Precarious Mobility: Trying and Failing to Get Ahead in the 21st Century

Citation
Wooten, Tom. 2022. Precarious Mobility: Trying and Failing to Get Ahead in the 21st Century. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

Permanent link
https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37372181

Terms of Use

Share Your Story

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

DISSERTATION ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

The undersigned, appointed by the

Department of Sociology

have examined a dissertation entitled

Precarious Mobility:
Trying and Failing to Get Ahead in the 21st Century

presented by Tom Wooten

candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and hereby
certify that it is worthy of acceptance.

Signature _____

Typed name: Prof. Mary C. Waters

Signature _____

Typed name: Prof. Jocelyn Viterna

Signature _____

Typed name: Prof. Mario Luis Small

Date: May 2, 2022

Precarious Mobility: Trying and Failing to Get Ahead in the 21st Century

A dissertation presented by

Tom Wooten

to

The Department of Sociology

in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Sociology

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

May 2022

Dissertation Advisers: Tom Wooten

Mary Waters (Chair)

Mario Small

Jocelyn Viterna

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how the recent rise in college going for young people from low-income families in the United States has shaped processes that reproduce poverty. Drawing on 2,400 hours of ethnographic fieldwork conducted over 25 months with eight young Black men in New Orleans, the study provides an in-depth look at the experience of trying to escape poverty by attending college. It argues that the concept of precarity, which is often invoked to explain the difficulty of daily survival for poor and working-class people, also captures what makes the work of trying to "get ahead" so fraught. This work is fundamentally unstable, in that small, unexpected problems can quickly escalate into total failure. It is counterintuitive, in that success can demand cautious strategies that feel at odds with one's inner drive. And it is high consequence, in that failure often leaves one much worse off for having tried. The stories of the men profiled in this study paint a new picture of social reproduction in the United States. As they transition to adulthood, young people from low-income families navigate an array of opportunities that appear promising but that conceal considerable risk. Because wholeheartedly chasing such opportunities increases exposure to these hidden hazards, such striving can inadvertently but easily contribute to failure. Succeeding at these opportunities does not require the creative spark or superhuman effort so often valorized in US achievement ideology, but rather caution, patient self-denial, and more than a little luck.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Lots of people have helped me on this journey. I feel humbled and grateful looking back on all their support. Most of all, I am grateful to this dissertation's core participants and to their families. "Kenya," "Dorian," "Juan," "Paul," "Vincent," "Jaydin," "A.J.," and "Casey" let me into their lives. They are each wonderful people, and the extensive time I got to spent with them over two years was the most engaging and rewarding thing I have ever done.

Mary Waters, my advisor, has believed in this project and had my back for a decade. She is extraordinarily smart and extraordinarily down to earth. She could not care less about the prestige and pecking orders of academic sociology, and she cares a great deal about doing research that matters for the world. This is what I want to be like when I grow up. One time, my participant A.J. came to visit me at Harvard, and we went to see Mary. A.J. was apprehensive about meeting a Harvard professor, but his time with Mary ended up being the highlight of his trip. Mary asked him great questions about his life and listened with interest to his answers, gave him a signed copy of her book *Black Identities*, and told him she was glad she got to meet him. Afterwards he was giddy. "That was so much cooler than I thought it was going to be," he told me.

Mario Small, a committee member on this dissertation, helped me transform this project for the better. For inductive qualitative projects, it is important to "think about your research as you're doing it," in the words of Howard Becker. This is much easier said than done. By the time I started my fieldwork, I had spent almost three years psyching myself up to do a comparative project focused on high school disciplinary culture. This type of resolve can give you blinders as a researcher; it took me five months in the field to realize that I should be asking a different question. Mario helped me reconceive my question and my methods in a way that I'm proud of. Through advising conversations, and through his example and his writing, he also helped me break out of clunky, scientistic ways of thinking about qualitative research.

Jocelyn Viterna, also a committee member on this dissertation, has been a part of my academic life for fourteen years. I first met her when she was a reader for my undergraduate thesis. Then, she taught me a very important lesson about literature reviews: they should not be summaries of everything that has been written about a topic; they should be arguments for your research question. Since then, she has been a wonderful guide through some of the parts of sociological research and writing that I find hardest. In graduate school, I have struggled to figure out how to fit ethnographic data into the form of a journal article. More than anyone else, Jocelyn has helped me learn this craft, all the while reassuring me that in the long run, the book will be the thing that matters.

Sandy Jencks and Matt Desmond were also both previously on my committee, and I learned a lot from each of them. I have never had an editor like Sandy; drafts of papers I sent him came back covered red ink chicken scratch that, when deciphered, revealed incisive and mind-expanding questions. Now when I write, I try to picture my reader as someone like Sandy: a skeptical, creative, no-nonsense thinker who cares most about finding out the truth. Matt Desmond patiently pushed me to trust ethnography as a method. "Just get to know a couple of people and spend a lot of time with them," he told me. I was used to doing projects based on dozens or hundreds of interviews, and trading breadth for depth felt counterintuitive and scary. Matt helped me push through my fears and commit to learning deeply about a few lives. I'm glad I did.

In graduate school, you also learn a tremendous amount from your peers. I am lucky to have been part of a PhD cohort of smart, friendly, collaborative people who get along and care about one another: Aaron Benavidez, Brielle Bryan, Matt Clair, Allie Feldberg, Hope Harvey, Barbara Kiviat, Char Lloyd, Margot Moinester, Katie Morris, Nate Wilmers, Alix Winter, and Xiaolin Zhou. I also got to make friends with lots of other sociologists in training, and I look forward to continuing to learn from them for decades to come: Mary Ellen Stitt, Nora Gross, Jasmin Sandelson, Nicole

CHAPTER 1: KENYA'S DAY

KENYA'S MORNING

On weekday mornings in New Orleans East, school busses clog otherwise quiet streets. As the sun rises over a landscape of brown canals and cracked asphalt, children trickle in twos and threes out of low-slung apartment complexes, tightly packed townhomes, and drab ranch houses.[1] They congregate on corners, their polo uniform shirts sporting the names and colors of dozens of different schools. They are quiet, mostly, wiping sleep from their eyes, nodding along to tinny beats from their headphones, arms draped over younger siblings, hands twisting absently at braids or dreadlocks. Around them, the twice-daily mustard yellow traffic jam plays out in slow motion. Their bus might be in sight, but it is caught behind three others. The busses inch forward, lurching through deep potholes, rumbling and filling the air with pungent diesel. One at a time, they unfold flashing STOP signs and slide open their doors. A line of maroon shirts files onto one bus, a sky-blue line onto another. Gradually, the busses whittle the corner gatherings away, one color at a time.[2]

Kenya's bus was usually last to arrive, so on this drizzly April morning, he stayed inside as his younger brother Lamonte and younger sister Shaniece left for their schools, the rusty iron security door creaking closed behind them.[3] Akeem, his older brother, dozed upstairs. Kenya took his usual spot on the stained carpeted stairs overlooking the living room. The television lit his close-cropped hair and neat goatee in striking blue profile. "Ma, what time it is?" he asked, not exactly eager for school but suddenly restless.

"It's not time yet," his mother Tamika replied from the faux-leather futon where she and Shanice had spent the night. Though Tamika's five children were growing up fast—T.J., her oldest, was 22 and nearly done with college; Lamonte, her baby, was already 11—they

still competed for her affection just as they had when they were little. "Shanice has slept in the same bed as me since she was born," Tamika once explained, smiling and rolling her eyes. "She's about to be 17 and I just can't get rid of her." Kenya, for his part, still sometimes massaged Tamika's feet after her 12-hour shifts as a home health aide. "He come off as surly," Tamika said, "but he's a real soft, loving person when you get right down to it."

Tamika was fiercely protective of her children. She had kept them together through more than a dozen moves: through shelters, then the St. Bernard public housing projects, then exile in a tiny Mississippi River town after Hurricane Katrina, then small apartments on the outskirts of Baton Rouge, then an unsteady return to New Orleans. When all else failed, they had slept in her old Ford Expedition. "If one eat, we all eat," Tamika said. "If one homeless, we all homeless."

Several years before, a Section 8 housing voucher brought the family newfound stability. Their story of moving to New Orleans East mirrored the stories of thousands of other New Orleans families, pushed permanently out of centrally located neighborhoods not by floodwaters but by the "recovery" that followed. A slew of post-Katrina policies—the demolition of public housing, the provision of aid to homeowners but not to renters, the allotting of rebuilding grants based on property values rather than construction costs, the choreographed transformation of formerly Black-owned and affordable commercial corridors into white-owned upscale retail destinations—created widespread gentrification and displacement (Arena 2012; Herring and Rosenman 2016; Buras 2014; Cyran 2018). "The East" is where many displaced families ended up.

"I didn't know nothing about this area before we moved out here," Tamika explained. "But going through the newspaper, the prices were so outrageous everywhere else. And knowing you can't afford anything but what the voucher is going to help you to

2

pay, this seemed like the only option." In the East, rents were still somewhat affordable, and lots of landlords were accepting housing vouchers. Tamika toured a boxy vinyl-sided duplex, one of the few two-story buildings on a wide suburban avenue of brick ranch houses. The unit had three bedrooms and a small fenced-in back yard; it was more space than the family was used to. The neighborhood, Tamika recalled, seemed "pretty quiet." She signed a lease.[4]

What she noticed first was that everything was far away. In the St. Bernard Projects, she remembered, "you had a doctor's office right across the street, lots of grocery stores, and lots of community. Everything was available then, before Katrina." From their new home, the closest grocery store was a three-mile drive away, and most jobs were much farther.

What she noticed next was the violence, which seemed to get worse with each passing month. Kenya and his older brother Akeem started coming home with terrible stories from the neighborhood. Like the time Kenya was playing basketball at the park, heard pops, and turned around to see a person in his death throes. "There was waterfalls of blood shooting out that man's head," Kenya reported matter-of-factly when he got home. Then, around Thanksgiving the previous year, Kenya was shot in the hand. Tamika remained hazy on the details. She had been upstairs when "the loudest piercing noise I ever heard in my life" jolted her awake. She called out for Kenya and Akeem but heard no reply. When she worked up the courage to open the front door, she found Kenya gripping his hand. She rushed him to the hospital. Later, at school, Kenya told classmates he'd been hit in a drive by shooting, but he told Tamika that he had been examining a friend's pistol when he accidentally shot himself. Tamika thought that was the likelier story.

Since that evening, Tamika had taken to spending her nights in the living room. "I sleep here because I want to hear what's going on," she explained. "I feel more sense of

control." If her boys tried to leave in the wee hours of the morning, she could put a stop to it.

Raising children felt to Tamika like balancing on a knife's edge. She had learned that at any moment, a tiny slipup or a morsel of bad luck could bring the whole enterprise crashing down. Tantalizing opportunities, nearly in reach, could vanish in an instant. She had felt this herself as a ninth grader, in love with school, when the death of her grandmother and a single time having sex—a fumbling encounter with a broken condom—left her homeless and pregnant. She had seen it with Kenya, who was finally finding his footing during his 10th-grade year at a strict charter high school when he was caught with marijuana and expelled. She had seen it with Akeem, off to a flying start at Southern University in Baton Rouge, all As and Bs after the fall semester. That spring, Akeem started coming home on weekends to visit his girlfriend. Then his girlfriend got pregnant, and Akeem spent more time with her while still keeping up in his classes. Then, his last visit home before finals turned inadvertently permanent. Tamika's truck broke down, leaving Akeem stranded in New Orleans, unable to make it back for his exams.

These misfortunes stung poignantly because opportunity felt close at hand. T.J. was about to graduate from Southern with a bachelor's in computer science, and he would remain enrolled there to pursue his master's degree. Shanice, now a high school junior, had straight As and ACT scores high enough to secure a scholarship at LSU. And Akeem's best friend Lucas, one year younger and a whole lot luckier, showed Tamika how close Akeem had come to a different life. Akeem, a talented artist, had helped Lucas develop an interest in drawing and painting. Both young men attended the same dysfunctional high school. When Akeem tried to apply to the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA)—a free, prestigious supplementary high school program that trained some of the state's best young

4

artists and performers—he discovered he had missed the deadline. No one from his school had helped him apply. Akeem's school was being shut down one grade at a time, taken over by a charter school that had begun sharing the building. Akeem was stuck under the old administration, but Lucas, one grade behind, was able to transfer to the new charter school. Lucas's NOCCA application was accepted, his art blossomed, and his new guidance counselors pushed him to apply to scholarships and "reach" colleges. The same spring Akeem left Southern, Lucas got into Stanford.

Tamika hoped that things would go better for Keyna than they had for Akeem. She sensed that she was on the cusp with him. If she could just keep him on track a bit longer—hounding him to stay inside and out of trouble, encouraging him to think about his future—he might just manage to stay the course. Kenya had been readmitted to his old high school after being expelled for a year, and he was now just a month away from graduation. Tamika would send Kenya away to college at Southern, where T.J. could keep an eye on him. "If he stays here and just goes to community college, I don't think he's going to be focused enough," Tamika said. "I think it'd be better for him to get that experience of being on campus. Getting out from around here." She wanted him to understand just how fleeting opportunities could be. "I keep telling him, tomorrow's not promised to nobody," she said. "I just want better for him."

As the morning's grey light streamed through the barred windows, Tamika and Kenya gently ribbed one another. Kenya, anticipating lousy food at school, told Tamika he would be coming home hungry. "I don't eat breakfast. Sometimes I don't eat lunch. It's nasty."

"You just complicated," Tamika retorted dismissively, deploying her favorite adjective for her temperamental son.

"I be so hungry," Kenya grinned, "and you don't even wait 'til I get home to eat. Sometimes I just be eating at work."

Tamika snorted. "What are you saying? Boooy, you lying! Nobody believe a thing that you say. Sitting here spreading fibs about me when you about to miss your damn bus."

Gathering himself, Kenya pulled on a black hoodie, grabbed the fraying grey cammo Batman backpack that held a spiral notebook and his scratched school-issued Chromebook computer, and pulled up the "Supa Savage" mixtape by Lil Reese on his phone's YouTube app. Whenever he fell behind on his bill, he always opened music on his phone before leaving WiFi so that he could listen without cellular data. Headphones affixed and already in his zone, Kenya headed out the door without so much as a "goodbye" to Tamika, who knew not to take it personally.

There were no sidewalks, so Kenya hugged the curb, trudging the wet pavement past the overgrown trash-strewn lot next door, past rows of identical beige houses with identical rectangular lawns, nearly to the green utility box that had been splattered with blood and brains after the shooting he had witnessed. At the bus stop, power lines buzzed overhead in the humid air. A sophomore from Kenya's school arrived and gave him a wordless dap. Then the two stood a little apart, listening to their music, gazing into the middle distance at the dense thicket of foliage that had overtaken the opposite block. Mr. Mike, their bus driver, would come rumbling down the street any minute.

A STUDY OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

This is a study about what it was like for Kenya and seven of his peers to finish high school and go to college. It is also a study about what it is like for young people from low-

income families to try to work their way out of poverty in a world that offers them enticing but risky opportunities to chase their dreams.

Escaping poverty has never been easy; the "American dream" is just that. Most children born to parents in low-status occupations will grow up to do such work themselves. Rates of intergenerational income mobility in the United States are quite low compared to those in other developed nations, and they have remained remarkably consistent for over a century (Lee and Solon 2009; Corak 2016). The class structure is especially "sticky" at the bottom, meaning that children born into poverty are much likelier to remain caught in place than their better-off peers (Isaacs, Sawhill, and Haskins 2014; Bengali and Daly 2014). Perhaps one in ten will "make it" and achieve adult earnings in the top fifth of the income distribution (Chetty et al. 2014a). Low-income children who are Black, or who live in poor neighborhoods, face worse odds still (Chetty et al. 2018; Chetty and Hendren 2018).

When Tamika was born, she faced these long odds—the same long odds her son Kenya faced. Yet, in the span of that generation, the typical experience of trying to "make it" changed a great deal. For the first time, most young people from low-income families started going to college. In 1992, when Tamika left school in the middle of tenth grade, a quarter of high school students from poor families dropped out. Of those who earned a high school diploma, only 40% went on to a 2-year or 4-year college. By the time of Kenya's senior year, the high school dropout rate for low-income students had fallen by half, and nearly 70% of high school graduates from low-income families enrolled in college. Kenya's college goals were not exceptional among his peers; his plan was the new normal (Snyder and Dillow 2015: 218; Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019: 395).

Kenya viewed college as a practical necessity. Recalling a time he and his siblings went hungry when Tamika was out of work, he posed a rhetorical question. "You ever eaten

a just-mayonnaise sandwich?" he asked. "If you don't go to college," he continued, "you're screwed." He was not wrong. Finishing high school used to be enough to secure a middle-class life, but high school diplomas have steadily lost earning power. Median income for households headed by high school graduates who did not attend college fell by 20% between 1979 and 2019 (US Census 2021). Now, more than ever before, "moving up" requires college. People with bachelor's degrees earn nearly twice as much on average over a lifetime as people with high school diplomas, a payoff that has been growing since the 1970s (Carnivale, Rose, and Cheah 2011). And the best available evidence shows that college *causes* these earnings differences—it is not the case that very capable people who are inevitably bound for high-paying careers simply happen to be graduating from college in the process. Without the skills, connections, and credentials college affords, people are locked out of many of society's best opportunities.

So now, more than ever before, college enables the American dream. But college is also where the American dream goes to die. Students from low-income families rarely succeed at college after they enroll. Nationwide, just 11% of low-income college students whose parents did not attend college earn a bachelor's degree within 6 years (Engle and Tinto 2008). Whether or not they graduate, many of these young people are left with debt that cannot be forgiven, even in bankruptcy (Webley 2012). Higher education, like other opportunities increasingly peddled to the poor—home ownership, entrepreneurship—is as fraught as it is tantalizing.[5] For students like Kenya, the chances of success are low, and the consequences of failure are high.

This dissertation asks how the newly prevailing system of college going for low-income young people shapes processes that keep them stuck in poverty. In the sometimes-opaque language of sociology, this is a question about "social reproduction." Beginning with

Marx, sociologists have used the terms "reproduction" and "social reproduction" to describe how social systems recreate themselves by influencing people's lives (Marx 2004). For example, laborers keep factories working, but the reverse is also true: factories turn people into laborers and keep them that way. Supervisors train and discipline employees; the demands of ever-moving machinery create a rhythm to which laborers gradually adapt; workers sometimes goad one another and compete to see who can work the quickest or with the most skill; factory owners pay workers (just) enough to survive, giving them the means to eat, sleep, and show up each morning rejuvenated enough to work another full day. This is social reproduction. It is also social reproduction when parents teach their children how to "do" gender, often by example—acting in deeply ingrained ways that they learned from their own parents. And it is social reproduction when the children of poor parents grow up in class-segregated neighborhoods, attend substandard schools, get passed over for opportunities given to better-connected peers, and ultimately grow up to be poor themselves.

Questions about social reproduction are questions about process. What happens to people, step by step, as they are funneled toward the life outcomes that those in their positions most often experience? By following Kenya and some of his peers through their senior year of high school and their attempted first year of college, this dissertation traces processes that reproduce poverty in the United States today.

METHODS

To gain a close view of attempted upward mobility for disadvantaged young people, I undertook two years of full-time ethnographic observation focused on the transition to college for Kenya and seven other Black men from low-income families in New Orleans.

I began my research intending to undertake a comparative ethnographic study of the college transition experiences of students from one no-excuses school and from one traditional public high school. A central critique of no-excuses pedagogy speculates that students struggle to transition from the highly structured environments of no-excuses schools into the comparative freedom of college (e.g., Golann 2015). I was personally interested in this question because I had taught at a no-excuses middle school in New Orleans, and I had listened to alumni of my school describe exactly such struggles. I gained permission to conduct observations at one no-excuses high school, Strive Prep, and one traditional public high school, O.C. Haley High. Large majorities of students at both schools were Black and received free lunch, and the schools had similar average test scores. But the schools had markedly different disciplinary cultures, with students at O.C. Haley enjoying more autonomy both during classes and between them. As I would learn, both schools engaged in substantial effort-based messaging to students, although this messaging was more pervasive at Strive. I intended to follow graduates of both schools to college and compare how they coped with autonomy.

I based my study in New Orleans because of my familiarity with its school system and because the city is a microcosm of trends I hoped to explore. New Orleans has one of the lowest rates of intergenerational income mobility in the country (Chetty et al. 2014), and nearly two-thirds of its public high school graduates attend college (Dreilinger 2015).

I embedded with the senior classes at Strive Prep and O.C. Haley at the beginning of a school year. I intended to recruit small cohorts of participants at each school who planned to enroll at community colleges or lower-tier four-year public universities, which together serve approximately two-thirds of low-income, first-generation students (Engle and Tinto 2008:10). For both practical and theoretical reasons, I opted to only enroll men. I am male,

and I anticipated that it would be easier for me to spend time with male participants outside of school.[6] I also knew that low-income men have lower college graduation rates than low-income women after enrollment (Snyder and Dillow 2015:608-614), so I anticipated that focusing on men would offer an especially acute view of problems of college persistence.

