiders—most of whom were unfamiliar with their context. They constructed the exceptional nature of their local areas through emphasizing the beauty, abundance, prominence, and cultural significance of these places. The neighborhood thus served as a set of symbolic resources from which they could fashion their unique identities as elites and partake in a “subculture of privilege” that emerges from the “spatial niche of concentrated affluence” (Massey, 1996, p. 408).

Constructing neighborhood narratives also opened up dialogue on issues that were manifest in their local surroundings, and students were able to express moral and civic values that ultimately added legitimacy to their own high status position in Indian society.

This study also illuminates how neighborhood narratives can serve as a toolkit for boundary work on a global level. Through their discussions of the cosmopolitan, globally connected, and “concrete jungle” aspects of their city, the Mumbai students asserted an identity that transcended the boundaries of their local places. Moreover, by aligning their city with other global cities, particularly those in the West, the Mumbai students pushed at boundaries within mainstream discourse that marginalize India or reduce it to flattened images of “underdevelopment.” By constructing where they come from as positive, popular, and complex, the Mumbai students afforded their localities and their nation a mark of distinction that otherwise may not have been received. Indeed, despite their high status in Indian society and their membership in a global elite, the Mumbai students can be considered a marginalized group given other markers of their identity, such as place or race. The Mumbai students’ neighborhood narratives thus served not only to flesh out a particular picture of their country, but also to resist dominant narratives that historically have not
positioned India at the top of symbolic hierarchies of place in the world. Echoing other scholars who have argued for the incorporation of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) into the study of elite students, I recommend that future studies on elites account for multiple axes of social difference when seeking to understand the experiences and perspectives of this diverse group of youth.

The findings of this study can also be considered in relation to broader discourse on identity and community in a globalizing world. Various scholars have conceptualized globalization as a growing interconnectedness between parts of the world, which can give rise to new means of communication and new forms of community that go beyond national borders (e.g. Giddens 1990). De Block and Buckingham (2007) have asserted that particularly in the contemporary era, boundaries are fluid, and modern consumer culture provides youth with increased possibilities for constructing their identities in creative ways. Schrager (2002) has suggested that these conditions call for emphasis on defining identity and belonging according to shared interests rather than shared geography. Along these lines, Appiah (2006) has proposed the notion of cosmopolitanism as a universal concern for all human lives, coupled with a sincere respect for difference; it is an orientation towards a sense of membership in a human race, where people are linked to one another across boundaries of space. In the Mumbai students’ narratives, this ideology might be seen as manifest in the usage of a generalized “we” when addressing other members of the international online learning community, and in their alignment of Mumbai with other major cities around the world.

Nussbaum (2002) has argued for educators to orient towards cosmopolitanism—rather than national citizenship—in such a way that students learn more about their selves, become prepared for international cooperation, and recognize moral obligations to others.
Discourses around global citizenship have become increasingly popular in education—energizing projects such as CWCS and countless other educational programs, as well as the philosophy of the elite school that the participants in this study attended. Yet it is possible that cultivating a sense of identity as a cosmopolitan global elite could weaken the boundaries of obligation that young people construct within their local society. Miller (2002) has argued that discourses around cosmopolitanism can cause individuals to be less concerned about (in)equality in their immediate geographic communities. Scholars have also noted that for elites with spending power in modern consumer cultures, the cosmopolitan identity tends to link directly to participation in global capitalism and neoliberalism (Mitchell, 2003). Because cosmopolitanism does not actually link to real citizenship rights or concrete opportunities for social impact on a global level, the discourse can serve as a cultural disposition that maintains and elevates elite status, while perpetuating local patterns of stratification and exclusion. The findings of this study demonstrate how students can assert a cosmopolitan, global citizen identity alongside a fairly strong national identity—all expressed through pride in their local places. Their narratives also included some critiques of the global economy and indicated a desire to address inequality in their local context. Yet because this study cannot speak to students’ actual civic behavior, the potential tensions between local and global citizenship should be explored through ongoing research and dialogue.

**Implications for Research and Educational Practice**

I view this paper as a foundation for future research, and it is my hope that its findings can contribute to several promising directions for scholarly pursuit. Here I suggest three possible paths forward.

First, researchers interested in studying the intersection of culture and inequality might continue to build sociological theory on space and place. Low (2011) has argued that
theories and methodologies of space and place can unveil systems of exclusion that are otherwise rendered invisible. The neighborhood narratives of the Mumbai students suggest that the everyday spatial experiences of young people involve a constant negotiation with boundaries and material forms of inequality. Further research into how spatial inequalities shape the identities, ideologies, and experiences of young people could generate deeper understandings of boundary work based on place. Importantly, this area of research can also carry strong implications for urban design and policy, given that addressing spatial inequality and injustice requires intervention in the physical environments themselves.