I am white and from an upper-middle-class background. I was 29 at the time my fieldwork began. At Strive Prep and O.C. Haley, I looked like many of the young, white, out-of-town teachers recruited by programs like Teach for America. Outside observers are common in post-Katrina New Orleans classrooms, so students were not immediately taken aback or put off by my presence. But I was quick to tell students exactly who I was and what I was doing there, letting them know I was not an authority figure.

During the fall semester, I spent most of each school day at one school or the other, attending classes, sitting with students in the cafeteria, going to extracurriculars, and attending field trips and sports games. Over time, I realized that my fieldwork paid much higher dividends when I returned day after day to a single school. My theoretical interests were also broadening from a close focus on comparing levels of student autonomy to a more open-ended investigation of the experience of going to college. Consequently, beginning in my second semester of fieldwork, I decided to stop doing observations at O.C. Haley and focus solely on Strive. However, I stayed in particularly close touch with a student from O.C. Haley named Casey, whom I tentatively enrolled in the study. Keeping Casey enrolled became an easy decision when he was assigned to the same floor of the same dorm as a participant from Strive. The remaining participants in the study came from Strive.

I ultimately enrolled eight students bound for less selective or non-selective public colleges. Initially, administrators at both schools provided me with lists of students whose grades and test scores likely put them on track to attend lower-tier colleges, and I began

spending time with students from these lists. I did not ask students if I could follow them to college until early in my second semester of research, after I had gotten to know them well and ascertained that they were planning to enroll in college the following year. Each student I asked to take part in the study said yes. More than anything else, this recruitment hinged on mutual affinity; I enrolled participants who I enjoyed spending time with and who enjoyed spending time with me. Eight was the largest number of participants I could enroll while maintaining the depth of access I desired with each one.

Participants from Strive were loosely a group of friends, but they were less tightknit and had a more diverse slate of interests and personalities than groups profiled in previous ethnographies, like the "lads," the "brothers," or the "hallway hangers" (Willis 1977; MacLeod [1987] 2009). As Table 1 shows, participants varied in their career aspirations, chosen major, and in the institutions they planned to attend.

Participants also varied in the nature and extent of outside obligations on their time and finances. Juan was the primary caretaker for his two-year-old son. Paul was an orphan who had formed a household with his older sister and needed to pay for rent, food, and bills. Jaydin's mother had lost her job, and he needed to help her pay for food, bills, and a mortgage. On the other hand, Dorian, Vincent, Casey, Kenya, and A.J. were materially secure enough that they did not need to work to meet their basic needs. Variation in the amount of "security work" (Cooper 2014; Hart 2019) participants needed to do to survive and support family members proved analytically useful for identifying and analyzing the effort paradox. A fundamental puzzle of my fieldwork was that Dorian, Vincent, and Casey were overworking—trying to balance college coursework with demanding outside jobs— even though they did not have to.

TABLE 1: A SNAPSHOT OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Career Aspirations	College, Major	Time & Money Obligations	
Juan	detective	4-year commuter, undecided	attend class, custody of son, long commute to campus	
Paul	open small construction business	2-year commuter, business	attend class, help pay rent, hide from a gun conflict	*must work to make ends meet*
Jaydin	undecided	4-year commuter, business	attend class, support mom and siblings	
Dorian	photographer, filmmaker	4-year commuter, art and film	attend class	
Vincent	entrepreneur: funeral home, barbershop, & lawn business	2-year commuter, mortuary studies	attend class, help with a few bills	
Casey	nurse or guidance counselor	4-year residential, nursing	attend class	*free to pursue advancement without major work obligations*
Kenya	undecided	2-year residential, criminal justice	attend class	
A.J.	computer programmer	4-year residential, computer science	attend class	

To get an intimate view of the experience of attempted upward mobility for study participants, I aimed to learn as much as possible not only about their academic experiences, but also about their experiences outside of class. College students from low-income families are likely to be employed while enrolled in college (Perna 2010), and most continue to live at home and commute to classes (Ipsos 2015), so I anticipated that fieldwork outside of school would yield crucial insights. I spent approximately 2,400 hours making active observations, most of which consisted of time with the study's primary participants. Along the way, I got to know participants' friends, classmates, family members, teachers, and professors. I also

became well acquainted with their high schools, colleges, and workplaces. And I lived for 11 months in the neighborhood where many of the study's participants resided.

My fieldwork primarily consisted of "going along" with participants as they went about their daily lives (Kusenbach 2003). This up-close vantage point allowed me to observe effort-based processes I describe in this study play out over time. Beginning in the spring semester of my first year of fieldwork, after I had selected participants, I would typically pick one participant to spend time with per day. I would go with participants to high school and college classes, spend time with them at home or in their dorms while they hung out or played video games, go outside with them to skateboard or play basketball, and occasionally go with them to their jobs. I concluded my fieldwork in September of what would have been participants' sophomore year of college, allowing me to see the processes that led them to either re-enroll in college or leave.

In building and maintaining relationships with participants, I balanced different roles: friend, confidante, adult mentor, observer. I treated consent as a continuous process (e.g., Khan 2011, Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), talking frequently with participants about the research and paying attention to whether they wanted me around. I was heartened that they were usually the ones to call me to spend time together. I entered the field determined to intervene in participants' lives as little as possible (Lareau [2003] 2011), worried both about altering outcomes and about introducing coercion into the research relationship. (Students who became dependent on my help might feel compelled to remain in the study even if they no longer wanted to.) In some ways, I stuck to this resolution. For example, I tried not to be a nag if a student was late for class. In other ways, it was impossible to be a passive observer of lives in which I had become enmeshed. Like previous ethnographers, I ended up giving participants a lot of rides (e.g., Stack 1974), and I sometimes helped them navigate personal

and bureaucratic challenges (e.g., Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). For example, I helped Dorian find his way to some administrative offices during his enrollment day. Mostly, I do not think these interventions substantially altered the stories I watched unfold; like Armstrong and Hamilton, I was "struck by how much intervention it takes to redirect someone's fate," (2013:276). This became clear to me the one time I *did* substantially intervene to change a participant's trajectory: after Paul fell into a gun conflict with several other young men, I worked hard to help him transfer to Kenya's out-of-town college to stay safe.

Often, my identity and affiliations opened doors for me. I was young enough that participants and their friends were willing to hang out with me (e.g., MacLeod [1987] 2009), but I was old enough that their parents and guardians trusted me. Participants' teachers and school administrators appreciated that I had been a teacher myself; their professors appreciated that I was a PhD student. And I found, like other white ethnographers, that "white people are afforded special privileges in the ghetto," (Desmond 2016:322). This turned out to be the case in other primarily Black spaces as well, like at the HBCU Kenya, A.J., Casey, and (eventually) Paul attended. There, security guards who checked everyone else's identification would wave me through with a nod and a smile, and administrators who usually acted withdrawn and dismissive were eager to answer my questions.

While conducting fieldwork, I took real-time notes in small notebooks and on my phone. With participants' permission, I would also sometimes digitally record conversations with them in the field. After each day of observation, I wrote detailed notes on my laptop, using my field jottings to jog my memory (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). Notes from a complete day of fieldwork typically ran from ten to twelve single-spaced pages, but my most productive days of fieldwork produced twenty pages of notes.

The ideas developed in this dissertation emerged from a recursive process of reflecting on surprising findings, developing intuitions about possible explanations for these findings, and then seeking further observations in the field to test and develop my emerging hypotheses (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). This cycle guided my fieldwork for much of participants' spring semester of college, sparked by my realization that several participants were struggling in college because of their fierce commitment to goal-directed efforts in and out of the classroom. It struck me at first as counterintuitive that the hardest-working participants were failing while less hard-working participants were succeeding. This puzzle prompted me to consider what assumptions I had made about effort and social structure, revisit existing scholarship about attempted upward mobility, and pay increasingly careful attention to the circumstances and rationales behind participants' exertion. After leaving the field, I continued to iteratively refine my analysis by re-reading existing literature, carefully combing through my fieldnotes with an eye for effort-related data, and soliciting feedback on my ideas from participants (Auyero 2015). I did not use qualitative coding software. As I analyzed my fieldnotes, I took stock of each participant's life ambitions, of effort-based lessons and messaging each encountered, and of contributing factors and timelines for each participant's freshman year success or failure.

KENYA'S BREAKFAST WITH FRIENDS

After waiting in the metal detector line, Kenya dropped his backpack at his usual table in the cafeteria at Strive Prep High School and headed to the servery to pick up breakfast. Seniors poured in, their shoes squeaking on the new linoleum floors, the din of their voices bouncing off the pastel walls. No sooner had Kenya returned with his meal than he spotted his friend Juan. Sneaking up from behind, Kenya grabbed Juan in a bear hug and

16

play-slapped him across the head. "I'ma smack all your dreads up," Kenya declared. Juan, not breaking stride, bent over to support Kenya's weight and carried him back toward the table. Soon the two were bartering breakfast items while sipping on still partially frozen cups of orange juice. "I don't eat pretzels," Kenya said, offering them to Juan. "Where the jelly at?"

Across the table, a confident and energetic young man named Vincent plopped down, eyes twinkling above a wispy beard as he pulled a large, ungainly laptop out of his backpack. Quan, an earnest senior on the autism spectrum, made a beeline for Vincent and began delivering rapidfire news. "Vincent. Yesterday my mom threw up ten times yesterday Vincent. She went to the hospital. She threw up ten times yesterday Vincent."

Vincent listened with patience and concern, peering up at Quan and reassuring him. "Bro, I'm so sorry to hear that, dawg," Vincent said. "I'm glad she had went to the hospital though." As his laptop powered up, Vincent headed off to grab breakfast, continuing to listen as Quan trailed behind.

Meanwhile, a tall young man named Dorian settled in between Kenya and Carlos. Though often gregarious, Dorian appeared to be in one of his quiet moods. There were bags of sleep under his eyes, and he seemed to be willing himself to concentrate on his Chromebook as he tried to finish a homework assignment at the last minute. Kenya, sensing an opportunity, stood above Dorian and placed a candy wrapper in his hair. Dorian did not notice.

Dorian's close friend Jaydin sat down, giving Kenya a smirk to let him know he was in on the joke. Then, talk at the table turned to absent friends. "Where Paul at?" Juan asked. "That n---a just stopped coming to breakfast." Paul, a spindly, serious young man who was best friends with Kenya, had recently started catching rides to school with a classmate

named Adonis. Paul and Adonis would usually smoke marijuana at a park near the school, showing up just in time for first period. Parth was also missing. The son of Indian immigrants, Parth had worked hard to fit in with his group of Black friends. Teachers and peers alike appreciated him for being hardworking and unpretentious. He excelled not only at schoolwork but also at basketball, having spent an entire summer in the blazing sun perfecting his 3-point shot. Now he was a varsity starter, despite standing not much more than five feet tall and weighing perhaps 100 pounds. Dorian, looking up from his Chromebook, wrapper still lodged in his hair, started to riff on Parth's absence, grinning to let everyone know he was making up lies.

"Last week he was cheating," Dorian said. "This week he's skipping." The young men started weighing in on Parth's supposed delinquency, keeping the commentary running as Paul and Parth arrived at the table.

"Parth just a G [gangster]," Paul said, not missing a beat as he sat down. "Cheating is just what Gs do."

Parth seemed not to notice the ribbing, fixating instead on the top of Dorian's head. Dorian reached up with a puzzled expression and finally brushed out the wrapper. The table erupted with laughter. Vincent doubled over, a characteristic staccato chortle escaping from either side of his clenched teeth. "Bro," Vincent breathed, "that thing was in your hair for like five minutes straight." Dorian, who often knowingly made himself the butt of jokes to lighten the mood, just smiled, happy to be the center of attention. "I couldn't feel it," he admitted.

On the concrete block wall opposite Dorian, a painted message delivered a line from Strive Prep's credo. "Where are you headed? To college!" College was a big deal at Strive. Students went on campus tour field trips beginning in ninth grade, college banners lined

classrooms and hallways, advisories took on the name of each teacher's alma mater, and daily messaging reminded students that their work would culminate first in college and then in a successful life. The credo, a long call-and-response chant that students recited most mornings, exemplified this messaging. *Who are you? A scholar! Why are you here? To learn! Why else? To be powerful, to be a leader, to be my best self. Then what will you do? Change my future! And then? Change the world! What will you have to do? Work, work hard! Hmmm? Work, work hard! …. Where are you headed? To college! And will you succeed? Yes!*

College was front of mind for all of the young men at the table. Some were still deciding where they would enroll in the fall. Jaydin had long wanted to attend Grambing State University, a historically Black college in northern Louisiana. The school had a mystique that captivated him: Georgian-style academic buildings, sleek black sports uniforms, a nationally renowned marching band. Even though he had never driven the five hours to visit, he had told everyone he was dead set on enrolling there. But this morning, he was suddenly backpedaling. "I was thinking about it son," he said to Vincent. "I'm gonna be so bored out there. If I go to UNO [University of New Orleans], I could be with my family." Jaydin seemed to be trying to convince himself to believe the words as he spoke them. In truth, with his mother out of work and her finances stretched increasingly thin, Jaydin might not be able to attend Grambling even if he wanted to. Living at home and attending UNO would let him save money and help his mother take care of his little brothers.

As breakfast wound to a close, Mr. Katz, a white 29-year-old social studies teacher with a calm, formal bearing, walked to the middle of the cafeteria and held up a hand. Chatter petered out, and students looked in his direction, expecting the usual string of announcements and recitation of the credo. But with just weeks left in the academic year, teachers had begun loosening up on procedures. Mr. Katz's message was unusually brief.

"All right seniors, good morning. It is time to head to your first period. Make sure you throw your trash away and head on up. Let's go."

Students were caught off guard. "Dammmn," muttered Vincent, looking around in surprise. "I feel like we didn't get—."

Juan, playfully referencing the school's credo, called out "Where we headed?" to Mr. Katz.

"Tuesday and Thursday we don't say the credo anymore," Mr. Katz explained.

Juan feigned confusion. "I don't even know where I'm headed!" he exclaimed as he dumped a mostly uneaten breakfast in the trash. "Where to go? Where to go?!" Mr. Katz rolled his eyes.

Around them, students headed for the exit with buoyant giddiness. Kenya and Paul tussled playfully on their way upstairs, sensing that today they could get away with a bit of extra mischief.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Six of the eight young men profiled in this dissertation sat at the cafeteria table that morning: Kenya, Paul, Dorian, Jaydin, Juan, and Vincent. A seventh young man, A.J., sat at a nearby table with a nerdier group of friends. The eighth, Casey, attended a different public high school elsewhere in New Orleans.

Outwardly, the young people who participated in this study had a great deal in common. All were men in late adolescence, seventeen or eighteen when the study began. All were Black. All grew up in low-income families. All had lived most of their lives in poor, segregated neighborhoods. All were displaced from New Orleans after Katrina, spending formative grade school years in unfamiliar and often-unfriendly environments. All then

returned to a city transformed, navigating their teenage years in a topsy-turvy system of post-Katrina charter schools. All were bound for less-selective or nonselective colleges. And all wanted, very badly, to make something of their lives.

Inwardly, however, these young men were very different from one another. Though they shared fierce ambition, their goals ranged widely. Paul wanted to start his own construction business. Dorian wanted to be a photographer and filmmaker. Juan hoped to become a detective. Vincent aspired to be a funeral director. A.J. planned to study computer science. Casey wanted to become a nurse. Jaydin was fascinated with Islam and hoped to study comparative religion. Kenya, though unsure of his academic and career plans, wanted to help his family move permanently away from New Orleans.

Their personalities also varied a great deal. Dorian and Jaydin were close friends, for example, but their shared interests belied deeper differences in temperament and outlook. Both loved skateboarding; both listened to emo rappers like Lil Uzi Vert; each could finish the other's sentences. They had cemented their friendship trekking the mile back and forth between their houses during the summers, playing games of SKATE in the sweltering heat, knocking on the door of the neighborhood candy lady for fifty-cent frozen cups. Yet while Dorian was an adventurous extravert, seeking out as many new people and new experiences as he could, Jaydin was cautious and shy, skeptical of deviations from his routine and slow to warm up to people. The two also reacted very differently to authority. At school, Dorian was quick to question instructions, divert class with a joke, or storm out of a room in anger. "In ninth and tenth grade, I used to practically live in detention," Dorian recalled. Jaydin, by contrast, hardly ever got in trouble, remaining deferential to adults and keeping any complaints to himself.

To come to know the young men profiled in this dissertation was to peer out at the world through eight very different sets of eyes. Identifying what participants had in common provides only a superficial picture of each young man. But their shared starting points—class, race, gender, age, birthplace, high school—were deeply consequential for the lives they would be able to lead. In chasing their varied dreams, they would face a common set of challenges. This dissertation examines these challenges. The diversity of participants' goals and personalities turns out to be useful for this task. Watching eight very different individuals take eight distinct journeys through a system reveals a great deal more about how the system works than watching eight closely matched journeys.

KENYA'S CLASSES

Kenya's first class of the day was AP environmental science, taught by an energetic white teacher in her twenties named Ms. Stuart. Students sat in rows at long black lab tables, facing a projector screen at the front of the classroom. Standard procedure at the beginning of most classes at Strive was for students to complete a "Do Now"—a roughly five-minute assignment that they could finish silently on their own, allowing the teacher to take attendance and start each period in an orderly way. This morning's Do Now was a web-based worksheet that students would complete on their Chromebook computers. But there was a problem. Ms. Stuart had not activated the activity on the website, so students could not enter in their answers. As Ms. Stuart clicked through screens to fix the issue, she did not quite catch who in the class was calling whom a "duck ass n---a." It was Kenya, quietly ribbing his seatmate Juan. "Language," Ms. Stuart said sharply, not looking up from her computer screen. The problem fixed, Ms. Stuart moved to get students back to work. "If you are on any site other than the Do Now, those are off-task demerits and minus

participation points," she announced. Then, her posture softening a bit, she added, "Demerits to me for messing up."

Juan, having already found one line of absurdist humor about Strive's procedures with his jokes about the credo that morning, sensed another opportunity. "How many demerits you got?" he asked Ms. Stuart. Twelve demerits at Strive equaled a detention, but only for students. Teachers did not receive demerits.

"I think I've got, like, nine," Ms. Stuart responded, playing along.

"Nah, it's at least ten," another student chimed in.

"Dang," Ms. Stuart replied, gamely.

Juan pounced, adopting the indignant tone of a teacher doling out consequences. "PRC!" he exclaimed, implying that he was sending Ms. Stuart to the school's "Positive Redirection Center," an in-school suspension room. The two began acting out a role-reversed version of the type of teacher-student conflict that everyone in the classroom had seen play out dozens of times, an interaction so well-worn and predictable that neither had trouble switching sides.

MS. STUART: [Smacking teeth.] For what? For saying dang?

JUAN: Inappropriate reaction.

MS. STUART: Maaaan, you're blowing it. [New Orleans slang for getting overly angry about something minor.]

JUAN: Um, that's *still* not an appropriate reaction.

MS. STUART: But I was doing my work! I was doing it!

JUAN: You need to pack your things and go.

Students chuckled along. Unlike a real conflict, which could send a class off the rails, this interaction seemed to lighten everyone's mood. Before long, students were silently typing in answers on their online worksheets.

The struggle for control of classrooms has been a defining dynamic in US education for a long time. With the tightening of truancy laws in many parts of the country in the early 1900s, and with a push for less reliance on suspension and expulsion, teachers and administrators grappled with how to discipline a growing portion of students who were unenthusiastic about school. "The question of discipline in the schools has become as great as the question of truancy," wrote a Chicago Public Schools administrator in 1913. Books like *Every Teacher's Problems*, published in 1922, offered practical advice on how to deal with dozens of "problems of discipline," like students being unruly in the hallway or goofing off in class. The scenarios it described still feel fresh and recognizable today, a century later (Stark 1922; Neckerman 2007).

Prescribed approaches to student discipline have cyclically come and gone over the years. "Character education," focused on building dispositions in students that make them intrinsically buy into school, was all the rage first in the 1930s, then again in the 2010s. Calls for regimented classrooms and assertive teaching, focused on extrinsically motivating and disciplining students, saw popularity in the 1950s, 1980s, and 2000s. Emphasis on child-centered, supportive reactions to misbehavior gained traction with the "open school" movement of the 1960s and 1970s, then again with a backlash against zero-tolerance discipline in the 2010s (Tyack and Cuban 1997; Neckerman 2007). Although these swings in rhetoric were substantial, actual practices in most schools across the country changed much more gradually. Schools that fully embraced each era's (putatively) cutting-edge approach tended to be outliers.

Strive Prep was one of those outliers, part of a small-but-growing wave of charter schools that used a pedagogical and disciplinary approach known as "no excuses" schooling. Beginning in the 1990s, a handful of young white teachers from elite colleges began founding these schools, which employed a distinctive brand of peppy-but-rote teaching and strict discipline. The educators, alumni of the new organization Teach for America, designed their schools with poor students of color in mind. They borrowed high-energy instructional techniques from veteran Black colleagues, like using rhythmic claps and chants to teach grammar rules and multiplication tables. Then they added a heavy dose of regimentation, adopting the style of obedience-based classroom management described in Lee Canter's 1976 book *Assertive Discipline*. Teachers established clear rules and gave students very explicit instructions about what to do with their bodies: how to sit, where to look, when to speak and at what volume, when to pick up and put down pencils. Early "no excuses" charter school networks, like the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) and YES Prep, generated substantial interest and attention because of students' high test scores. Soon, many new "no excuses" charter school networks emerged, including Achievement First, Uncommon Schools, Success Academies, Democracy Prep, the Noble Network, and IDEA Public Schools. By 2014, there were perhaps 600 "no excuses" charter schools in the United States, mostly clustered in cities.

Students at "no excuses" schools were held to rigid behavioral expectations. During the 1990s and 2000s, the influential but empirically flimsy "broken windows" theory was gaining popularity with police departments across the country: the idea that cracking down on small signs of disorder in a neighborhood would prevent more serious crimes. "No excuses" school leaders adopted a similar philosophy, believing that if teachers "sweated the small stuff," they could prevent larger disruptions (Stitt 2021). They designed systems that

would catch slight deviations in behavior. They placed taped lanes in the hallways, for example, so that it would be immediately obvious if students were not standing in perfectly straight lines. They often made students work in silence, meaning that teachers could catch even furtive whispers. They deployed acronyms like SLANT—Sit up, Listen, Ask and answer questions, Nod your head, Track the speaker—which codified posture and behavior so clearly that students could receive consequences for a slouch or a wayward glance. And they cracked down hard on such deviations, believing that students should experience "an instant and overwhelming response to any violation of the rules," (Matthews 2009: 172).

Over time, parents, alumni, and community activists pressured these schools to soften some of their disciplinary practices. They pointed out that taped lines on the floor were a hallmark of prisons, questioned the schools' high rates of suspension and expulsion, and speculated that rigid rules would not help students prepare for the comparative freedom of college (e.g., Sondel and Boselovic 2014). By the time of Kenya's senior year, Strive had begun to make changes, removing tape in the halls and implementing the Positive Redirection Center (PRC) in an effort to eliminate out-of-school suspensions. But in other ways, hallmarks of "no excuses" education remained deeply ingrained in the school's pedagogy.

In Kenya's environmental science class, for example, this type of teaching was baked into the structure and cadence of how Ms. Stuart conducted instruction. Her teaching closely followed techniques popularized by author and pedagogical consultant Doug Lemov, whose textbook *Teach Like a Champion* codified approaches used by "no excuses" teachers. The effect of this style of teaching was that students knew exactly what they were supposed to do at each moment. Using a timer projected on the board, Ms. Stuart broke classwork down into discrete chunks, each with a very clear set of instructions, a clear beginning and end, and

clearly observable behavioral expectations. "What you need to make sure you are reading right now is the instructions," Ms. Stuart said, preparing the class to practice the types of questions they would encounter on the AP test. "Vincent is group A. Please read the instructions for group A, right here, aloud."

Vincent found the relevant direction on the class's digital worksheet. "You will quiz each other for five minutes, then go on to group B work," he read dutifully.

"Good," Ms. Stuart said. "Group B. Kenya, you're in Group B, read the directions for your group."

Kenya stuttered a bit, trying to find the instructions on the worksheet. Then he began, reading slightly haltingly. "You will be working on multiple choice questions. Absolutely do not answer in order. If you finish early, move on to Group C work."

"Tamar, you are in Group C," Ms. Stuart said. "Please read that." Group C would be practicing written response questions, and the instructions reminded students of steps they should follow for each question.

"Annotate first," Tamar read out loud. "Rephrase the question. Absolutely do not name drop without an explanation."

After students finished reading each group's instructions out loud, Ms. Stuart reminded them once more of the process she expected them to use to tackle the questions. In case they forgot, she had pasted the instructions in red font in the header at the top of each page of their digital worksheets.

Absolutely do not…

answer in order   leave blanks   name drop   be done early   fail to annotate

Then, she reminded everyone of time constraints and observable bodily expectations. "Okay, find your groupwork," she said. "You have 10 minutes until you can check your

answers. I should hear academic talking, question asking. There should be hands up. Get started."

As soon as students began working, Ms. Stuart walked around the room and noted, out loud, specific ways she saw students following the directions they had been given. "Sasha and Tamar are both using the flashcards page to help them," she said. "I see that Juan has marked a question to come back to it. He is not answering in order. Good." A bit later, when she noticed that Kenya's shirt was untucked—a uniform violation—she discreetly told him to tuck it in, and he obliged.

In a three-minute span, Ms. Stuart had used at least ten of Lemov's techniques: "what to do," "name the steps," "strong voice," "cold call," "on your mark," "circulate," "precise praise," "narrating positive behavior, "100 percent," and "sweat the details." By structuring, correcting, and reinforcing students' efforts, she left Kenya and the other students little leeway to deviate from her plan (Lemov 2010, 2018).

Kenya stayed alert and focused during environmental science, but he was less enthusiastic about his second-period class: remedial geometry with 10th-graders. Between classes, he dragged out his time in the hallway as long as possible, bantering with his classmate Simone in a tucked-away nook by the gym before shuffling reluctantly toward the sophomore classrooms, pausing for a long drink at the water fountain. Most of the 25 sophomores in the class were already in their seats working on the Do Now assignment when Kenya arrived. A low din of chatter filled the room. Ms. Becker, a white teacher in her early twenties with a peppy demeanor, moved between desks checking student work. While Kenya rummaged for a pencil, Ms. Becker called for students' attention.

"All right dogs," she said, "Pause and track me in three, two, woof." As students looked her way, she praised them by name, imploring others to do the same. "I'm still

waiting for a couple eyes. Thanks Kamisha. Still need a couple more. Thanks Kenya." She proceeded to give the type of pep talk students heard several times a day from Strive teachers. "It's really important that we come in at level zero," Ms. Becker said. "I keep hearing murmuring, and that makes it hard for me to check in with you about your work. The Do Now gets you ready for class. It gets you in the mindset to do your best work. If you finish—" she interrupted herself mid-sentence, peering pointedly at a student who had begun whispering to his seatmate. The student quieted down. "If you finish your Do Now, please go ahead and start the second part of your packet. We are at a level zero. Get started."

Like Ms. Stuart's directions to her class, Ms. Becker's announcement reflected the rhythm and lingo of "no excuses" teaching. "Level Zero" meant silent. "Tracking" meant looking at the person who was supposed to be speaking. Reinforcing desired behavior by name checking students who were complying with instructions, and "self-interrupting" to let students know they are not to talk while the teacher is talking, were Lemov-codified techniques that young teachers learned in their training programs. It was also common for teachers to give groups of students collective names, like Strive's practice of naming advisories after the adviser's alma mater. To motivate her two geometry classes, Ms. Becker had set up a points-based competition between them, affixing stickers to a large poster board at the front of the class to track how many students in each class passed a daily quiz. Students in her afternoon class were the "cats;" students in her morning class were the "dogs."

Kenya detested Ms. Becker's class. "No excuses" teaching already seemed patronizing to him, and listening to a white teacher call him and his Black classmates "dogs" while telling them to "track" her felt, in his words, "insulting." He was also pretty sure Ms. Becker did not like him. "You can tell the ones that like me and the ones that don't like me,"

he once explained. "The teachers that don't like you be quick to call your name out even if half the class is doing the same thing." Moreover, the class felt like a waste of time because he had already taken geometry at his alternative school during his yearlong expulsion, although for some reason the credits had not transferred over. And he was embarrassed to be in a classroom full of tenth graders. It made him want to disappear.

Barring that, Kenya did the next best thing: he repeatedly fell asleep. His eyelids drooped, and he supported his head with his right forearm. As he drifted off, he kept his pencil propped in his left hand with its point resting on the packet. At a glance he appeared poised and concentrated; only his eyes gave him away. For the rest of the period, Kenya and Ms. Becker played a game of cat and mouse, with Kenya slyly dozing until Ms. Becker caught him, over and over again.

SEGREGATED SCHOOLING IN NEW ORLEANS

The history of public schooling in New Orleans is a story of white parents and politicians going to great lengths to avoid sending their children to school with Black children. Twice, coalitions of Black parents and community leaders, with federal legal backing, pushed to integrate the schools. Twice, after initial violent resistance from white parents and students, Black children and white children attended school together with promising success. And twice, initial progress faltered, with entrenched white resistance undermining hard-won gains and the system reverting to rigid segregation. One such push occurred during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and continued into the 1970s. The other push occurred one hundred years prior. It is now mostly forgotten, the pages documenting its brief triumph literally ripped out of the historical record.[7]

Formal efforts to enroll Black children at whites-only schools in New Orleans began in 1862, after the city fell under the control of the Union Army. The efforts gained steam in 1868, when Reconstructionist politicians swept to power in statewide elections, pushing a platform of school integration. And they seemed on their way to success in 1872 when William G. Brown, a Black educator and newspaper editor, defeated avowed racist and segregationist Robert Mills Lusher for the job of state superintendent of education.

Growing up in a city with an especially blurry color line, New Orleans students with African heritage had long knowingly and unknowingly "passed" as white, attending whites-only schools without notice. But by 1872, many schools across the city enrolled students who openly identified as mixed race or Black. Some white students staged walkouts early that fall, but their protests quickly lost steam. Instruction mostly went smoothly that school year. By the spring of 1873, a Black newspaper lauded school integration as an "accomplished fact."

The progress was short lived. With the end of Reconstruction and the certification of dubious results from the election of 1876, segregationist Democrats regained power in Louisiana. Lusher returned as superintendent, and formal resegregation of New Orleans schools followed. Like other contemporaneous politicians, Lusher was eager not only to reverse civil rights gains but also to erase evidence that such rights had ever been granted. In an 1877 journal entry, Lusher described ordering the seizure of school board minutes from the integrationist years. Today, there is a gap in the records from 1870 to 1877.

It was not until nearly a century later that New Orleans schools began to desegregate again in earnest. Widespread integration did not get underway until the early 1970s, two decades after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. New Orleans is a patchwork of white and Black neighborhoods, and most of the city's schools had substantial populations of both

Black and white residents in their catchment zones. Consequently, unlike Charlotte, Boston, and other cities, New Orleans did not need to rely on large scale bussing to dismantle educational Jim Crow. For many students, integration meant finally being able to attend the school closest to home. The integration effort intensified in 1972, when the school board merged its formerly segregated teaching staff. It aimed for a roughly 60-40 mix of Black and white teachers at each school, reflecting the demographics of its workforce. By the late 1970s, editorials in the *Times-Picayune* were trumpeting the success of school integration.

But just like in the 1870s, initially promising gains began to recede. White parents started pulling their children out of New Orleans public schools as soon as integration got underway. Many of these white families moved to suburban communities bordering New Orleans; others enrolled their children in private and parochial schools. The losses were not immediately obvious. For a decade, from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s, class photos and yearbooks showed a balanced mix of Black and white faces. With each passing year, however, more white families pulled out. By the 1990s, the exodus was nearly complete. Apart from a few magnet schools with stringent academic admission requirements, most public schools in New Orleans were nearly all Black. The dividing lines were new, with municipal borders, entrance examinations, and tuition bills replacing whites-only enrollment policies. But the effect was the same: de facto educational apartheid.

Integration alone is not a panacea for equitable education. Integrated schools can perpetuate deep disparities. However, the mass departure of white families from New Orleans public schools was clearly a step in the wrong direction for equity. Among New Orleans students, race and class correlated very closely. Most of the departing white families were middle class; most of the remaining Black families were poor. The white families took their resources with them: extra funds for the PTA, the connections and entitlement

required to demand quality instruction for their kids and not get ignored, time after work for homework help and tutoring. In their wake, they left behind schools with highly concentrated needs.

By the 1990s and early 2000s, New Orleans public schools had entered a downward spiral of poor management, overwhelmed teachers, and disaffected students. Superintendents came and went, unable to improve conditions. When the FBI indicted dozens of school system employees on various embezzlement and corruption charges, then-superintendent Anthony Amato admitted that he did not know where the district's money was going. "We don't know where the truth begins and where the truth ends," he said (WDSU 2004).

Infamously, in 2003, the valedictorian of Alcee Fortier High School failed the state graduation exam five times. She also scored 11 out of 36 on the ACT, a mark in the second percentile. Her teachers had been giving her As just for showing up and being compliant (Fox 2003).

Children wilted in these schools. In her vivid, elegiac memoir *The Yellow House*, Sarah M. Broom recalls her time attending Livingston, a middle school in New Orleans East.

> Some days we have substitute teachers who seem called in from off the street. Many times, the substitute puts a movie into the VCR that has nothing to do with the subject matter or with learning. Everything in the world feels stupid then…. I begin disliking school, bored by its monotony, the way every class, even the one memorable math class taught by the bald Mr. Nero who had high expectations for us, devolved into a corralling of wayward students. We had become a horde, to be gathered and made to "act right," indistinguishable from one another (Broom 2019).

Across town, at the mostly white Metairie Country Day School, students occupied what may as well have been a different planet. Brochures described the tenets of the school's founding philosophy—a philosophy enabled by copious resources.

> Study of the individual child, and effort to satisfy his or her needs; Freedom to develop naturally, which does not mean license to invade other people's rights;

Attention to play and physical development for every child; The utilization of children's interests for educational ends; A large place for beauty in nature, in art, in music; Friendly relationship between pupils and teachers, with teachers functioning as guides rather than taskmasters; Such cooperation between school and home as will make the two, supplementing each other, provide for the whole development of the child (Metairie Park Country Day School 2022).

The New Orleans public school system, like all struggling school districts in the United States, did not exist in a vacuum. The metropolitan area had ample means to give every child a good education. But citizens with power settled for a different solution. They sequestered their own children in walled gardens, seemingly unconcerned with the fate of the rest.

When Gulf waters poured into the city through levee breaches in the wee hours of a late-summer morning in 2005, they carried a piano up onto the wooden chairs in the auditorium at Hynes elementary school in Lakeview. At the Martin Luther King Jr. School in the Lower 9th Ward, residents took shelter on the roof as waters lapped just feet below. For years afterward, the sign outside the Israel M. Augustine Middle School on Broad Street read, "SCHOOL STARTS AUG 18, 2005 8 AM." Eleven days into the new school year, the old system of public education had come to an end.

The months following the storm saw a scramble for power in New Orleans. The recovery would remake the city in ways that could last for generations. Everything seemed uncertain, which meant that everything felt up for grabs: housing, demographics, infrastructure, industry, commerce, public transit, healthcare, law enforcement, education. Committees of mostly wealthy, well-connected New Orleanians began laying plans to reinvent the city while nearly everyone else was displaced (Horowitz 2020). Even before the floodwaters drained, a wholesale transformation of New Orleans public schools had begun.

Changes to the school system happened particularly quickly and comprehensively because would-be reformers were already waiting in the wings. In 2003, the state of Louisiana had taken over most of the public schools in New Orleans, placing them under

control of the newly formed Recovery School District (RSD). A pro-market coalition of local business leaders, philanthropic organizations like the Gates Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation, nonprofits like Teach for America, state-level politicians like Governor Mike Foster, and federal backers like Senator Mary Landrieu and the Bush administration supported this takeover. After the flood, they moved quickly to reinvent the school system. Rather than directly reopening most of the schools in its portfolio, the RSD would instead authorize third-party operators to run city schools as charters. Charter schools are publicly funded but privately administered, often by nonprofit charter management organizations that oversee multiple schools. The RSD and its allies would choose what kinds of schools would open. Elected members of the New Orleans school board—and by extension, New Orleans parents and voters—would have little say over the transformation (Carr 2013).

The schools that opened after Katrina looked and felt very different than the schools they replaced. Although groups of parents and residents who hoped to reopen their neighborhood schools organized to try to obtain state charters, the process was daunting and demanding, requiring detailed plans and the completion of an application hundreds of pages long. Already-established Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) had much more success getting their schools approved. Among the CMOs that began to open schools in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, many, like KIPP, used the "no excuses" model (Carr 2013; Sernovitz 2018).

With the decision to transition New Orleans to charter schools, 4,300 teachers and 2,700 other school employees lost their jobs. 71% of the teachers were Black, and they had on average 15 years of experience. Displaced by the flood and dismissed by their former employer, more than half of these teachers—formerly a pillar of the city's Black middle class—would never teach in Louisiana public schools again (Perry 2017; Dreillinger 2017).

In their place came an influx of young teachers from other states, many recruited straight out of college by Teach for America. Boysie Bollinger, an industrialist and major Republican Party donor who had a prominent voice in early governance of the recovery, lauded the change in personnel.

> BOLLINGER: Teach for America was like a vacuum cleaner sucking in new talent…. We got more Teach for America teachers than anywhere. We got rid of eighty percent of the faculty in the Orleans Parish school system. Eighty percent. So the question was, how do you run a school system? Well, we were very fortunate. Because we got rid of eighty percent, all these young kids who wanted to come in and say, 'Man, this is an opportunity to come in and really make a mark. Really change things.' …. It took a disaster. We would have never, ever, ever done what we did just on politics.[8]

Principals and administrators at the city's new CMOs were often alumni or former employees of Teach for America, creating connections and cultural comfort that led them to hire Teach for America recruits at their schools. Teach for America teachers, entering the profession for the first time, were also less expensive to hire than veteran teachers. And as charter schools placed new, high demands on their employees—such as working extended nine-and-a-half-hour school days—Teach for America offered a labor force that would not put up a fuss. Teach for America encouraged its recruits to not quit their two-year commitment at any cost. Very few joined the city's teacher's union, which had been dealt a deathblow by the post-Katrina firings (Zubrzycki 2018).

Members of the coalition overhauling schools in New Orleans repeatedly called education "the civil rights issue of our time." But the coalition was working toward a very different vision of civil rights than had activists in the city's past. The struggle was no longer against segregation and lopsided treatment. There would be no sit ins at Metairie Country Day School. Rather, the new struggle took segregation as a given, striving instead for a world where Black New Orleanians from low-income families would score the same on standardized tests as white New Orleanians from middle class families. To achieve this goal,

the new system unapologetically treated Black students very differently in their schools than white students were treated in theirs. Reformers were working toward a system that was separate but narrowly equal: the unfulfilled promise of Jim Crow.

KENYA'S COLLEGE SUCCESS CLASS

After lunch, Kenya and his classmates headed back to the senior hallway for a 30-minute block of instruction called College Success Class. Kenya took College Success Class with Ms. Corbin, a soft-spoken, serious white calculus teacher in her 30s. "Ms. Corbin was my favorite teacher before I got expelled," Kenya once explained. "She used to always tell me, 'I can't wait to teach you in *my* math class.' But when I got expelled, I lost that chance. And then, when I got back, she started acting fishy." Kenya suspected that Ms. Corbin thought less of him for his marijuana infraction. As class began, Kenya looked up at her expectantly, seemingly eager for affirmation.

The day's lesson was about Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP), a metric colleges use to determine if students are on track to graduate. Students not making Satisfactory Academic Progress in college can lose their financial aid (Schudde and Scott-Clayton 2016). On a double-sided worksheet, Kenya and his classmates read scenarios about college students who were not making Satisfactory Academic Progress, writing short paragraphs of advice to each hypothetical young person. The first scenario featured a student named Scooter, who had earned two Cs and two Ds after his first semester of college.

"Scooter" was made up, but his story was not. The scenarios on the worksheet were based on the college experiences of real Strive alumni. Six years after graduating from Strive, just 19% of students from the school's celebrated founding class had completed a bachelor's degree. Strive students were still faring slightly better on average in college than

demographically similar peers across the country, but "better" is not the same as "good." No one at the school was happy with the results. College Success Class was one of the ways Strive was trying to improve its college outcomes. Teachers and administrators hoped that by giving Strive students a preview of challenges that lay ahead, future cohorts would be more successful.

Ms. Corbin queried Kenya and his classmates. What advice did they have for Scooter? Hands shot up. Students seemed to know exactly what Scooter's problem was. "He should set higher expectations for himself," AJ said. "Because two Cs and two Ds is not good enough." Others in the class nodded along. A few snapped their fingers in agreement, a "no-excuses"-approved way to non-verbally concur with classmates.

A skinny senior named Minh raised his hand. "I would say the same thing," Minh offered. "He needs to pull up his GPA. And that he needs to have more motivation too."

Kenya raised his hand as well. "He needs to put in work to get a higher GPA," he said earnestly, echoing his classmates.

Ms. Corbin, who was perched on a desk in front of the classroom, listened approvingly. She reminded students that making Satisfactory Academic Progress at most colleges requires maintaining at minimum a 2.0 GPA and withdrawing from no more than 30% of courses. Together, she and the class calculated that Scooter's GPA was 1.5. To pull his GPA above 2.0 the following semester, Scooter would have to earn mostly Bs. To reiterate the point, Ms. Corbin asked students to synthesize these calculations into more advice for Scooter. A student named Alicia volunteered.

"I would tell him to stop slacking in class," Alicia said. "You gotta get your grades up to a B and higher."

"To not be on what?" Ms. Corbin asked.

"Academic probation," Alicia said, gravely.

The next scenario on the worksheet featured a student named Cedric, who was already on academic probation, and who was failing all his classes. Ms. Corbin explained that students who fail classes across the board often have to repay their Pell Grants—up to $5700—directly to their colleges. "They're gonna want the money back," Ms. Corbin said. "Because what happens is, the federal government gives them money. The school says, 'Cool, that money is for you.' If you don't make your SAP, the federal government takes that money out. And UNO [University of New Orleans] says, 'You owe us this money.' They won't give you a diploma until you pay your debt."

Kenya was incredulous. "What if you keep the money?" he asked.