Second, moving forward in this area of study, it is crucial for researchers to continue examining the various ways in which institutions, relationships, and spaces shape how young people become elite. While processes of boundary work are enacted at the individual and group level, they are deeply rooted in larger structures of inequality (Mayorga-Gallo, 2014). This recalls Leonard’s (2008) point about young people’s boundary work:

\[\text{Boundary work does not occur in a vacuum. Inter-group interactions reflect the wider social, historical, political, and economic context within which insider and outsiders position themselves in relation to each other and the wider society. (p. 486)}\]

The boundary work of students who live in affluent areas and attend elite schools thus reflects social dynamics and power relations that exist at the macro-level. Building knowledge on boundaries allows for consideration of how people might shift the discourses that exist, and how educators can engage the “heart, head and hands” (Rogers, 2011, p.4) in unpacking the complexities of place and privilege together with their students. As Howard (2010) notes, this is especially relevant for educators in elite schools, for it is in these settings that “students from dominant groups are comfortably socialized to accept (and even defend) particular ways of knowing and doing that protect their advantages” (p. 1989). Though the challenges of countering these ways of knowing and doing may be significant, the
opportunity before educators and students working in these spaces is tremendous. We know that identities, boundaries, and hierarchies are not fixed and static, but rather open to revision and change (Leonard, 2008).

Relatedly, I believe this research calls for more attention to the construction and negotiation of privilege in contexts outside of school. Much of the research on young elites has focused on elite schooling, which has generated important knowledge about the functions of elite schools in social reproduction, and the experiences and meaning-making processes of students within these institutions (e.g. Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Howard, 2010; Khan, 2012). Future studies could examine how discourses of distinction (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009) or ideologies of individual merit (Khan, 2012) may be produced in the home, in the out-of-school time programs, and in the everyday interactions of young elites as they move through their local surroundings. Because the present study was based on an online context, it provides limited access to understanding the larger discursive environments in which elite students live and learn.

Finally, in an era in which young people increasingly interact on social media across lines of geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic difference, it is essential to continue to study how diverse groups of young people interact in online contexts. Although they are situated in a virtual world, online learning communities can carry profound developmental, civic and social impacts in young people’s lives. Research has shown that the use of technology can have psychological benefits and can enhance young people’s sense of civic identity and social responsibility (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). Because they offer opportunities for youth to interact across localities and nation-states (Appadurai, 1996), they can create a “new ethic of exchange” among individuals and groups previously imagined as distant “others” (Smith & Hull, 2013). Chen and colleagues (2012) note that such
engagement with people from different backgrounds might be rare even in diverse neighborhoods. Further, the reflection that can be embedded in online dialogue can allow students to talk more productively about complex social issues than is typical in face-to-face learning. The ability to talk about things that might otherwise be “undiscussable” (Caruthers, Thompson, & Eubanks, 2004) opens up possibilities for students to develop new frameworks for understanding, and to practice skills in communicating across differences in background or viewpoint.

In these ways, international online learning communities hold promise as sites where education, civics, and identity converge. The question before educators is how to further support students engaging in online spaces within a globalizing world—where social inequalities persist and power is unequally distributed, and where boundaries are at once inevitable and malleable. Narratives and storytelling offer rich opportunities for dialogue and learning, and although this aspect of CWCS was not the focus of this paper, the impact of online storytelling is an important area for continued educational practice and research. By building coalitions of practitioners and researchers interested in these issues, we can more fully explore the challenges and leverage the opportunities of education in a “multilocal life world” (Vertovec, 2009, p.77).
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## Appendix A: Codebook

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<tr>
<th>Code (Sub-Codes in Bullet Points)</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<td>• Schools</td>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gates or Security</td>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Neighborhood Boundary</td>
<td><img src="image4.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Government Buildings</td>
<td><img src="image5.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Arabian Sea/Chowpatty Beach</td>
<td><img src="image6.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Places of Worship</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Construction</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Tall Buildings or Skyscrapers</td>
<td><img src="image16.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “My Bus Stop”</td>
<td><img src="image17.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Codes Applied:**
- Skyscrapers – Cafes/Restaurants – Trees or Green Space – Recreational Area – Arabian Sea/Chowpatty Beach - Shops

### Good Quote

Excerpt - Document: Ava W._Neighborhood Map.docx, Position: 1353-1524

I have so much to share about my neighbourhood and city - it is like no other. it is teeming with everything - people, cars, pollution yet an energy that is very special!