"They're gonna come after you," Alicia replied.

"For real," piped up Adonis.

Ms. Corbin nodded along. "It can affect whether you can buy a car," she said. "What kind of loan you can get."

In reality, the scenario on the worksheet could be even worse than Ms. Corbin described. Public colleges in Louisiana turn unpaid bills over to the state Attorney General's Office, which has the legal authority to seize bank accounts, garnish wages, and deny public services to debtors as it seeks repayment (Lau 2016).[9] And unpaid bills to public colleges can block not only graduation from those colleges but also transfers to any other college. Colleges that are owed money do not release students' transcripts to them or to anyone else. In practice, this means that students in such a predicament are unable to continue in higher education until the debt is paid. The debt creates a "transfer trap," stopping students in their tracks (Lindhoff 2012; Gilbert 2019).

To wrap up the lesson, Ms. Corbin framed Cedric's problems in terms of personal responsibility. "This is what happens," she told the class, "if you're on academic probation and you don't change your ways."

BLOCKED MOBILITY AND PRECARIOUS MOBILITY

The scenarios Kenya and his peers contemplated that afternoon in College Success Class appeared to them to have clear answers. Here is the story they embraced: Cedric, Scooter, and the other hypothetical struggling college students faced academic difficulty because they were not sufficiently invested in their coursework. Consequently, they were not working hard enough. The solution seemed obvious. Struggling students like Cedric and Scooter needed to care more and try harder. Catching up would not be easy, as hard work is by definition hard. But it would be straightforward, a simple matter of putting their heads down, channeling their willpower, and pushing to reach their goals. The subtext in class that day was clear. Kenya and his peers were reassuring Ms. Corbin, and themselves, that they would not suffer the same fate as Strive alumni from years past. They resolved to succeed where others failed by trying harder than those who had come before.

Their reasoning was an example of achievement ideology, the longstanding notion that success in life hinges on personal effort, the more the better. For more than half a century, up-close studies of the experiences of young people like Kenya have unpacked the false promise of achievement ideology. They show how social conditions like poverty and racial discrimination undermine even the most determined attempts to "make it." Social reproduction, these studies show, can play out as an inexorable process where the challenges of poverty resist or impede young people's efforts to build their desired lives. Facing overwhelming resistance, some young people simply give up. Others try with all their might

to meet their goals, but fail more often than not, thwarted despite their best efforts. In his book *Ain't No Makin' It*, a classic ethnographic study of young men growing up poor in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the 1980s, Jay MacLeod clearly lays out these two potential paths. "Conformists accept [achievement] ideology and act within the system but come up against the barriers of class; only a few break through," he writes. "Nonconformists balk and do no better" (McCleod 2008 [1987]: 150).

MacLeod's explanation of these processes of failure tracks closely with how other studies portray social reproduction. Time and again, researchers have told stories of *blocked mobility* to make sense of how children born to poor parents grow up to be poor themselves. Blocked mobility is a pervasive, powerful analogy that describes how circumstances of poverty can make opportunities inaccessible.

A close reading of studies of young people like Kenya reveals sentences peppered with the language and logic of blocked mobility. Poor and working class people featured in these studies face "barriers," "obstacles," "hurdles," "impediments," or "roadblocks." They are "prisoners" facing a "nearly impenetrable wall" of social-structural constraints; they "cannot do what they want because class circumstances pen them in;" they are "trapped" by social structure (Sennett and Cobb 1972; Kornblum and Williams 1985; Newman 1999; Young 2004; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Silva 2013; Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014; DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016). These barriers push back against young people's best attempts to build the lives they desire. Young people must exert "an opposing and even more powerful force" to achieve their dreams (DeLuca, Calmpet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016:69).

The central argument of this dissertation is that blocked mobility is no longer the best way to make sense of how disadvantaged young people fail to get ahead. Although rates

of upward mobility have not budged in the United States, the process of social reproduction is changing in ways that the blocked mobility framework does not capture. The stories of the young men profiled in this project reveal some of these flaws.

The first flaw is that blocked mobility implies a fundamentally stable struggle for personal advancement: a mostly static push-and-pull contest between an aspirant and the barriers in their way. But the young men's attempts to get ahead were actually highly unstable. Tiny mishaps could cascade into larger and larger difficulties, quickly derailing an entire semester.

The second flaw is blocked mobility's implication that success demands as much individual effort as humanly possible. In fact, the young men often failed because they exerted too much effort, trying unsustainably hard to achieve their goals and burning out in the process. This *effort paradox* emerged from the young men's strong yearning to build their desired lives and from misleading training they received about the efficacy of unrestrained effort. It created a tempting, deceptive trap.

The third flaw is that blocked mobility implies there is no harm in trying, as the worst that can happen is ending up stuck where you started. However, the young men in this project ended up substantially worse for wear when they tried and failed. Failure left the young men indebted and depressed, saddled with misplaced guilt and self-blame.

A better way to make sense of the challenges that faced this study's participants— and by extension, to understand what makes upward mobility so hard today—is the concept of precarity. To date, scholars have mostly used precarity to describe the instability of daily survival for low-income people. Nearly half of people in the United States could not come up with $400 in a pinch (United States Federal Reserve 2019). They are one car accident, medical emergency, or lost paycheck away from having their lights shut off, going hungry, or

being evicted. Many people who work low-wage jobs also experience employment instability, with inconsistent schedules leaving them unsure when they will be called into work and whether they will earn enough each month to make ends meet (e.g., Schneider and Harknett 2019). In ways like these, daily survival is often quite precarious in the United States.

But the concept of precarity also aptly captures the difficulties low-income people encounter as they pursue alluring-but-fraught opportunities to get ahead (Hart 2019). With high school graduation looming, Kenya and the other young men profiled in this project perceived boundless opportunity. Enthusiastic college representatives, enticing campus tours, and pre-approved financial aid packages made a bachelor's degree seem ripe for the taking. The prospect of newfound free time, and the leeway it would afford to earn money and pursue passions, also beckoned promisingly. The young men did not face a challenge where opportunity was wholly cut off or inaccessible. Rather, they faced a challenge that offered up tantalizing opportunities but obscured their inherent risks.

I call the work of navigating these fraught opportunities *precarious mobility*. This work is fundamentally unstable, in that small, unexpected problems can quickly escalate into total failure. It is counterintuitive, in that success demands cautious strategies that feel at odds with one's inner drive. And it is high consequence, in that failure often leaves one much worse off for having tried. If the challenge of blocked mobility is akin to pressing with all one's might against a wall in an effort to break through, the challenge of precarious mobility is subtler. It is like stepping eagerly out onto a high tightrope, eyes fixed on a prize at the other end, perhaps not fully aware of the precipitous drop and lack of safety net.

Better understanding how precarity undermines upward mobility could help to correct problems created by the blocked mobility paradigm. For example, blocked mobility thinking informs widespread efforts to teach "grit" to young people from low-income

families (Duckworth 2016). This project shows how such programs can prove inadvertently harmful, contributing to the effort paradox mentioned above. In acting on the notion that disadvantaged young people must try much harder than their affluent peers, well-meaning teachers prime their students to overcommit and inculcate them with an ideology that prevents them from recognizing and correcting such overcommitment. Pedagogy more clear-eyed about the hazards inherent in opportunities like college could help young people approach these opportunities in a more balanced and cautious way. It could also help prevent spirals of guilt and self-recrimination in the event of failure.

Moreover, blocked mobility thinking spurs the creation of flawed opportunities that may actually do more harm than good. This is because the analogy lends itself better to describing challenges that entirely cut off access to opportunities than it does to describing hazards inherent within such opportunities. For instance, blocked mobility thinking currently undergirds widespread efforts to enroll as many low-income people as possible in higher education—efforts billed as attempts to "break down barriers to college." Completing college is inarguably beneficial for most people and for society as a whole (Hout 2012). It should indeed be a goal to greatly increase the number of college graduates in general and to equalize college graduation rates across lines of class and race. But pervasive focus on barriers to college has not been matched with an equal commitment to solving problems that arise for students after they enroll. Although Kenya and his peers received tremendous encouragement and support to sign up for college, that support largely fell away once classes began. If the consequences of failure in higher education were not so dire, such gaps might be excused as justifiable growing pains. But given the substantial toll of college failure on young people's finances, mental health, and future opportunity, the practice of sending most low-income young people to college without adequate support is indefensibly harmful. The

framework of precarious mobility reminds us to consider both the benefits and the hazards of the opportunities we offer low-income young people.

KENYA AT WORK

After school, Kenya swapped one uniform for another, slipping on a grease-stained pair of black Dickies pants, black closed-toed Crocs, and a black McDonald's polo shirt. Then, he and Tamika headed out to Tamika's truck. Without much better to do, Shanice and Lamonte climbed in back, happy to spend time with their older brother.

On the ride, Kenya regaled his family with news of the day. He told them about pulling the wrapper prank on Dorian. "I put it in just the right spot where he couldn't feel it and where it wouldn't fall out," Kenya said. "The whole cafeteria knew besides him."

Tamika, anxious for Kenya to get to enjoy the hallmarks of senior spring, and worried that he might be excluded for disciplinary reasons, asked him about the end-of-year schedule. "They still haven't said nothing about the prom?" she asked.

"Nope," replied Kenya. "I wish."

Then, Tamika asked about me. "So Kenya," she said, "how did you like having a shadow today?" I was not sure how Kenya would answer his mother's question, and I was pleasantly surprised at his nonchalance. "I don't know," he said. "It feel like every day to me."

I was the fifth person in the car, sharing the back seat with Shanice and Lamonte. I had been following Kenya around all day. A lanky white man, I was 29 years old at the time, although I looked younger. Kenya told me I could pass as a college student. I wore slacks, a short-sleeved button down shirt, and a worn pair of brown lace ups, as I had nearly every school day that academic year. A grey messenger bag that I took everywhere with me sat on

my lap, and I held a small digital voice recorder, taping the conversation. In all likelihood, my mop of brown hair was a bit unkempt, and my long legs were probably crossed somewhat awkwardly, folded away to fit behind Tamika's driver's seat.

On that April evening, I had known Kenya for eight months. I was a graduate student in sociology, spending time with Kenya and the other young men profiled in this project as part of my dissertation project. To begin the research, I had gotten approval from the principals of two New Orleans high schools to embed with their senior classes. I had been spending lots of time with students at both schools since August. I attended class, hung out in the cafeteria, went to club meetings and sports games, marched as a band chaperone in Mardi Gras parades, and tagged along on field trips. My goal was to get to know a small group of students well enough that they would let me follow them to college the subsequent year. I was especially interested in students who would be attending community colleges and non-flagship public four-year colleges. Together, these two types of institution enroll the bulk of first-time college students from low-income families.

By December, I had already spent enough time with Kenya and several other young men that I felt comfortable asking if I could follow them to college. I recruited several more participants during the spring semester. Each person I asked to take part in the project said yes.

That spring, I set about getting to know the young men as well as possible. I had already spent lots of time with them at school, but I started spending even more time with them outside of class. When I hung out with Kenya, he usually wanted to take driving lessons in my old Toyota. The blocks around his house were thick with memories and relationships. As we crisscrossed the neighborhood, Kenya gingerly tested the gas pedal, and the slowly passing scenery prompted hours of storytelling and stream-of-consciousness

narration. I also began spending more time with Kenya's family. Tamika told me her life story during an interview that stretched over four hours. I started tutoring Shanice for the ACT. Akeem showed me sketchbook after sketchbook full of his art. At a family crawfish boil, I joined Tamika, Kenya's grandmother, and Kenya's aunt at a card table under a pop-up tent for games of spades.

The mood in the car that evening was light, and everyone seemed to be getting a kick out of the dogged, quixotic attention I was paying to Kenya that day. "So did y'all stand in line together and stuff?" Shanice asked, poking gentle fun at both of us over the absurdity of the arrangement.

"I let him have a little bit of leeway," I said. "He would usually run out of classes before I'd get out. He's quick to leave."

Kenya nodded. "I *hate* class," he said.

I figured Kenya would not get in too much trouble if I told everyone about how he fell asleep in geometry, but I checked with him first. He told me to go ahead, and I described how he managed sleep with his head and pencil propped in just the right way to make it seem like he was working. Kenya seemed pleased that I had noticed. "I sleep like that all the time, huh? It don't look like I'm sleeping, huh?"

Shanice, a much more fastidious student than her older brother, was unimpressed. "How you gonna just fall asleep in class?" she asked.

"It ain't my fault!" Kenya replied.

Lamonte piped up in Kenya's defense. "He get off work late. That's true."

Shanice was having none of it. "If you falling asleep, you go stand in the back of the class," she said matter-of-factly.

Kenya turned to me, grinning. "You told your professors how I fall asleep?" he asked.

"They don't know you, so I haven't told them," I replied. "But I am writing about it." Tamika chuckled at the idea of Kenya's antics being recorded for posterity.

As we pulled up to the McDonald's, a skinny man with grey hair staggered around the parking lot, clearly intoxicated, dancing to a tune that only he could hear. "He *full*," Tamika said. "He tripping. He crazy."

"He be out here every day," Kenya said. Kenya hopped out of the truck and ambled toward the restaurant's entrance. I thanked Tamika for the ride and then followed behind.

For the next several hours, as Kenya assembled Big Macs and Hot n' Spicy chicken sandwiches for a never-ending line of cars in the drive-through, I sat at a booth typing up fieldnotes from the day. I was already off to a good start. In class, while students worked on their assignments, I was able to type notes on my laptop, writing down in-the-moment observations and capturing snippets of conversation. Now, I went back over these rough notes, clarifying them and adding more layers of description. I also typed detailed recollections of times when I had not been taking notes, like that morning's bus ride. And I kept an eye on Kenya, writing about what I saw during his shift.

This McDonald's was a hectic place to work. Everyone on the short-staffed crew was a teenager, except for a harried manager in her twenties. Young women ran the registers and the drive-through; young men did the cooking. For much of the shift, as various coworkers went on break, Kenya was the only person at the sandwich station. He needed to assemble a burger every thirty seconds, keeping up with the computerized beeps of a timer displayed above the station. Two young women in the front alternated between chatting

about their high school English assignment, laughing at the disarray of the restaurant, and flirtatiously hounding Kenya to follow the rules and work harder.

"You eat and I'm gonna rat on you!" one called out to Kenya.

"Lord, these fries is so old," the other laughed as she doled out orders into takeout bags.

"Hey Kenya! I need a Big Mac, dude!" the first called out. "Better come on! Better come on!"

Kenya appeared to relish the attention, and he returned the flirtatious energy. At one point, as he walked by the fry station, he tapped one of the young women on her left shoulder as he passed on her right, prompting her to do a confused pirouette to see who was behind her.

After three hours, Kenya went on break and joined me at the booth. I showed him my notes from the day, and he read them intently. He caught a few factual inaccuracies right away—I had messed up the names of students who were on the bus that morning—but mostly he seemed pleased that I had been paying close attention to him. He laughed when he got to a part in the notes where he told me about his crush on a young special education teacher. ("She need me. She need to give me a chance after graduation.") And he offered some clarity after reading a note where I described not being able to hear most of the banter between him and Paul in the hallway. "Mostly I just be ribbing him," Kenya explained. "My mama do tell me I mumble, though."

After Kenya's break, the restaurant descended into mild pandemonium. Several customers barged in, irate that the drive-through got their orders wrong. A man with missing teeth and a portable radio tuned to 106.7 sauntered through the dining area, panhandling customers and mumbling about sniffing Adderall. Shortly thereafter, another man with an

emaciated frame and a weathered face arrived. "You gonna learn about this McDonald's here," he loudly declared, to no one in particular, which struck me as an apt synopsis of the unfolding scene.

"Nah ah ah ah, hey!" the man said, nonsensically, to one of the two young women who had been flirting with Kenya earlier.

"You drunk?" she replied.

"Do I look drunk, Ms. Erykah Badu?" he slurred, taking a step toward her.

"Stay in your place. Stay in your place. Please stay in your place," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Hey!" he yelled, turning around and heading toward the booths. "The customer supposed to come first!" Then, as everyone stopped to stare, he commenced a lap of the dining area. "Call the po po!" he yelled. "Call the po po! Call the po!" Arriving back at the entrance, he pushed his way out into the muggy night air. Behind him, Kenya and his colleagues burst out laughing.

KENYA'S EVENING

When Kenya's shift finished, Tamika picked us up. The ride home was quiet. Shanice dozed in the front seat, her head propped up against the passenger-side door. Tamika did not like the idea of her children sleeping alone at the apartment while she was not home, despite the iron security grates over the first-floor entrances and windows. "Shanice was sleeping so hard," Tamika explained. "I didn't want to leave her sleeping that hard."

In the back seat, Kenya stifled a yawn. "Today feel long, huh?" he asked. I agreed. The morning already seemed like a distant memory.

That day with Kenya was just one of 454 days I spent with the young men during the two-year span covered in this dissertation. (I also spent most of the remaining 296 days immersed in the project, catching up on fieldnotes, writing grants and early drafts of papers, and living in New Orleans East.) Few days of fieldwork lasted as long as this one, but most were substantial. I spent a total of about 2,400 hours with study participants, meaning that an average fieldwork day lasted a little over five hours.

By the end of the project, the cumulative effect of all this time watching the young men's lives unfold felt profound. It induced a strange mix of gratitude, heartache, and vertigo—an uncanny sense that the events I had witnessed were at once close at hand and long gone. As the young men's college attempts fell apart, I longed for the times when Kenya and the others still seemed to have their best chances ahead of them. I thought wistfully of the optimism, confidence, and camaraderie that filled their lives in the waning months of high school. I struggled to come to grips with all that had happened since: the many small serendipities and triumphs, the sprawling stretches of tedium, the exhilarating and weirdly grounding moments of terror, the quiet tragedies.

The chapters that follow tell some of these stories and attempt to make sense of them. Chapter 2 introduces the eight participants and describes the lives they wanted to build for themselves. It shows that these men, like most young people who grow up in poverty, were bursting with pent-up potential and desire. The chapter explores how the privations and indignities of poverty can inflect personal aspirations with a sense of acute urgency and yearning.

Chapter 3 describes one of the ways the young men's attempts to get ahead could prove counterintuitively challenging. It describes how several of the young men were tempted to overcommit and overexert themselves, failing not despite their best efforts but

precisely because of them. The chapter traces the origins and consequences of this *effort paradox*.

Chapter 4 describes one of the ways that promising attempts at upward mobility could spiral into failure with a single mishap. It tells the story of how Paul fell into a long-running gun conflict in a way that eventually forced him into hiding. It uses Paul's story, and the stories of Paul's friends who dealt with similar conflicts, to build theory about how targeted threats of gun violence can lead to social isolation. It also reveals previously undocumented tolls of gun violence, which can ruin lives (and derail upward mobility) not only in its aftermath but also in its anticipation.

Chapter 5, the conclusion, further develops theory about how precarity infiltrates and undermines attempts to "make it" in a society that has removed some of the most glaring first-order barriers to personal advancement for young people from low-income families, but in which mobility nevertheless remains stalled.

Overall, the data from this project suggest that this precarity manifests in three ways. First, it shows up in the susceptibility of these attempts to tiny misfortunes or changes in circumstance, which quickly snowball into much larger problems. Second, it shows up in the often-counterintuitive approaches demanded to navigate systems full of temptations and hazards. Third, it shows up in the consequences of failure, which often leave people worse off for having tried.

At the end of the drowsy ride in Tamika's truck, as we rounded the last corner before home, Kenya caught sight of his friend Mickey. Kenya perked up. For the first time that day, he did not want me tagging along. As soon as we parked, Kenya trotted off in Mickey's direction. I dutifully headed indoors with Tamika and Shanice. Akeem, who had

just finished his own shift at Wal-Mart, greeted us. Lamonte did not look up from his video game.

A few minutes later, Kenya returned, plopping down on the futon to begin his homework. He worked with evident drive and focus. As he plowed through a geometry assignment, he narrated his progress to me. "I got all these right," he said. "See, I told you, I took this class already."

"Want me to check?" I asked.

"No!" he said. "I already know. See, all you got to do is calculate the slope. Y_2 minus Y_1 over X_2 minus X_1. That's all this is." He wanted me to know that sleeping through geometry class was not a sign that he was behind. "I didn't say I didn't know," he said. "I just said I didn't like it."

Kenya dispatched his other assignments with similar confidence. He completed web-based Duolingo exercises for Spanish class, and he worked his way through review problems for the AP Environmental Science exam. He opted to skip his English homework, as his instructor Mr. Braun would not be in school the next day. "And nothing for Mr. Katz, huh?" he asked himself, running through a mental checklist. "I guess I'm all done."

The flicker of a muted Food Network show illuminated the living room. Akeem and Lamonte had already headed to bed. Shanice was fast asleep in a chair. Tamika was dozing off too. But Kenya had energy to burn. "I can do pushups with claps," he said, grinning. "I can do ten." Tamika stirred, and the two of us shared a smile as Kenya fell to the floor and began huffing and clapping. With his obligations behind him, Kenya seemed eager to wring every last drop of potential out of the day.

Still panting from his efforts, Kenya asked if he could head back out into the neighborhood. Tamika shook her head no. "You are not leaving out that door," she said.