### Impact of Prompt Exercise


This walk made me actually notice my neighbourhood, I see it everyday but today I actually saw it!

### Categorizing Other Groups


I’ve been taking several short walks on Ridge Road. I see postmen, sweepers, fruit sellers, broom sellers, residents busy on their weight-reducing walks, dog walkers (yes, we have them on Malabar Hill too), workers in a rush to go to work or back to bus stops to catch a bus back home, many devotees walking with flowers and offerings to and back from temples, school children and many policemen.

### Sharing Personal History

- Referencing Family
- Claiming Cultural Identity

Excerpt - Document: Bambi W._Neighborhood Map.docx, Position: 950-1431
Many of the small street shops have been passed down through many generations and are the pride of the families they belong to. Near my house is an old Banyan tree which many refer to as 'the old tree by the road'. Below this tree is a bench; my siblings, my friends and I spent our summer evenings by them. It was by the sea that we found our nearly starved kitten on a rainy Tuesday evening and brought her home. Upon her demise, we sent her ashes back off into the vast Arabian.

Engaging in Dialogue
• Disagreeing with Peers
• Direct/General Response

Python G. - Although I respect your opinion, I do think it's a bit harsh to classify these fishermen in such a way. They are merely victims of circumstances. They have also changed greatly in the recent years. They do whatever they must to survive and to try and imagine their plight would be impossible. Many of them are also extremely conscious of their surroundings and you will often find educated ones! Also, I do believe that a milkman, who is so essential to our life, deserves to have shelter although I do agree that it is a little unfair to the pedestrians but in this case, I feel the milkman does deserve importance! The government does have more important things to look at, and I believe a country like ours should be able to put up with minor hardships when traversing the path to growth and development. It is a monumental task that the government faces, but it is doing a relatively good job, especially when you take into account the recent growth that we have seen. Hopefully, I have managed to change your perspective, even if marginally so.

Informing Readers
• Acting as Translator
• Sharing “Culture” or “History”


One of the pictures below is of a temple dedicated to the Hindu god Swaminarayan. Behind it is another temple dedicated to goddess Mahalaxmi. Religion is one of the key elements of the lives of much of the Indian population. The temples are visited everyday by many people; during festivals and religious occasions, throngs of people flock to the temples to worship, and the meandering line to enter the temples snakes down the entire length of the street. This also contributes to a massive increase in traffic in the vicinity.

Relating Neighborhood to Broader Context
• Comparing to Mumbai
• Comparing to India


This area is less of a concrete jungle than the rest of the city I live in, Mumbai, and has...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comparing to “the world”</td>
<td>quite a bit of greenery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aligning to the West</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stating Preferences</td>
<td>Excerpt - Document: Taranvir C_Neighborhood Map.docx, Position: 208-363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likes</td>
<td>The thing that I would like to change is the traffic jam caused every evening on the main road and the noise pollution caused by honking of the car horns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislikes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characterizing Local Neighborhood</td>
<td>Excerpt - Document: Vera R_Neighborhood Map.docx, Position: 362-940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pointing to Contrasts</td>
<td>1) Priyadarshini park, better known as PDP is a field surrounded by tracks for running. Most athletic meets are held here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlighting Plurality</td>
<td>2) The Shiv temple is a temple for worshippers of the Hindu God 'Shiva'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentioning Pollution (Noise, Air)</td>
<td>3) Hanging gardens is another tourist attraction in this part of Mumbai. It is a park, and a walking area, best known for the huge model of a shoe, taken from the children's nursery rhyme 'there was an old woman who lived in a shoe'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlighting Affluence</td>
<td>4) The Jain temple is a heritage sight, and a major tourist sight. It is known to be one of the most beautiful and noteworthy temples in Mumbai.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlighting Abundance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pointing to Cleanliness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noting #s of People</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stating Prominence or Importance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highlighting Proximity/Convenience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pointing to Beauty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pointing to Tourist Attractions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“progress”/change</td>
<td>The second one is of the skyline of Mumbai, which reflects the progress of the cosmopolitan city. This is in stark contrast with the first picture. It shows the economic disparity that pervades our society. While Mumbai rises to the heights of prosperity, there are still parts of the city where people live a hand to mouth existence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“modern(ity)”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“problems”/solutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“development”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>preservation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>role/responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inequality/wealth/poverty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>