WORKS CITED

Adams, Thomas Jessen, Sue Mobely, and Matt Sakakeeny. 2019. *Remaking New Orleans: Beyond Exceptionalism and Authenticity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Alexander, Karl, Doris Entwisle, and Linda Olson. 2014. *The Long Shadow: Family Background, Disadvantaged Urban Youth, and the Transition to Adulthood*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Arena, John. 2012. *Driven from New Orleans: How Nonprofits Betray Public Housing and Promote Privatization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Armstrong, Elizabeth A. and Laura T. Hamilton. 2013. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Auyero, Javier, ed. 2015. *Invisible in Austin: Life and Labor in an American City*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bankston, Carl L. III and Stephen J. Caldas. 2002. *A Troubled Dream: The Promise and Failure of School Desegregation in Louisiana*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Bengali, Leila and Mary Daly. 2014. "U.S. Economic Mobility: The Dream and the Data." *Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco Economic Letter*, March 4.

Berube, Alan and Natalie Holmes. 2015. "Concentrated Poverty in New Orleans 10 Years After Katrina." *The Avenue*, August 27.

Brook, Daniel. 2019. *The Accident of Color: A Story of Race in Reconstruction*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Broom, Sarah. 2019. *The Yellow House*. New York: Grove Press.

Buras, Kristina. 2015. *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance*. New York: Routledge.

Carnevale, Anthony P., Stephen J. Rose, and Ban Cheah. 2011. *The College Payoff: Education, Occupations, Lifetime Earnings*. Washington, D.C.: The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

Carr, Sarah. 2013. *Hope against Hope: Three Schools, One City, and the Struggle to Educate America's Children*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Chetty, Raj and Nathaniel Hendren. 2018. "The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility I: Childhood Exposure Effects." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 133(3): 1107–1162.

Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie Jones, and Sonya Porter. 2018. *Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective*. w24441. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez. 2014a. "Where Is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States." w24441. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, Emmanuel Saez, and Nicholas Turner. 2014b. "Is the United States Still a Land of Opportunity? Recent Trends in Intergenerational Mobility." American Economic Review 104(5):141-147.

Cooper, Marianne. 2014. *Cut Adrift: Families in Insecure Times*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Corak, Miles. 2016. "Economic Mobility." *Pathways,* Special Issue: The Poverty and Inequality Report.

Cyran, Olivier. 2018. "The gentrification of New Orleans." *Le Monde diplomatique*, December.

Deluca, Stephanie, Susan Clampet-Lundquist, and Kathryn Edin. 2016. *Coming of Age in the Other America*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Duckworth, Angela. 2016. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. New York: Scribner.

Dreilinger, Danielle. 2015. "College-going rate at New Orleans high schools improves to 59 percent." *Times-Picayune*. April 7.

Dreillinger, Danielle. 2017. "Most Katrina laid-off teachers never came back, study confirms." *The Times-Picayune,* May 31.

Engle, Jennifer and Vincent Tinto. 2008. *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students*. Washington, D.C.: The Pell Institute.

Fox News. 2003. "F is for Valedictorian." August 17.

Gilbert, Nedda. 2019. "How to Get Your Transcripts When You Still Have College Debt," *Noodle*, April 11.

Golann, Joanne W. 2015. "The Paradox of Success at a No-Excuses School." *Sociology of Education* 88(2):103–19.

Hart, Beth Ann. 2019. "Hanging In, Stopping Out, Dropping Out: Community College Students in an Era of Precarity." *Teachers College Record*, 121: 1-30.

Hasselle, Della and Marta Jewson. 2013. "Cost of Bussing Students in New Orleans rises as parents exercise school choice," *The Lens*, September 12.

Herring, Chris, and Emily Rosenman. 2016. "Engels in the Crescent City: Revisiting the Housing Question in post-Katrina New Orleans." *ACME* 15(3): 616-638.

Horowitz, Andy. 2020. *Katrina: A History, 1915-2015*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hout, Michael. 2012. "Social and Economic Returns to College Education in the United States." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38: 379-400.

Isaacs, Julia B., Isabel V. Sawhill, and Ron Haskins, *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Ipsos Public Affairs. 2015. "How America Pays for College: Sallie Mae's National Study of College Students and Parents." Washington, DC: Sallie Mae.

Johnson, Walter. 1999. *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Jones, Victor. 2020. "The New Orleans public school bussing crisis should be treated like the civil rights issue that it is," *The Lens*, January 4.

Kneebone, Elizabeth and Alan Berube. 2013. *Confronting Suburban Poverty in America.* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

Kusenbach, Margarethe. 2003. "Street Phenomenology: The Go-Along as Ethnographic Research Tool." *Ethnography* 4(3):455-485.

Lau, Mary. 2016. "Residents irate over OMV, state collection agency's tactics in collecting fines for insurance lapses," *The Advocate*, February 14.

Lee, Chul-In and Gary Solon. 2009. "Trends In Intergenerational Income Mobility," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 91 (2009): 766-772.

Lemov, Doug. 2010. *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass Teacher.

Lemov, Doug. 2018. "Narrating Positive Behavior: Talking to Students vs. Talking About Students," *Doug Lemov's Fieldnotes* Blog, May 23.

Lindhoff, Dave. 2012. "Holding transcripts hostage." *The Los Angeles Times*, May 2.

Marx, Karl. 2004. *Captial, Volume 1*. New York: Penguin.

Matthews, Jay. 2009. *Work Hard, Be Nice: How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America.* New York: Algonquin Books.

McLeod, Jay. [1987] 2008. *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*, 3rd Edition. New York: Routledge.

Metairie Park Country Day School. 2022. "Our History."

Neckerman, Katherine M. 2007. *Schools Betrayed: Roots of Failure in Inner-City Education.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Newman, Katherine. 1999. *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City.* New York: Vintage Books.

Perna, Laura, ed. 2010. *Understanding the Working College Student: New Research and its Implications for Policy and Practice.* Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Perry, Andre. 2017. "Building educational 'success' on the backs of fired black teachers." *The Hechinger Report*, May 31.

Rosen, Eva. 2020. *The Voucher Promise.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Schudde, Lauren and Judith Scott-Clayton. 2016. "Pell Grants as Performance-Based Scholarships? An Examination of Satisfactory Academic Progress Requirements in the Nation's Largest Need-Based Aid Program." *Research in Higher Education*, 57(8): 943-967.

Schneider, Daniel, and Kristen Harknett. 2019. "Consequences of Routine Work-Schedule Instability for Worker Health and Well-Being." *American Sociological Review* 84(1):82–114.

Scott, Mike. 2017. "Remembering Hurricane Betsy, a New Orleans Nightmare," *The Times Picayune*, May 31.

Sennett, Richard and Jonathan Cobb. 1972. *The Hidden Injuries of Class.* New York: Norton.

Sernovitz, Gary. 2018. "What New Orleans Tells Us About the Perils of Putting Schools on the Free Market." *The New Yorker*, July 30.

Silva, Jennifer M. 2013. *Coming Up Short: Working Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. New York: Oxford Universtiy Press.

Snyder, Thomas D. and Sally A. Dillow. 2015. *Digest of Education Statistics 2013*. Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Snyder, Thomas D., Cristobal de Brey, and Sally A. Dillow. 2019. *Digest of Education Statistics 2017*. Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Sondel, Beth and Joseph Boselovic. 2014. "No Excuses in New Orleans," *Jacobin*, July 7.

Stack, Carol B. 1974. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York: The Free Press.

Stark, William E. 1922. *Every Teacher's Problems*. New York: American Book Company.

Stitt, Mary Ellen. 2021. "'Broken Windows' Discipline and Racial Disparities in Student Punishment." *Punishment & Society*.

Tavory, Iddo and Stefan Timmermans. 2014. *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

US Census Bureau. 2021. "Historical Income Tables: Households," Tables H-13 and H-14.

United States Federal Reserve. 2019. "Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2018," *Economic Well-Being of US Households (SHED)*.

WDSU. 2004. "10 To Plead Guilty In Orleans Schools Probe." July 2.

Webley, Kayla. 2012. "Why Can't You Discharge Student Loans in Bankruptcy?", *Time*, February 9.

Williams, Terry and William Kornblum. 1985. *Growing up Poor*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.

Yamahtta-Taylor, Keeanga. 2019. *Race for Profit*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Young, Alfred. 2004. *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zubrzycki, Jaclyn. 2013. "TFA Alumni Aid New Teachers in New Orleans." *Education Week*, April 19.

ENDNOTES

---

[1] The New Orleans of popular and scholarly imagination is not, by and large, the New Orleans of this book. It is easy to bracket New Orleans off as a place apart, paying closest attention to what makes the city so different from anywhere else. Thomas Jessen Adams, Sue Mobely, and Matt Sakakeeny describe the allure and folly of this approach in the introduction to the edited volume *Remaking New Orleans: Beyond Exceptionalism and Authenticity* (2019: 1):

> From the beginning of [the city's] existence as a juridically American locale, those both inside and outside the city have marked it off as anathema to broader patterns of urbanity, culture, politics, economics, and, indeed, Americanness. Placed in opposition to a nation perpetually driven by progress, New Orleans is the "City that Care Forgot." It can also be the "Paris of the South," the "northernmost Caribbean city," and "the most African city in the United States." That New Orleans can be all these is what makes this place different than any other place. Or so the story goes.

Focusing only on the city's idiosyncrasies misses a more important insight: New Orleans has long held up a mirror to US society. The city embodies and accentuates core parts of what make the United States the United States. In a nation whose founding and rapid economic growth relied on slavery, New Orleans was one of the largest slave markets (Johnson 1999). In a nation whose coastal cities are at high risk from rising sea levels and climate change, New Orleans has given us jarring glimpses of our underwater future (e.g., Scott 2017; Horowitz 2020). In a nation where the face of poverty is increasingly suburban, New Orleans epitomizes this shift, with outlying areas like New Orleans East seeing large jumps in poverty even as poverty declined in the urban core (Kneebone and Berube 2013; Berube and Holmes 2015). For the purposes of this book, one of these accentuated similarities is particularly important. In a nation that has long had low rates of intergenerational income mobility, New Orleans is one of the least mobile parts of the country. Children born into poverty in New Orleans are particularly likely to grow up to be poor themselves (Chetty et al. 2014b).

[2] School bus traffic jams are a curious feature of life in some post-Katrina New Orleans neighborhoods. The rise of open-enrollment charter schools has meant that each school needs to send a bus to every part of the city. In parts of New Orleans where lots of public school students live—neighborhoods that are predominantly Black and poor—the morning rush of school busses is a sight to behold. The city's decentralized bussing system eats into school budgets, forces students to wake up before dawn, and creates safety problems (Hasselle and Jewson 2013; Jones 2020).

[3] All of the names in this book are pseudonyms. I have also changed some identifying details throughout the book to protect the confidentiality of study participants.

[4] Why do voucher recipients like Tamika often end up moving into neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, even though vouchers are supposed to provide them with the choice to live elsewhere? Eva Rosen answers this question in her book *The Voucher Promise* (2020). Landlords play a big role. Landlords who own units in poor neighborhoods often prize and seek out voucher holders, anticipating they will be a more reliable source of rent than other low-income tenants who would otherwise occupy their units. Landlords also play up creature comforts like new appliances, encouraging would-be tenants to focus more on the interior of a house or apartment than on its surroundings.

[5] Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor uses the term "predatory inclusion" to describe how the ostensible opening of opportunity to formerly disinvested groups can be used to exploit them (2019).

[6] However, researchers can also conduct fantastic ethnographic research across lines of gender (e.g., Carter 2005; Small 2009).

[7] The history of New Orleans school desegregation I tell in this section draws heavily on two books (Bankston and Caldas 2002; Brook 2019). The story of the missing school board minutes comes from a conversation I had with Daniel Brook.

[8] This quote comes from an interview the author conducted with Bollinger for a different project.

[9] As the University of Louisiana at Lafayette explains to its students, "Louisiana RS 47:1676 requires the University to turn over any unpaid debt 60 days after the semester is over…. If you receive a letter from the Attorney General's office, the University is NO LONGER able to prevent collection efforts from the Attorney General. The Attorney General's office will add an additional FEE to your current debt for THEIR collection efforts, even if you are a current student. The Attorney General fees cannot be waived by the University under any circumstances."

CHAPTER 2: YEARNING

An eager restlessness suffused senior year. The young men were coiled springs. Sometimes their pent-up energy was obvious, like on days when Vincent strode out of the school building after lunch, hours before classes ended, greeting the receptionist with an "Alright ma!" and bounding into the afternoon sun, so courteous and confident that no adult thought to ask where he was going. Sometimes it was subtle, like in the yawning stretches of boredom when A.J. stayed home watching his younger brothers, fixating for hours on lines of computer code, barely glancing up as his stepfather returned reeking of alcohol. The young men strained toward the future, confident in its promise, allured by the escape it offered from the suffocating present.

This is a chapter about how growing up in poverty sharpens the desire for a better life. It introduces Dorian, Juan, Paul, Vincent, Jaydin, A.J., and Casey by describing their hopes and dreams. It shows how their childhoods and adolescent years made them yearn fervently for an imagined future that felt tangible and close-at-hand. Knowing where this yearning came from is important for understanding why some of the young men held fast to untenable levels of work and commitment once they got to college. It is also important for understanding who each young man was and what each wanted to accomplish as he transitioned into adulthood.[10]

DORIAN

Several days after Kenya placed the candy wrapper in Dorian's hair, Dorian sat fidgeting in environmental science class. Ms. Stewart told him to go get a drink at the water fountain, sensing that he just needed to move around for a bit. Dorian pulled his tall frame

out of the chair and ambled toward the door. Out in the hallway, a stocky, bearded English teacher named Mr. Braun glanced up from his computer.[11]

"Oh hey," Mr. Braun said, in flat tone students had learned to associate with his dry humor. "Did you get kicked out of class again?"

"Yeah," Dorian replied. "I cursed this time."

Mr. Braun inhaled sternly. "You cursed?"

"I called her the B word," Dorian deadpanned.

Mr. Braun began to gather himself. "Dorian, what would you do if I cursed you out?"

"Psych, I'm playing," Dorian said, flashing a gap-toothed grin. "I'm going to the bathroom. I seen the horns comin' out your ears though."

People who talked about Dorian tended to start smiling. "Dorian? Dorian is hi-*lar*ious," said Jaydin's mom Bernadette, who saw so much of Dorian that she almost considered him a surrogate son. "Dorian makes me laugh allllll the time. Fun-*ny*." But people also noticed Dorian's earnestness. He tended to focus his humor on himself, poking fun at his own foibles and selfish impulses. Dorian's joke in the hallway was not about Mr. Braun being gullible; it was about his own alleged misbehavior being plausible. And people noted Dorian's seriousness of purpose. "He has drive," Mr. Braun said. "He's one of those kids where in ten years, I could be saying, 'Wow, I taught him.'" As Mr. Bruan saw it, Dorian's humor helped him navigate a world that could be arbitrary and cruel. "He's had a rough life," Mr. Braun said. "And he is so funny sometimes that I just think, 'Alright, he knows how to keep moving.'"

Dorian spent his early childhood in the Iberville Projects, a complex of three-story red brick apartment buildings on ten city blocks near the French Quarter. He remembered

his time there as idyllic. Most days, he would play with friends and cousins in the grassy, shaded courtyards between apartment blocks. "We used to ride bikes and stuff," Dorian said. "My cousins used to stay a couple of courts down. I used to walk by them every morning to go to school." The short walk to Wicker Elementary took Dorian and his cousins past St. Louis Cemetery No. 2 with its above-ground tombs, under the elevated interstate where crowds would gather at night to dance to Bounce music from artists like Juvenile and DJ Jubilee, and through a lush tunnel of oak trees on Bienville Avenue. Coming home from school, Dorian would check his pockets for tiny treasure. "I used to take the apples and oranges we got at lunch and take the seeds home and plant them by my house," he remembered. "But they never grew."

Dorian was the baby of the family. He lived with his older brother, his older sister, and his parents. His father Demetrius, a soft-spoken cook, had been working in restaurants since he was thirteen years old. His mother Phyllis, a wise, even-keeled preacher's daughter, worked as a housekeeping supervisor in a hotel. Dorian shared a bedroom with his brother Demetrius Jr., who was twelve years older than him. Everyone called Demetrius "Big Dee" or just "Dee" to tell him apart from the boys' father, who was a good six inches shorter and one hundred pounds lighter than his son. Big Dee doted on Dorian. In their room, the two would watch scratchy VCR recordings of *The Incredible Hulk* and play with spinning tops. Dorian's sister Lianne and Big Dee were both in high school. Dorian soaked up details of their lives, listening as his parents interrogated Lianne's new boyfriend, or cheering from the sidewalk as Dee played bass drum in Mardi Gras parades with his high school marching band.

One summer, the family packed up a U-Haul and moved from the Iberville to an apartment in New Orleans East. Demetrius Sr. and Phyllis were earning more money, which

drove up their rent at the Iberville enough to prompt the move.[12] Then, right as school was about to start, the family moved again, though they did not realize it was a move at the time. They joined 1.2 million other South Louisiana residents leaving their homes as a behemoth storm churned toward the Gulf Coast. "I didn't bring much," Dorian remembered. "I left my clothes, I left all my games and stuff like that. I thought we was just going to come back to the city." After fourteen hours in bumper-to-bumper traffic, Dorian and his family arrived at a shelter in Jackson, Mississippi. There, on a surreal Monday afternoon amidst cots and crying infants, they caught word that their city had filled up with water. For Dorian, memories of what followed are a blur. The family settled in Dallas for a year and then spent another year in Baton Rouge. Lots of children were bullied in their new schools, but Dorian got along well enough with his classmates. When Dorian's family returned to New Orleans, they moved into a modest ranch house in a quiet corner of New Orleans East.

"When we came back from Katrina, there weren't any kids on the block," Phyllis remembered. Dorian filled his time with art projects, like making Phyllis a jewelry box covered in intricate Mardi Gras Indian beadwork. Big Dee was now in college at Southern University, a public, historically Black institution in Baton Rouge. Dee came home to visit most weekends. "Everybody on campus knew my brother," Dorian remembered. "Whenever he came back, he would bring a new person. It would be like, 'Ma, meet so and so.'" Dee and his friends would pile into the kitchen with ravenous appetites, looking expectantly at Phyllis. "What you cooked, ma?" they would ask. Dee was studying criminal justice, and he talked about becoming a lawyer. "I had Dorian punished one time," Phyllis remembered, "and Dee came home. He was like, 'Boy, what you did?' The two of them talked and talked. Dee told me, 'I'm his lawyer.' Then he came to me and made a good case. I had to un-punish Dorian. And Dee told Dorian, 'Man, if you ever need a lawyer, call me.'"

Dorian attended school at McDonogh 42 in the city's historic Seventh Ward, where he made friends, kept doing art, and got up to mischief.[13] He and Juan, who also attended McDonogh 42 before enrolling at Strive, would reminisce for years about one particularly memorable food fight with apples. But Dorian's misbehavior rarely went unchecked; the school's teachers were strict, loving, and engaged. "I was best friends with Dorian's teachers," Phyllis said, remembering their frequent updates on Dorian's exploits. "I was talking with them all the time."

One morning, Dorian woke up to find his parents missing. His sister Lianne told him not to worry and helped him catch the school bus. After school, Dorian found Phyllis and Demetrius sitting at the table. They told him to pull up a chair. "The doctors did everything they could," Phyllis told him, "but Dee is gone." Dee had been shot and killed the previous night in his Baton Rouge apartment. He was three months away from graduation.

"I just went to my room and sat," Dorian remembered. "I didn't really cry, because I didn't see it as real at the time."

Dorian bottled up his rage and grief in the weeks that followed. "All of us were in therapy after Dee died," Phyllis said. "Dorian was maybe the one who needed it the most, but he was the one who just wouldn't talk."

"The therapist would ask me questions, and I would give one-word answers," Dorian remembered. "After the first session, I just used to sit there quiet. She used to get so mad. She asked me what I do when I get sad or angry. I told her I draw. So every time after that, she would just bring out a piece of paper. She would draw on one, and I would draw on one. But as we were drawing, she would try to ease us into questions, you feel me? And I would ignore her. It got to the point where she said, 'It's not working. He can't come back.'"

The experienced soured Dorian to the idea of mental healthcare. Years afterward, he would

continue to dismiss the notion of therapy.

Dorian began to pour himself into skateboarding. The floodwaters had left many

parts of New Orleans East lifeless: the old Six Flags amusement park, the mall, the movie

theater. There were miles of empty parking lots, empty stairways and railings, and empty

loading docks. A generation of Black teenagers turned this landscape into their playground,

and Dorian joined in. He found mentors in older skaters and in the proprietor of a French

Quarter skate shop, who sometimes gave Dorian used "decks" for free when he snapped a

board. Dorian liked the aesthetics of skater fashion and skater art. He appreciated that

skateboarding could be an act of rebellion—police sometimes chased him and his friends

away from downtown skate spots like One Shell Square. And most of all, he liked the

exhilaration of landing a trick, or of skating down city streets with his friends, the wind in his

hair, grabbing onto the bumpers of cars ("skitching") to go even faster.

In ninth grade, Dorian enrolled at John McDonogh High, colloquially known as

"John Mac," a school so dysfunctional that Oprah's television channel made an exploitative

reality show about it (Hopkinson 2013). Phyllis still got calls from Dorian's teachers about

his behavior, but now she did not trust what they had to say. "As bad as Dorian is," she said,

"he's not going to be disrespectful." She thought the teachers were singling Dorian out, and

she resolved to see for herself what was going on. "I would turn up at the school," Phyllis

remembered, "and I would see teachers standing there, students fighting, and no learning

going on whatsoever. It was just horrible."

Dorian was unhappy at John Mac. "I like freedom at school, but it was too much

freedom," he remembered. "I didn't have to follow any rules." The security guard let

students walk out the front door at will. One day, fed up with not learning anything, Dorian

left with several of his friends. They did not get up to any trouble. Instead, they went on a self-organized field trip to the city's NASA plant, riding public busses to the edge of New Orleans East and gawking through a chain-link fence at the massive Saturn V moon rocket, assembled during the plant's heyday decades before.

Dorian transferred to Strive as a sophomore. He had never experienced anything like the school's strict, controlling environment. "I was racking up demerits," Dorian remembered. "The first week of school, I didn't see the cafeteria because I was in detention every day. I remember one day I got ninety-something demerits in one day. It was over things like, 'Tuck in your shirt, that's a demerit.' Or, 'Level zero, that's a demerit.' It got to the point tenth grade year where it didn't even matter. I knew I was going to have detention every lunch period, and every Friday afternoon, for the rest of the year."

Dorian had mixed feelings about Strive. He was grateful for the school's academic instruction. "To be honest, I've learned a lot here," he reflected. "They are going to make sure you learn pretty much no matter what." With time, he started living within the school's rules. In 11th grade, he got fewer detentions. Now in 12th grade, he barely got any.

But Dorian disliked how adults seemed to patronize students at Strive Prep. "How they teach us, it's just so childish," he said. "Every day it's, 'Level zero,' or 'Tracking in one, two, three. All eyes on me.' It blows [aggravates] me."[14]

And lately, Dorian had begun to ruminate on another problem. "Strive doesn't support creativity at all," he said. The school had only recently started a band, and it had no visual arts classes. Instead, once or twice a week, Strive offered an after-school art club taught by Ms. Jamie, a free-spirited photographer with piercing green eyes. Ms. Jamie's teaching was unlike anything Dorian had experienced. At the first club meeting of Dorian's senior year, thirty students from all grade levels piled into a special education classroom,

energetic and wound up after a long day of sitting still. Ms. Jamie, without resorting to commands or gimmicks, won students' rapt attention.

"The other day," she said, "I was walking down Elysian Fields Avenue and I stopped in my tracks. I saw a nest up in a tree with a mother hawk and her babies. She was teaching them how to fly. It was breathtaking. I watched for a whole hour. And you know what was interesting?" Ms. Jamie lowered her voice. The students, captivated, strained forward to hear. "The entire time, not one other person stopped to watch. Nobody noticed! Why do you think that is?"

Ms. Jamie's lesson that day was about seeing the world like a photographer. It was a lesson about slowing down, tuning in, and capturing moments of serendipity or uncanny beauty. This was the type of instruction Dorian craved.

In the months that followed, Ms. Jamie took Dorian under her wing. "Dorian is special," she said. "He's creative and strong." Ms. Jamie brought Dorian, along with a small cadre of students she mentored from other high schools, out into the city. They visited art galleries on Magazine Street. They developed black and white film in a high-ceilinged clapboard dark room. They spent weekend afternoons watching and discussing documentaries. And they met Ms. Jamie's friends: artists, photographers, filmmakers, and other offbeat people who did creative work.

Dorian was hooked. In New Orleans, these worlds of art and photography overlapped and collided with the worlds of skateboarding and fashion. Dorian was discovering a cohesive identity that felt just right.[15] He wanted more. By the winter of his senior year, Dorian had a steady stream of photography gigs. He made regular posts to a website that featured street portraiture from around New Orleans. He had started to do shoots for several local skate-inspired fashion brands. A Black feminist fashion blog featured

his work. The more he experienced, the more he wanted, and the more convinced he became that his education had stifled this part of himself that was now finally flourishing.

He began writing his thoughts in a spiral notebook, composing a statement that was part personal manifesto and part call-to-arms for his peers. "We are a generation of crushed and unsupported communities because of our school system," he wrote. "We are educated out of our creativity." He envisioned art as an emancipatory force of self-discovery and revolutionary change.

> *We believe the world is nothing without self-expression through creativity. A world without creativity is black and white. Stripped of soul. Art is our religion. As a creator, your job is to voice this religion by sharing your creative crafts with the world. Where you showcase this religion is whether* [sic] *it's a museum, the streets, an alley, or where you performing. Those places are our churches, cathedrals, temples, to spread this creative plague. This is a time to rebel. The art frees us and shows the world who we are.*

Dorian saw vast untapped potential in his peers. "I guarantee you we have so much talent we don't know about," he said.

As Dorian threw himself headfirst into creative work, Ms. Jamie grew concerned about his unchecked enthusiasm. He was saying "yes" to every opportunity, giddy with optimistic energy. More and more, his days were filled with photo gigs, meet-ups with newly cultivated mentors, and editing sessions. The work could pile up. "You have to learn to say 'no' sometimes," Ms. Jamie told him. She worried he would fly too close to the sun.

Ms. Jamie knew that when Dorian crashed, he crashed hard. His highs were very high, and his lows were very low. Sometimes the crashes came out of nowhere; others were grindingly predictable. His older brother Big Dee's birthday in October, and the anniversary of Big Dee's death in February, were especially hard for Dorian. In school one Tuesday,

close to the date of Dee's murder, Dorian completely shut down. He sat out in the senior hallway staring blankly into space as tears streamed down his cheeks. His academic advisor, Coach Sanchez, had seen it coming. "He gets this look on his face, and you can just tell that he's done," Coach Sanchez said. Dorian was sent home. "I'm not really feeling anything anymore," he told me. "I just need a break."

But by the weekend, Dorian was back. That sunny Saturday afternoon, Dorian went with Ms. Jamie and a young man named Bernard to Bayou St. John, a placid, grassy-banked waterway that winds past pastel houses. There, Dorian and Bernard practiced outdoor portrait photography with large stand-mounted studio flashes—a technique that leaves subjects illuminated in ghostly light. Dorian's girlfriend, a petite white woman named Tricia, posed for them. She smiled shyly at the cameras as Dorian and Bernard clicked their shutters. Dorian was vivacious, suggesting new poses and backdrops, adjusting and re-adjusting the large flash, driving the shoot forward through force of will.

As the sun set, Dorian, Tricia, and Bernard returned to Ms. Jamie's airy apartment, where Ms. Jamie had a plan for them. On a table in her living room, beneath walls hung with taxidermied owl's wings, she laid out a deck of tarot cards. "This is some witch-y stuff," Ms. Jamie said. "Focus on something you've got going on or some question you have." One at a time, she had them pull cards from the deck. Bernard, a sincere and imaginative young man, went first. Ms. Jamie told Bernard that the cards showed he had the whole universe at his fingertips, but that accessing his potential would entail personal transformation. Along the way, Ms. Jamie told him, he would need to learn to listen to his inner voice. Bernard nodded in apparent wonder.

Next up was Tricia, who cut a timid figure in Ms. Jamie's commanding presence. Tricia drew the Queen of Pentacles. Ms. Jamie nodded knowingly. "What do you do when you're not at school and you're not at work?" she asked.

"I hang out with Dorian," Tricia replied, the phrase curling up into an almost-question.

Ms. Jamie seemed to have expected this answer. She explained that Tricia's card signaled attachment and domesticity. It might indicate that Tricia wraps herself in the needs and desires of the people in her life. "Maybe that's a boyfriend. Maybe that's family," Ms. Jamie explained. "It can come from a place of love. But it can also come to define your identity. Just remember that your identity is not just bound up in other people."

Last up was Dorian, who drew several ominous cards studded with swords. "These are darker," Ms. Jamie explained. "That doesn't mean bad or evil. Humans? We're very light, and we're very dark. These cards could be a kind of warning." She pointed at one. "This in particular can symbolize self-destruction. I see this as a warning not to get lured into stuff where you don't need to be there. To take it easy sometimes. And this card? This is a recovery card. So it's saying you can get through the pressure if you give yourself a break. Take a weekend off, you know? That's what will help you avoid the self-destructive stuff. A lot of high schoolers are good at self-sabotage, especially when they feel lots of pressure. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah," Dorian exhaled. "This stuff *real*."

Ms. Jamie had told each of them exactly what they needed to hear.

As the spring unfolded, Dorian seemed to find stabler footing. With graduation approaching, he also began to celebrate milestones that marked the end of his high school

journey: prom, an awards night, and—most significantly of all for him—a culminating project for Mr. Katz's class.

The same day he fooled Mr. Braun into thinking he had cursed out Ms. Stewart, Dorian ran an after-school film screening at Strive Prep. The screening was part of Dorian's "Capstone," a semester-long research project required for graduation. After dismissal, Dorian changed into a dress shirt and slacks. A few students had opted to ride the late bus to help Dorian. They began setting up chairs.

"I'm nervous," Dorian said, to no one in particular.

A young woman named Tyrielle scooted a chair across the floor. "You gonna have food here, right?" she asked Dorian. Dorian shook his head no. Tyrielle smacked her lips in mild disgust. "How you run an event like this and not have food?" Teenagers could be brutally honest. Dorian stared forlornly at the floor.

But then more people from Dorian's life streamed into the room. His mother Phyllis and older sister Lianne came, along with Lianne's rambunctious sons, who ran to give their uncle a hug. Dorian's advisor Coach Sanchez arrived and helped Dorian tie his tie. Ms. Jamie showed up and began holding court, asking students what they knew about the film. The movie, about injustices in the recovery following Hurricane Katrina, was cued up and ready to play. In the nick of time, the filmmaker himself arrived, wearing flip-flops and sporting several days of stubble. It was Dorian's mentor Steve, who seemed momentarily taken aback to see so many people in the audience. Just then, all of Dorian's teachers filed in the door too, followed by Dorian's girlfriend Tricia.

As the lights dimmed, Dorian stood and addressed the audience. "So, um, I wanted to thank everybody for coming today," he said, his voice quavering a bit with nerves and emotion. "I want to introduce you all to Steve Lowry, the man behind this amazing film.

This is a movie about what the government did wrong after Hurricane Katrina. Steve showed me the trailer, and it really got my attention. This is something I'm really passionate about. I think we're going to have a lot to discuss after the film." The adults in the room shared approving glances. This young man was going places.

WHAT SOCIOLOGY CAN LEARN FROM INDIVIDUALITY

When sociologists write books based on qualitative data gathered from ethnography or interviews, they commonly leave out lots of information about the personalities and life stories of their participants. For example, in *Learning to Labor*, a classic ethnography about how young, working-class men in England inadvertently prepare themselves for factory work by rebelling at school, Paul Willis does not spend much time introducing his twelve protagonists. In two quick sentences, Willis tells us that the young men call themselves "the lads" and oppose authority. Then we are off to the races, watching as Joey, Bill, Spanksy, and the others complain about their teachers and sow chaos in their classrooms. The writing is keenly observed, incisive, often hilarious, and convincing. We see how the young men try to subvert a school environment they experience as patronizing and arbitrary. We see how their acts of rebellion, which often drip with racism and sexism, seem to them like steps toward self-actualization and freedom. Then we see how these steps actually lead toward lives of stultifying factory labor: by always trying to "have a laff," the young men teach themselves how to maintain a sense of identity and camaraderie in otherwise-anonymous jobs where people can be replaced like cogs (Willis 1977). But through all of this, we do not get to know Joey, Bill, Spanksy, or the others as individuals. "The lads" become an undifferentiated mass whose commonalities we vividly remember but whose personal stories and quirks never come into focus.

There are good reasons for sociologists to write this way. Sociology examines how social processes shape people's lives, and in a zero-sum world of limited page counts and limited attention spans, it can make sense to concentrate exclusively on these processes. How do members of a religious minority maintain a strong sense of community and belonging amidst a secular, cosmopolitan society (Tavory 2016)? How does the threat of violence shape the social lives of middle-school aged Black boys growing up in poor, urban neighborhoods (Harding 2010)? How do immigrants to the United States build new lives for themselves when they settle in rural areas that have not historically experienced immigration (Marrow 2011)? To answer questions like these, what matters most is what people have in common. Taking the time to craft three-dimensional portraits of participants can distract from the important work of describing a type of experience they share.

But there are also good reasons to pay close attention to participants' individuality, even if we just want to learn something new about society. One reason is that better understanding who someone is—their personality, their experiences, their motivations— creates a much sharper picture of how social processes unfold in their lives. Having this kind of perspective helps build nuanced theory about the interplay between personal agency and social structure.

"Structure" and "agency" are loaded, slippery concepts.[16] It is easiest to conceive of social structure as the context around a person, but that is too simple. Structure also works its way *into* people, shaping their habits, their perceptions, their tastes, and the strategies they use to get what they want. In other words, culture is part of social structure. This means that a person can take actions that feel inventive and autonomous but that are nevertheless subtly steered by social currents. "The Lads," for example, view their exploits as creative, anti-authoritarian self-expression: their actions feel to them like unfettered personal agency. But

the young men are less original and less in control than they feel. Their behaviors emerge from lessons they have internalized since childhood about "authentic" learning and masculinity, and these behaviors lead them down an imperceptible path toward servitude.

This type of analysis, which shows how social structure permeates individual perception and action, is powerful but limited. When it goes too far, it can take on what sociologist William H. Sewell called an "agent-proof quality" (1992:15). It misses the essential weirdness and creativity of human beings. Consequently, it has a hard time making sense of variation and change.[17]

Richly describing people as individuals helps guard against this trap. The more we know about a person, the better a sense we gain of their inner essence—of the personal spirit that impels them and gives them volition. This is what I mean by "agency." An individual's personality, life experiences, and goals each shape how they exert agency. These elements of personhood are influenced by culture and other elements of social structure, but they are far from determined by them. Take personality, for example. Even siblings of the same gender, raised in the same household with the same norms and rules, end up with very different personalities. In fact, on average, siblings vary as much as strangers in terms of their personality traits (Hertler 2017).

Viewing people as unique, creative, goal-directed agents helps us understand social structure in a more granular and dynamic way. It provides a clearer picture of how people navigate and react to social influences in their lives. This attunes us to insights we might otherwise miss, like how no two people experience a social context or social influence in quite the same way. Subsequent chapters show how Kenya and Dorian both experienced pervasive indoctrination about the importance of hard work and grit, for example, but drew different lessons from that exposure owing to their personalities and life experiences. Paying

attention to individuality also clarifies how people mobilize culture. Sociologists increasingly think of culture not as an ideology that shapes values but rather as a "toolkit": a set of familiar scripts, mental schemas, habits, and repertoires that people reach for as they try to solve problems and steer their way through the world (Swidler 1986). The better we understand who someone is and what they want, the better we can understand how they use the cultural tools at their disposal. For example, subsequent chapters show how Dorian and several of the other young men reached for the same repertoire—doubling down on effort in the face of adversity—but did so with different styles and toward different ends. Finally, focusing on individual uniqueness and agency can elucidate what makes structural challenges so difficult by letting us see these challenges through participants' eyes. This project's critique of the notion of structural "barriers," for example, emerges from viewing the challenges of going to college through the eyes of Kenya, Dorian, and the other young men.

The other reason to focus on participants' individuality is that it can help dismantle harmful, misleading stereotypes. Writing that focuses primarily on a social problem can easily, if inadvertently, portray people in flat and caricatured ways. Individuals become merely the sum of the problems they face. This is especially true of writing about marginalized people of color.

At its worst, such work is exoticizing and pathologizing, implying that participants' identities are defined by the problem or behavior in question (Betts 2014; Rios 2015). One relatively recent study of retributive violence, for example, consistently refers to its 52 Black participants as "active street offenders," and it describes its methods as "studying criminals 'in the wild.'" By this, the authors mean that their participants are not incarcerated. The authors critique researchers who interview respondents in prisons, equating their methods to "going to the zoo to study the hunting strategies of lions" (Jacobs and Wright 2006). This

type of writing dehumanizes participants, creating the false sense that they are fundamentally different than other people.

Getting to know participants as full human beings gives lie to the notion that they are defined by a particular behavior or problem. Paul, one of my participants, would fit the methodological criteria of "active street offender" used by the above-mentioned authors.[18] But to Paul and the people closest to him, this identity was not as salient as other identities: loyal friend, uncle, serious student, employee, flirt, self-professed "nerd."[19] People regularly toggle between these divergent parts of themselves. Victor Rios, in a study of Latinx young men and women with gang involvement, describes how young people "shift their practices, actions, and attitudes across short time spans (e.g., a few hours) and spaces (e.g., between school and the street)…. consistently adopt[ing] different personae" (Rios 2017: 9). Studies that focus only on the worst context of a person's life can easily miss these multiple identities. This contributes to a flawed understanding that draws sharp, stigmatized lines between groups of people (Ray and Tillman 2019). It becomes easy to write off people like Paul as incorrigibly delinquent, when in fact they are mostly just like other teenagers.

Even when problem-focused studies do not exoticize or pathologize participants, they can still reinforce false ideas about the prevalence of a problem or behavior among a marginalized group. Many studies of low-income young people of color, for example, engage in what Ranita Ray calls a "risk discourse," focusing on sensational topics like drugs, gangs, violence, and teen parenthood (Ray 2018). Reading these studies, it is easy to get the sense that such problems are pervasive and that they are the root causes of the perpetuation of poverty. But most low-income young people of color, even in very distressed neighborhoods, do not engage in these behaviors.[20] Ray and other scholars have begun a needed shift toward studying marginalized young people who "play by the rules" (e.g.,

DeLuca, Clampet Lundquist, and Edin 2016; Hart 2019; Sandelson forthcoming). The fact that most of these young people *also* fail to achieve upward mobility suggests that risky behaviors are not the biggest problem facing low-income teenagers of color (Ray and Tillman 2019).

Kenya, Dorian, and the others profiled in this project show that Black, inner-city young men from low-income families are not easily typecast. Cultural categories that sociologists often use to sort these young men and explain their behavior—like Anderson's "decent" and "street," or Morris's "gangstas," "ballers," and "clowns"—have limited predictive power when applied to the lives of this study's participants (Anderson 1999; Morris 2012). Concepts like "decent" and street" are best understood as ideal types that demarcate a spectrum of possible attitudes and behaviors, not as rigid categories that define people. Anderson, for example, emphasizes that young people often "code switch" between these styles, trying on different personas and seeing what works in different contexts. Still, in literature about adolescent culture among marginalized young people of color in the United States, there is a strong expectation that identification with "non-dominant" cultural styles tracks closely with disengagement or defiance at school, diminished academic achievement, and deflated life ambition.[21] The lives of this study's participants suggest a more complicated story.

For example, although Dorian could be a class clown, his jokes and asides did not stem from indifference. Morris suggests that class clowning is a form of "contrived carelessness"—a way for young men to avoid seeming too invested in their schoolwork, and to thus avoid being perceived as emasculated and lame (2012: 124). But Dorian's classmates and teachers recognized him as someone with strong interests and drive. Dorian, a young man who openly expressed that he was "really passionate" about his senior project, who

threw himself wholeheartedly into art and photography, and who organized a bootleg field trip to NASA when he felt he was not learning enough in school, was anything but aloof.

For participants, street smarts, identification with "non-dominant" culture, belief in the importance of education, academic effort, academic achievement, school behavior, and social esteem did not track as neatly as sociological scholarship would lead one to believe. Casey, a self-described "suburbs kid" who did not identify as very "street," was nevertheless not particularly well behaved at school, frequently chatting with classmates or spacing out when he was supposed to be working. By contrast, arguably the two of the most "street" participants in this study, Paul and Vincent, were also among the most compliant and best-behaved students at their school. Vincent even won Strive's highest honor, an award for outstanding character, based on his behavior. Behavior, in turn, did not always track with academic achievement. Vincent's grades were not very good. Neither were A.J.'s, even though he was by far the least street-savvy of the participants, was very well behaved at school, and worked hard. And coolness did not track very well with anything. A.J. was not very cool. But neither was Kenya, who could be very "street," sometimes openly defied teachers, and was often either aloof or asleep in class. Juan was a cool, street savvy, mischievous student who dated a beautiful, popular cheerleader. He also exerted the most academic effort of any participant in the study, scoring the highest grades and participating in class with an eagerness that seemed to course through his body. The closer we examine the real lives of young people, the harder they become to put in neat analytical boxes.

JUAN

After a 6:45 AM bus ride, a cafeteria breakfast spent comparing gold earrings with Kenya, AP test prep in Ms. Stuart's class, a game of basketball with Parth in gym, revisions

to a research paper about Louisiana youth curfew laws in Mr. Katz's class, a free period running errands for Ms. Stuart, a lunchtime spent dreaming up a summer canoe trip, a lecture titled "Art as Technology: Painting as Verisimilitude" designed to give students a taste of college instruction, a discussion of Richard Wright's *Native Son* in Mr. Braun's class, a lesson on algebraic manipulations of natural logarithms in Ms. Astor's class, a dismissal period spent surreptitiously stealing bags of chips from a senior class fundraising table, an afternoon bus ride trading good-natured barbs with his younger brother, a quick change of clothes, and a four-hour shift bagging Cheesy Gorditas and Doritos Locos Tacos at Taco Bell, Juan arrived home just before 10 PM. The humid night air in the Lower 9th Ward smelled faintly of sulfur—fumes from a downriver petrochemical plant. A dog barked in the distance, and an overhead sodium streetlight buzzed, bathing the street in orange light. Juan stood uncharacteristically still and closed his eyes. A sinewy, alert seventeen-year-old with long dreads, Juan often appeared tense. Now his shoulders slumped. It was the day's first moment of peace, and it did not last long. Fishing keys out of his pocket, Juan unbolted the security door. "Daaaadyyyy!" a young voice squealed from inside. "Daaaadyyyy!"

"What's up Benny?" Juan asked as he entered the den, scooping his son up in a hug. "I missed you." The two headed back to their shared room. This evening, like most evenings, would be a mix of distracted homework, toddler bedtime, and PlayStation *Grand Theft Auto*.

Juan was fifteen when he found out he would be a father. The news terrified him. "I was thinking about just doing stupid stuff so that I would go to jail or something," he said. "I wanted to escape from everything."

Instead, Juan stayed in school, got his job at Taco Bell, and devoted himself to raising his son. Sometimes, at night, the two played for hours, exhausting themselves and

leaving a mess of toys across the floor. "I still be in touch with my inner kid," Juan explained. Juan also patiently embraced the daily grind of parenthood. He changed diapers. He sang along to the "Elmo Song" on repeat. He calmed tantrums, like the time Buckey jammed his thumb in a toy drawer right before naptime.

"You want me to kiss it?" Juan asked, as Benny nodded between sobs. Juan bent down and kissed Benny's thumb.

"Thank you, Squirt," Benny said, sniffling. At home, everyone called Juan "Squirt," a nickname he'd had since he was a baby. "Benny" was a nickname too. People only called Benny by his given name, Marquis, at daycare.

"You're welcome," Juan said. "See Benny?" he said, cracking a smile. "Everyone here is happy, and you're all emotional. C'mon, let's count them sheep."

Juan felt especially proud to be showing up for his son because he knew what it was like to go without parents. His father Terrance had never been a part of his life. His mother Tori was devoted to Juan and her younger son Kendric, but she had not always been around either.

Tori was a skinny woman with striking features and a powerful baritone voice. After surviving a childhood of neglect, she had left home at sixteen. "I always had a hustle," she said. She would steal cash from her employers, forge paychecks, or sell fraudulently refilled food stamp cards. She was in and out of prison. "People used to always say, 'Oh, you too pretty to be going back and forth to jail,'" she remembered. "Pretty ain't got shit to do with it. It's about the hurt that I had inside me." To stay a step ahead of authorities, she adopted a series of aliases and kept fake IDs.

Tori was 21 when she had Juan. "I loved him to death, and I did everything I could for him *material* wise," Tori remembered. "I was trying to fill in what my mama didn't do for

me. But I wasn't there so much emotionally. I was steady going to the clubs Monday through Sunday."

Before Juan could walk, Tori went back in jail. During a court appearance, she met the man who would become Kendric's father. He was kind, with a gentle bearing that smoothed her sharp edges. The two began exchanging letters. They were together for a time after their release, and Tori got pregnant. But when Tori realized that her partner was addicted to heroin, the relationship fell apart. Tori caught new charges, doubling down on her life on the run to avoid giving birth in jail.[22]

Juan was three and Kendric was one when Tori was arrested again. She agreed to a plea deal that would allow her to avoid a prison sentence in exchange for repaying money she had stolen, but she had a different plan. Without telling anyone where she was going, Tori drove through the night with her children to Michigan, where her sister lived. She started over entirely. "It was a new me," she said. "Only thing anyone knew about me is what I allowed them to know about me."

The family lived in Michigan without incident for two years. Then, one afternoon, Tori was arrested after a routine traffic stop. She spent the next three years in prison. Juan and Kendric moved in with their aunt. Juan remembered his time in Michigan as a succession of grey days and snowstorms. After his mother's incarceration, he began to act out in school. Eventually, he was sent back to New Orleans, where he lived first with his maternal grandmother and then with his paternal grandparents.

In fourth grade, Juan enrolled at McDonogh 42, where he met Dorian. Then, as now, Juan could toggle on a dime between sly mischief and disciplined community-mindedness. Juan was a protagonist in the apple food fight that he and Dorian would still joke about as high school seniors. But he also craved order, belonging, and control—desires

80

that often outweighed his anarchic streak. Despite his mother's arrests and incarceration, Juan told anyone who asked that he wanted to be a detective or an FBI agent.

One autumn, Juan caught sight of the Southern University band in a Thanksgiving parade. He was awestruck at the sight of 200 well-drilled musicians marching and swinging in lockstep, producing music that was deafening but precise. He followed them for blocks. "It was like one sound," he said. "You can let everything out through your instrument. You don't have to say any words. I liked that." He joined the marching band at McDonogh 42, learning the saxophone.

During those years, Juan developed a reputation for selfless dependability. One afternoon, he and Dorian were walking down St. Bernard Avenue when their classmate Alexis fell down in the middle of the street. Dorian watched, slack jawed, as a city bus sped toward her. Juan sprang into action, sprinting into the street and pulling Alexis to safety in the nick of time. Dorian was not surprised; this was just the type of thing Juan would do.

Juan could also be stubbornly principled. In 9th grade, he enrolled at Aspire High School, a "no excuses" charter school. Juan liked Aspire, describing it as rigorous and orderly. But during the spring semester, his white English teacher assigned a novel that rubbed Juan the wrong way. Years later, Juan would not remember the name of the novel, but he would remember a scene in which a white character degraded a Black character, telling him to bend over and then kicking him in the butt. The book was Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, a novel about racial discrimination and labor politics in a gritty unnamed city evocative of midcentury New York. Whitehead is Black, and the book's depictions of racism and frequent use of hateful and anachronistic language are part of Whitehead's social commentary. Still, reading page after page of this content made Juan see red, and Juan's teacher did little to change Juan's mind. "I was telling him I had a problem

with the book," Juan said. "I thought it was racist. He wasn't listening to me. He was saying that I have to read different literatures." Juan's teacher, perhaps overworked and frustrated, and perhaps not realizing the sincerity of Juan's objections, pushed for compliance rather than for understanding. What followed was a power struggle strangely evocative of the novel, with its headstrong characters from different worlds who cannot see eye to eye. Day after day, Juan refused to read the book, and day after day, Juan's teacher gave him demerits. "If you get too many demerits, they make you fail for that school year," Juan said. "So before they could fail me, I just hurried up and left. Because I wasn't going to read the book."

Juan reunited with Dorian at John McDonogh, the dysfunctional high school with the reality TV show. "John Mac" was the only high school with space to take him. Juan found the instruction at the school dispiriting, but he fell in love with the marching band, where he switched from saxophone to trumpet. The band was ragtag but committed. "Everybody was close, because we was against everybody else. Like, everybody looking at us wrong," Juan said. "I like being the underdog." In Juan's sophomore year, the band won the 1st place trophy at the Krewe of Nyx Mardi Gras parade. Two months later, the state closed John McDonogh forever.

Amidst this instability, Juan held firm to his goal of one day joining the Southern University Marching Band. "It's been my dream ever since I first saw them," he said. He spent hours watching their videos, and he looked forward to any time they marched in New Orleans. "I wanna be right there," he thought, whenever he saw their trumpet section high step by in a parade. His new school, Strive Prep, did not have a marching band, but Juan arranged to march instead with a nearby high school, determined to keep his musical plans on track.

Settling in at Strive Prep proved as hard for Juan as it had been for Dorian. "I was used to being able to do whatever I wanted at John Mac with basically no consequences," Juan said. "When I came to Strive, it was just a clash. They had rules, and I had to follow them." Like Dorian, Juan spent lots of time in detention.

Time at Strive Prep also proved hard for Juan because he found himself keeping a deep secret. When his mother Tori was released from prison, Juan had not returned to her custody right away. As Tori began to rebuild her life—getting a diagnosis of bipolar disorder that helped her receive disability payments, securing a Section 8 housing voucher, and starting a relationship with an even-keeled man a decade her senior named Jordan—Juan had stayed with his paternal grandparents. Tori kept an immaculately clean house, and there was always plenty of food to eat, but Juan had the strong impression that his mother did not really care about him. There was also the problem of Jordana, Jordan's teenage daughter, who had moved in along with her dad. In studio portraits, Jordan and Tori flank their children: Kendric, Jordana, and Juan lined up together, a picture-perfect blended family. Tiny Juan grins at the camera; you can see where he got his nickname "Squirt." It was around the time of these photos, when Juan was eleven years old, that fifteen-year-old Jordana first had sex with him. "I liked how it felt, so I didn't resist it," Juan said years later. "But it also wasn't really something I wanted to be doing. I wasn't thinking about sex yet in my life. Like, I was still watching WWE wrestling on TV." After that first time, Juan was even more determined to stay away from his mother's home. "Every time I would go visit, Jordana would try to have sex with me," Juan explained. "I just stayed away." It was only when Juan was 14 that he moved back in with his mother, who had used her legal custody rights to insist he return home. Within the year, 19-year-old Jordana got pregnant.

Tori saw Jordana's pregnancy as a case of adolescent selfishness and risk-taking. No one uttered the words "abuse" or "rape." Even after Tori found out that the sexual contact between her stepdaughter and her son started when Juan was eleven, Tori stuck to this interpretation. "It was consensual," she said. "It was both of y'all experimenting. Both of y'all being stupid." Jordan agreed. "That's their mistake," he told Tori. "They're gonna have to fix it."

Juan lied to anyone who asked about how he met his son's mother. "She was going to school around the corner from where I used to stay at," Juan told me when I first interviewed him during the fall semester of his senior year. No one in the family wanted to see Jordana charged with statutory rape. As long as nobody got too close, no one else would have to know. Authorities did not find out because Juan's name was not on Benny's birth certificate. Officially, Benny was Jordana's child and no one else's.

When Benny was born, Juan not only started working, he also transformed himself academically, becoming a serious, committed student. "In everything I was doing, I had to think about how it wasn't just for me anymore," he said. He did not begrudge the extra work, believing that it was squarely his responsibility.

As his grades improved, his innate curiosity often took over. When he raised his hand in class, eagerness coursed visibly trough his body, and he would bite his lower lip with impatience. "He's really curious and driven," said his math teacher, Ms. Astor. "He's always willing to take a risk, push himself, and try to master whatever we're learning."

Juan's new identity as a father also sharpened his sense of injustice. "I didn't even see my daddy until I was 12," Juan said. "I try to be a good dad so that I can prove to my dad that I'm better than him." When Juan's father called him after a long stretch without contact, Juan blocked his number. "I've got forgiving problems," he said.

Juan also saw injustice in the ways society still treated him as a child. Under New Orleans curfew law, youths under 17 years old were not allowed to be outside unaccompanied by an adult after 8 pm on school nights and 11 pm on weekends. There was talk of expanding the law to apply to anyone under 18. Young people broke the curfew frequently, and many affluent white teenagers in the city were not even aware of it because it was rarely enforced on them. But the law gave police total discretion to detain unaccompanied teenagers at night for "strolling" or "loitering." In practice, they most often targeted young Black men who were committing no other crime. Young people like Juan who worked at night were allowed to commute home, provided they did so "without any detour or stop." A coalition started by New Orleans public defenders had organized to fight the proposed expansion of the curfew law. After connecting with the coalition as part of his Capstone project in Mr. Katz's class, Juan became its youth spokesperson.[23]

"The city council and the mayor should have more faith in young people like me," he said one morning from a podium at a 400-person rally on the steps of City Hall. "I am old enough to have a son. I am old enough to work at night to support him. It makes no sense that the city would tell me I am not old enough to be outside after dark. Expanding the curfew would make it illegal for me to do anything outside when I get off of work each night. I couldn't stop to make a phone call. I couldn't sit on a park bench. I couldn't go to the store. I think I have proved that I'm a trustworthy citizen. Please treat me like one." The next day, Juan's neighbors waited outside to tell him that they were proud of him. They had seen his speech on the evening news.

Juan felt the burden of his age most of all when he began struggling to gain legal rights to see his son. Jordana started trying to take Benny away during Juan's senior year of high school. First, she talked about moving to California, but nothing came of it. Then she

moved to an apartment off the I-10 Service Road in New Orleans East. "It's where people deal drugs and stuff," Juan said. "I don't like it." Jordana continued to co-parent with Juan, dropping Benny off at the house and sometimes spending time there herself. But she did not have to. Because Juan's name was not on Benny's birth certificate, Jordana could take him whenever she wanted.

Things got worse for everyone after Jordana was arrested for shoplifting at her job. Benny stayed with Juan and his grandparents while Jordana was in jail. Then, after Jordana's release, Juan and Tori tried to keep Benny. Jordana was understandably furious. She called the New Orleans Police Department to accuse Juan and Tori of kidnapping, showing up at the house with several officers. As the police pieced together the web of family relationships, Jordana grew upset. Eventually, under questioning, Jordana pointed at Juan and blurted out, "I been fucking him since he was 11 years old." Instead of leaving with Benny, Jordana left in handcuffs.

The rape charges against Jordana, ironically, made it harder for Juan to see Benny. Juan took a DNA test and began the process of claiming paternity, but it would take time. Meanwhile, Jordana was released from jail, and she retained custody of Benny. Jordana had been out of work since her shoplifting charge, and she lost her apartment in the East. She also could not return home to her father and Tori because the court had placed her under a restraining order to stay away from Juan. Between the eviction and the restraining order, Jordana found herself homeless. She left to stay with an aunt in North Louisiana, taking Benny with her.

The day after Jordana left, Juan dropped by his mother's job, a pet grooming service that paid Tori off the books. Tori had bad news: Jordana's aunt was taking her to apply for welfare and food stamps, which Tori incorrectly believed would saddle Juan with child

support debt as soon as his paternity was established.[24] Tori made phone call after phone call to try to stop it. "Name your price," she said to Jordana's mother. To Jordana, she said: "Don't let them haul you to no damn welfare office." Then, with Jordana's aunt, Tori went off. "I'll get inside that court and run that custody with your baby, and then I'll fuck around and put *her* on child support," Tori shouted. She put the phone on speaker and set it on a counter, standing over it to yell properly at the receiver. "You are playing with my child, so you know I'm going head first. If I have to, I will bat the piss out of you."

The store's owner grinned as she listened to the tirade. "That's my Tori," she beamed.

Juan, mortified, sat on a stack of 25-pound bags of puppy feed, staring straight ahead. He had learned long ago that his mother's bouts of anger were best endured quietly. "That lady crazy," he muttered.

With graduation nearing, Juan could not wait to have the world take him seriously. He was ready to be done with this custody battle. He was ready to turn eighteen. He was ready to say goodbye to Strive Prep and enroll in college, where professors would treat him like the adult he already knew he was. Southern University would remain a dream—there was no way he could attend college away from New Orleans and take care of Benny at the same time. Instead, he would stay at home, continue to work, and enroll at the University of New Orleans. The change could not come soon enough. "I already had to grow up too fast," he said. "I might as well grow up the rest of the way."

PAUL

Bright morning light streamed through curtainless windows, and Paul stirred awake, wiping sleep from his eyes and surveying the room. *His* room. After nearly two years of

homelessness, having a place of his own felt surreal. The space was bare, furnished with only a perpetually unfurled sleeper couch and an air mattress. Cracks ran up the white plaster walls, and a slipshod layer of beige paint covered intricate woodwork on the doors and doorframes. Paul kept his clothes in a trash bag under the fold-out bed. Next to Paul, Adonis stirred, and Shadrach groaned from the air mattress as a phone alarm blared.

Adonis and Shadrach were Paul's friends. They were staying with Paul because they had nowhere else to go. Up until a few months ago, this had been Paul's life too: bouncing between the apartments of friends and lovers, sleeping on floors and couches, giving vague answers if teachers asked where he was staying or why he kept switching school busses.

With seven people sharing a three-room apartment, there was not much privacy. Paul's sister Britt, her boyfriend Bodie, Britt's five-year-old daughter Brandi, and her eighteen-month-old son Max slept all together on a mattress on the floor of the front room. At sunrise, Britt and Brandi would pad around broken crayons and cigar wrappers on the creaky wooden floors, through the room where Paul and the others still dozed, past the mostly empty refrigerator in the kitchen, and into the bathroom to do Brandi's hair and change her into her school uniform. Adonis, the only person in the household with a car, lived out of his trunk, where he kept neatly folded clothes, a towel, laundry detergent, and schoolwork. Sometimes, he would change outside, indifferent to the morning traffic speeding by.

Many aspects of Paul's life were claustrophobic: the tight living quarters, the strictures and rules at school, the stifling monotony at his Quizno's sandwich shop job, the constant lack of money, the ever-present low-grade fear of violence in his neighborhood. Driving with friends—even as a passenger—could feel like an escape. This morning, Paul, Shadrach, and Adonis climbed wordlessly into Adonis's car. Adonis and Paul kept the two

front seats slid all the way back and partially reclined. Pulling into the morning rush hour, Adonis wove through the snarled traffic, racing yellow lights and flooring the accelerator. Paul picked the music. As the car climbed the ramp for the elevated freeway, blue sky filled the windshield, and there was a moment of weightlessness as they sped over the crest. Paul turned up the volume as high as it would go.

The lyrics that pulsed through the car described a life the young men knew well. *Have you ever been dead broke? No money in your pocket. New kicks* [shoes] *coming out and you can't even cop it* [buy them]. *Child need Pampers, you can't even buy it. Grams need rent money, you ain't even got it.* Adonis, unbuckled, danced in his seat as he accelerated past 80 miles an hour. Paul reached a skinny arm under his knit cap to twist at his hair. The rapper, BMG Youngboy, was from New Orleans, and he was only a few years older than the young men. His song was uncannily biographical for Paul. *Moms having spine surgery, pops a paraplegic. I'm popping all these trains* [Tramadol]*, man, I might just catch a seizure.* When Paul's parents were alive, his mother struggled with neurologic symptoms from drug addiction and from concussions suffered during beatings. His father spent his final months as a bedridden amputee. And part of why Paul stayed so skinny was his Tramadol habit, which stunted his appetite.[25] *But I gotta eat this pain and get my mind right.* Paul nodded hypnotically along. *No time to waste time. I gotta chase mine.*

After a gas station stop to buy a 99-cent two-pack of Game Silver cigarillos, the young men pulled into a nearby parking lot and began rolling. Paul cut a line down one of the gars with his thumbnail, which he kept long and sharp for the purpose. He dumped the shredded tobacco in a styrofoam cup, licked one long end of the tobacco leaf wrapper, and laid it on the center console. Adonis, having fished a prescription bottle filled with marijuana out of a stash beneath the car's steering column, crumbled a few buds into the wrapper. Shadrach, looking a bit more awake, pulled out an unfinished science homework worksheet.

For fifteen minutes, the young men passed one gar, then another, as the car filled with smoke. Shadrach wrote answers on his worksheet between puffs. Then, with just minutes to go, Adonis rolled down the windows, blasted the AC, sprayed a few spritzes of air freshener, and peeled the car off across the street. As Adonis parked once again, Paul tucked in his red Strive uniform shirt, a color reserved for students on the honor roll. The young men grabbed their backpacks. It was time for first period.

Paul's teachers knew he lived a hard life, but they were fuzzy on the details. Ms. Corbin had heard that Paul was in a gang, which he was not. She had not heard that Paul's parents were dead. Ms. Becker mostly knew Paul as a respectful-but-withdrawn student. Mr. Braun saw Paul as a capable reader who lacked motivation. Ms. Astor believed Paul needed to find a passion that would help him break through his baseline apathy. She summed up the sentiments of his teachers when she said, "I'm pretty worried about him."

Paul's teachers knew little about him because he gave little away. The school culture at Strive stressed quiet compliance, and that was just fine with Paul. He did what was asked of him and no more. That morning, Paul sat quietly in each of his classes, completing his work and avoiding notice. Bigger personalities like Dorian wore their hearts on their sleeves, but Paul saw expressing emotion as a luxury reserved for people with lives easier than his. Once, Paul confided that he was jealous of Dorian because Dorian was able to cry. "I be wanting to drop a tear sometimes," Paul said, "but it never come out."

Paul's childhood had turned him into a quiet survivor. Like Dorian, Paul grew up in public housing. Unlike Dorian, Paul did not remember his childhood as idyllic. He did not talk much about it, but his sister Britt described those years in the Calliope Projects vividly. "Everything was pretty chaotic," Britt remembered. Their mother's crack addiction dominated daily life. "Our regular living was pretty hard," Britt said. "There were times when

we were hungry. Our mother sold pretty much everything that we had. From TVs to crayons to underwear."

Britt was four years older than Paul. Growing up, she often found herself in charge of him and their middle brother, Evan, who was severely disabled. Britt bore this responsibility even though she was not the oldest. Older half-siblings—Patricia, Tyler, and Damien—were in and out of the apartment. Kiara, her older full sister, lived with their maternal grandparents. So, Britt remembered, "It was just me, Evan, and Paul. The three amigos."

Britt and Paul had to savor the tiny slivers of childhood that life offered them. "We got to go out in the little courtway [lawn between buildings] sometimes when my mom wasn't strung out," Britt said. Mostly, though, their mother kept them inside. They looked forward to visits with their father, a larger-than-life restauranteur in his late 60s who had 21 children. He would buy them clothes and candy. At his house, there was usually enough to eat.

Paul was in early grade school when Katrina hit. Paul remembers watching as floodwaters lapped the screened window of his mother's second-story apartment. Eventually, the family took refuge with upstairs neighbors. "They shared whatever food they had with us," Britt recalled, "even though it wasn't much." Paul's brother Damien, tired of waiting in the sweltering heat, floated off on a door. The others stayed behind. After days, Paul and his family were able to catch a boat to higher ground. Scenes from that ride seared themselves into Britt's memory: people struggling through the water; a corpse; a dog tied to a post, abandoned by its owners, howling and lunging in vain against its leash. They made it to the Superdome, the citywide evacuation point, where another wait began. "We stayed outside of the Superdome because of what was going on the inside," Britt said. "People

getting killed and raped and stuff. So our mom was like, 'Oh no. Stay in this little circle. You gotta pee? You'd better pee in this circle.'"

When busses finally arrived for the 30,000 evacuees, the lines were two days long. Paul, Britt, Evan, and their mother sat on army cots in their imaginary circle as people clambered and crowded toward the busses. There was no telling where a bus might take you. Perhaps to a shelter in Alexandria, Louisiana. Perhaps to the airport, and then onto a charter plane bound for Raleigh. When you boarded a bus, no one would tell you where you where it was headed. The bus that eventually picked up Paul and his family took them to Sherman, Texas.

Paul thrived in Texas. He came out of his shell. "That was a whole different Paul," Britt remembered. Paul loved school so much that he would sob if his mother ever tried to keep him home. He would go to sleepovers at his best friend Gavin's house, where Gavin's mother would dote on him. He also started playing sports. After a few years, he joined a running club and excelled.

For a time, home life in Texas was better too. "My mom didn't find the drugs that she was into, so she did really start paying attention a little more to us," Britt remembered. "But then she switched to alcohol." Sometimes their mother beat them. Often, there was not enough food. And increasingly, their mother would not let Paul out of the house. "I knew how to box, run track, all that. Play football. Play sports. But she wouldn't let me," Paul remembered.

One summer, their father drove out to Texas in his white truck and brought Paul and Britt back to New Orleans. Paul loved his father's house, where he had his own bedroom, and where he could hide out and play for hours in the attic. Paul's older nieces and nephews would come by the house and tease him affectionately. Paul was hooked. "After

that summer, I never wanted to go back," he said. Paul did return to Texas, but he continued to stay with his father during the summers.

Then, as he entered seventh grade, Paul moved in permanently with his father. Britt moved back to New Orleans soon thereafter, pregnant with her first daughter. "The schooling and the neighborhood environment was bad," Britt said of her life back in New Orleans. "But the home was way better. My dad took care of us well. We was spoiled rotten." It did not take much for Britt to feel spoiled. Their father had a strong temper, and he occasionally beat them, but at least he consistently provided. "He took care of us," Britt said. "We weren't hungry. We had clothes. We had shoes."

When Paul showed up at Strive Prep as a ninth grader, he was short, skinny, and shy. Classmates could not help but speculate about his home life. "Man, that dude used to be so tiny," his classmate Vincent remembered. "We used to call him 'Little P.'" Sometimes, Vincent said, it looked as if Paul had been crying. "He would come to school with black eyes and stuff like that," Vincent said. Paul was a quiet, obedient student. As he remembers it, he did not serve a single detention his ninth-grade year.

But although he was small, Paul was not afraid to go out in the streets. Paul's neighborhood, Hollygrove, used to be a tightknit working-class Black community where neighbors would keep an eye on one another's kids as they played in the street. But it had been on the decline for decades, and by the time Paul moved there, it was, in his words, "the hood." Paul took enthusiastic part in a neighborhood Christian basketball camp, where he met his friends Rasha and Jay. The rest of the time, he got up to trouble. He started selling drugs: marijuana at first, then crack and pills. He also started carrying a gun. "It's two different worlds inside of school and outside of school," Paul said. "Outside of school, I'm a whole different person."

As their father's health declined, Paul and Britt found themselves quarreling with him more and more. Paul eventually had to move out to avoid the beatings. "Daddy and him was getting into it [fighting] so much that daddy was like, 'I don't wanna whup you,'" Britt said. Even though he was in his seventies, Paul's father could still physically dominate his rail-thin teenage son. "Our daddy was heavy-handed. And he wasn't no small, petite man," Britt remembered. For a time, Paul stayed with his stepmother. Then he started drifting between friends' houses. Before long, Britt moved out too.

After Britt and Paul left Texas, things continued to deteriorate at their mother's house. Eventually, their mother and their disabled brother Evan were both hospitalized with malnutrition. "They was barely eating," Paul said. Child Protective Services placed Evan with a Texas foster family. Their mother ended up in an assisted living facility in New Orleans, where she was bedridden with early-onset dementia. She died as Paul began his junior year.

Next, Paul's father took a turn for the worse. His feet became swollen from diabetes, and his leg was amputated. "Neither one of us was really around at the time to give him his medicine," Britt said. "Maybe it wouldn't have happened if we'd been there." Britt and Paul moved back home to try to take care of their father after his discharge. They were quickly overwhelmed. "He done pottied on himself," Britt remembered. "Me and Paul, Paul's holding his body, I'm wiping him down. And next thing I know, like two hours later, he's shaking." He went back to the hospital. Then he was sent to stay with one of his older children in Atlanta. "They said me and Paul weren't fit to keep watch over him," Britt said. "But we were trying! We missed him. We loved him." He died shortly after arriving in Atlanta. "We never got to talk to him again," Britt said. "Our brother wasn't exactly that close to us. He didn't really care for us. Because we were outside children." Paul and Britt

felt shunned by their older siblings after that. Shut out of their father's affairs, they were not able to return to his house.

Paul spiraled after his father's death. He was living dangerously: selling crack in the 7th Ward, hanging out in abandoned houses, and running from the police. He also started to rob people. He and a friend would ride up to victims on bikes, stick guns in their faces, and take their cash. "I was getting buku [a lot of] money," Paul said. "I was doing that like every night." Paul knew that this was not the life he wanted. "It's just a matter of time before it catch up with you," He said. "I know it be a dead end."

Paul's glimpse of a better path came the summer after his junior year. Through his adviser at Strive, he landed a job with a rebuilding nonprofit doing construction. He loved the work. It felt good to wake up early, gut rooms, pour concrete, meet teams of volunteers from around the country, and see tangible progress each day. He also loved that he got to work with his best friend: Kenya.

Kenya and Paul had been in the same advisory since ninth grade. Skeptical of one another at first, they got to know each other better when they started riding the same school bus. By tenth grade, they got along so well that their teachers gave them entirely different schedules, knowing they would talk nonstop if they were placed in the same classroom. When Paul was homeless, he spent weeks living with Kenya. Working the construction job together made for a perfect summer.

Now, with graduation nearing, Paul was looking forward to a brighter future. He did not feel defined by his robbing and drug dealing, and he knew he could excel in college if he put his mind to it. "I'm sort of a nerdy kid," he said. "It's just that I've got street smarts too."[26] He also felt more loved and supported than he had at any other time since his parents died. After second period that morning, Paul found Kenya in the hallway and put his arm

around him. In low tones, the two bantered and ribbed each other, sauntering off together to flirt with girls on the sophomore hallway. As Paul saw it, Kenya was his brother. "For family, it really is just me and Britt," he later reflected. "But then I got my partners [close friends], and they be like family too, ya heard me? They was my family when I didn't have no family."

VINCENT

Every day during third period, Vincent would head downstairs to volunteer in the classroom for students with severe disabilities. "Alright my dude!" he would greet Minh, a nonverbal, wheelchair-bound young man, who would smile back at the attention. "My man!" he would exclaim as he dapped off Corey, a dreadlocked teenager with Down syndrome. Vincent was eighteen, but he looked a decade older, with a lush beard, gold rings on his fingers, and a sharp buzz cut. He was not tall, but he carried himself with upright confidence. He could be intimidating, especially on the rare occasions when his face went blank with anger. Almost always, though, he put people at ease, spreading infectious positivity. His twinkling eyes let you know he was sincere.

Vincent paired his positivity with whirlwind energy. In the special education classroom, he was everywhere at once. Students in the class ran a coffee shop for teachers and staff, and Vincent loved pitching in, helping Corey tally bills from the cash box, or hustling to the nurse's office to restock the ice. As he worked, he would chat with the teachers about his post-graduation plans and provide a string of upbeat commentary for the students he was helping.

"At the end of the day, nobody don't wanna be disrespected," Vincent declared, summing up his life philosophy. "I'm respectful of everybody." No matter who you were—a

child, a disabled peer, the lowest-status student in the grade—Vincent would take you

seriously and engage with you on your terms. Vincent gave at least as much attention to staff

members like janitors and front desk attendants as he did to his teachers. "He's *so* genuine,"

gushed Ms. Tricia, a security guard. And Vincent lived by his mantra on the streets too,

where he paid as much respect to acquaintances who were "bummed out"—dirty and

unkempt in appearance—as he did to high-level drug dealers he had befriended.

Vincent wanted the respect he paid to be reciprocated.[27] Usually, it was. But it had

been a struggle at Strive. When Vincent arrived at the school in ninth grade, he had found it

to be a patronizing, deflating place. As he encountered the rules—the micromanaging, the

enforced blocks of silence, the taped lines in the hallways to ensure students walked in

straight lines—he thought, "You preparing me for jail, man." He found that the school's

mostly white, out-of-town teachers simply did not understand him and his peers. "A lot of

the shit that we did was unfamiliar to them." He said. "They'd be like, 'Don't do that.'" For

example, teachers had trouble telling whether students ribbing each other—a near-constant

patter between New Orleans teenagers—were having fun together or bullying one another.

"That's why they be like, 'You can't talk,'" Vincent surmised.[28]

Vincent *wanted* to act out. "There was a lotta shit that I didn't really agree with," he

said. But he knew it was a losing battle. "I'm not gonna put up the fight," he said to himself,

"because I'm not gonna win."

Instead, as his peers bucked against the system and landed in detention and in-

school-suspension, Vincent began building rapport with teachers. "School got easier to me

once I got an understanding with everybody," he said. "I just want my respect." Teachers

noticed and appreciated these efforts. "He is one of the kindest, most respectful people I

have ever met," Ms. Astor said. "He knows how to talk to people," Mr. Braun said, "and he

knows how to get the things he needs." Ms. Stuart agreed. "He's really good at building relationships," she said.

Vincent was not brownnosing. Even as he followed rules and showed deference to teachers, he let them know that they were dealing with an equal. Through dozens of cues—his upright posture, his unblinking confidence, his popularity with peers, his warm relationships with other adults who would likely have his back—he conveyed that there were limits to how far he would let himself be pushed. "I'm gonna respect you, but I'm still a young man," he said of his expectation of teachers. "I'm not a child. You're gonna respect me like a young man."[29]

Over time, Vincent had discovered how to use his relationships to short-circuit some of Strive's strict rules. In summer school after tenth grade, he got permission to leave a class early to make it on time to his summer job. As he remembered it, the administrator who gave him this permission, Ms. Adams, was impressed at how well he had laid out his case. "You're a respectful young man," Vincent remembered her telling him. Vincent was exhilarated. "I was like, 'Man, that's *cool*,'" he remembered.

When school started up again that fall, Vincent kept leaving early. He told himself he still had permission, although that was not true; his understanding with Ms. Adams had only applied to the summer. Teachers and administrators were so attuned to signs of defiance in students that they did not catch on that Vincent, upbeat and deferential as ever, was striding out of the school in plain sight. It was his Jedi mind trick. "I just rolled. Just rolled," Vincent recalled with a grin. "I could leave whenever I wanted." Vincent did not want to break the spell, so he did not speak up about other school practices he found patronizing. "That's why, at the end of the day, I couldn't really complain. I couldn't stand up and say, 'Man, you doing this [or that].' Because that'd fuck me up. It's gonna put attention on me."

98

Vincent had always been on the go. As a child growing up in the St. Bernard Projects, his nickname had been "Running Man," because he was always jumping off his front stoop and bolting off, eager to see a friend or greet a family member. The courtyards in the St. Bernard were teeming with children, and Vincent knew everyone. People said Vincent took after his dad—also named Vincent—who was full of energy just like his son. "He was always moving around doing something," the Vincent Jr. said of his father.

Vincent grew up surrounded by family. "My mother, my grandmother, cousins, uncles, aunts was always around," he said. "I came from a family that was used to having fun and being together. Like, every week we would throw a party. It didn't have to be nobody's birthday or nothing." Vincent's mother Pamela had been with Vincent Sr. for almost a decade when Vincent Jr. was born. During that time, Pamela's younger sisters had grown to love Vincent Sr. deeply. "He was another brother to us," one of them said. "That's right," another agreed. "When our own brothers wasn't there, he was there."

Vincent was five when his father was murdered. He did not talk much about it, but his older family members freely discussed how devastating the murder was for them. "That was traumatizing for all of us," his maternal aunt remembered. "He really was part of the family, more than just their dad or like my sister's husband." The rest of the family rallied to support Vincent and his older sister. Most weeks, the two children would visit their father's sister. At family gatherings, aunts and uncles smothered Vincent and his sister with affection and encouragement.

Several years later, Hurricane Katrina scattered the family. "The storm really broke everybody up," Vincent explained. At first, many of them moved to Baton Rouge, including Vincent, his mother, and his sister. But over time, the extended family spread out, with some

settling as far away as Texas. Vincent, his mother, and his sister returned to New Orleans, but it was a lonelier city than the one they had left.

It did not take long for Vincent, a fearless extrovert, to begin exploring his new neighborhood and meeting new people. "I walked everywhere," Vincent remembered. "My legs were strong." The family settled in a modest one-story bungalow off the interstate in New Orleans East. From there, Vincent would walk for miles to visit aunts and cousins who remained in the city. "I would always look for shortcuts," he said. "I got to know the East like the back of my hand." He discovered that many of the apartment complexes in the East were more fun than his own quiet neighborhood. The apartments had soothing, generic names like Walnut Square and The Willows. "Don't let the names fool you," Vincent said. "Those places are turnt up." By the time he was twelve, he was hanging out at his cousin's apartment, where he would invite girls over and sneak puffs of marijuana. It did not take long for Vincent to feel mostly grown up. "I looked like a grown man when I was thirteen," Vincent explained. "I had a beard. I had dreads." Soon, he was also spending time at other apartment complexes, where he met drug dealers, hung out with older women, witnessed drama, and thoroughly enjoyed himself. Naming one apartment complex near his house, he exclaimed: "That was the *spot!* I used to sneak back there. I wasn't supposed to be back there."

Vincent found his new life on the streets exhilarating, but he felt trapped and unsafe at his school, Schaumberg Elementary. Schaumberg, a K-8 school a few miles from Vincent's house, was chaotic and violent. Fights broke out frequently. Students sometimes snuck knives and guns into the school, using the back entrance to avoid metal detectors and hiding the weapons above bathroom ceiling tiles. As an eighth grader, after getting into a fight with a student who was newly released from juvenile detention, Vincent began carrying

a gun for protection. He did not take it into the building, but he kept it with him on his walk to school, stashing it in tall grass by an abandoned house a block from the campus.

When Vincent arrived at Strive as a ninth grader, he quietly chaffed at the rigid rules, but he also realized that he was now much safer. "That environment [at Schaumberg] required a particular kind of mentality," Vincent reflected. "You don't need that mentality at Strive. That was the biggest switch for me."

Vincent also began to use his free time differently in high school. He wanted to start earning money. "I love working," Vincent said. "But by me being so young, I could never get a job." A few men he knew from his neighborhood mowed lawns, and Vincent began helping them out, sweeping up grass clippings and helping carry mowers to and from trucks. From there, he went to work for his father's sister and her husband, who ran an auto body shop. That was the job Vincent left early for each day when he was in summer school. The next year, Vincent became a fry cook at his cousin's bar. He worked hard at each of these jobs, and he loved getting paychecks, but he always knew that the business owners were taking a much bigger cut. "He not going to hurt his business to make me rich," Vincent said. "When you realize that, you come to find out that the way to go is to pay yourself. That's the best way to go: be an entrepreneur."

By his senior year, Vincent had a clear idea of the businesses he would open: a lawn care company, a barbershop, and a funeral home. The lawn care business was already up and running. Vincent had several clients in his neighborhood, one of whom paid him $80 for each job. "I can mow a few lawns and already make the same as my paycheck," Vincent explained, excitedly. The barber shop and the funeral home would take more work, but Vincent knew that both ventures hinged on building relationships, his strong suit. Plus, he

liked that all three businesses had built-in demand. "Grass always grow. Hair always grow. And people always die," he said, his eyes twinkling above a wry smile.

Vincent pictured himself employing family members at each of his businesses, just the way his aunt and cousin had employed him. He liked the idea of being able to help family members who could not find work. Several years after Vincent's father's murder, his mother had remarried. Vincent's new stepfather had served time in prison, and Vincent still remembered his struggle to find employment. Vincent also had other family members in prison—an uncle, an older cousin—who would be in the same bind after their release. "I'm coming home next year," his cousin told him, "but I know I'm not going to be able to get no job." Vincent wanted to be able to step up. "[My cousin] tells me, 'I'm gonna need you. Try to keep your business going.' Like the grass cutting. He gonna need the help. And then I got little cousins who don't got no job experience…. So they gonna need my help [too]."

Vincent also saw entrepreneurship as a way to make his family proud. It was hard to miss that he was carrying two generations' worth of dreams on his shoulders. "We're just so proud of him, especially considering that he lost his daddy," his aunt said. "Despite the obstacles in his way, he's made it so far. And like we tell him, 'Just keep it up. We know you can do it. We know it. We know it's in him.'" Vincent found this faith and encouragement inspiring. But it was also a gnawing source of pressure.

On the afternoons when Vincent left school early, he headed off to his neighborhood to cut lawns. He did not think he was trading in his education for dead-end labor; he was just trying to squeeze the most potential out of each day. "I'm watching my GPA," he said. He still wanted to stay on a path to and through college: it was the only way he could earn his mortuary license. But experience taught him that he could keep up in

school while also building toward other goals. As he saw it, he was taking his first steps toward a lifetime of entrepreneurship. "I'm trying to get my shit all the way right," he said.

JAYDIN

One Thursday afternoon a few weeks before graduation, Jaydin invited me over to his house for a tutoring session. He had been meeting regularly with me like this for most of the spring semester, finding me in the hallway or texting me to arrange after-school or weekend meetups. We mostly worked on preparing for the ACT. Jaydin would sit at his kitchen table, or at a McDonald's booth, and puzzle over questions like this one, an excerpt from a passage about climbing Mount Fuji:

Every thousand feet, we came to a small station constructed of tin and cement, barely able to block the wind. At each one, we noted the roof <u>piled high on</u> fallen rocks and felt both unsettled and reassured by evidence of the station's protective ability.	a. NO CHANGE b. piling high with c. piled high with d. piling high on

Often, Jaydin struggled because of cultural bias baked into the questions. He had only ever seen mountains in photographs, for example, so he had a hard time conjuring the image of a cabin nestled against a slope so steep that rocks would fall on its roof.[30]

Jaydin was good friends with Dorian, who lived a few blocks away. Dorian would sometimes join for tutoring, bantering with Jaydin as the two took breaks between sections. "You gonna support anything I do in life?" Jaydin asked Dorian one time with feigned earnestness.

"Yeah," Dorian replied.

"I wanna be a NASCAR driver," Jaydin said, keeping a straight face as Dorian cracked up.

A tall, muscular young man with dark eyebrows that accentuated his narrow hazel eyes, Jaydin was handsome but shy. He was also a homebody, usually content spending time with his mom and younger brothers. Dorian was always trying to coax Jaydin out of his house, asking him to come skateboarding or head downtown. Usually, Jaydin declined. "Jaydin an inside child," Dorian would say with faux contempt, hoping to get a rise out of his friend. Jaydin would just shrug.

After the ACT was over, Jaydin began asking me to help with his Capstone project. On this particular Thursday afternoon, Jaydin and I arrived at his house after school to find a glum scene. The blinds were drawn in the living room, laundry was piled up on a couch, and the scent of marijuana wafted from the back of the house. Jaydin's mother Bernadette greeted us. "You heard anything about that job?" she asked her son. Jaydin had not. Bernadette, a short, pretty woman with wavy hair she kept parted down the middle, looked exhausted. "Everything changed since Katrina," she said. "There are no jobs with the schools anymore."

For years, Bernadette and her three boys had experienced a slow downward slide out of the middle class. Before the storm, Bernadette had a well-paying administrative job at the Orleans Parish School Board, where she oversaw federal grants and trained employees in budgeting. With the firing of 7,000 teachers and administrators after the storm, jobs in the schools dried up (Perry 2017). Still, the family remained financially comfortable: Bernadette's husband Steve took home $1,000 a week as a welder. After a time in Texas, the family managed to return to New Orleans, buying and rebuilding a flooded-out ranch house in New Orleans East. Bernadette found a position with the Department of Children and Family Services, where she helped families apply for Medicaid and welfare benefits. Unlike her old job with the schools, this new job paid only $10.50 an hour. "Steve told me that

104

money was play money," Bernadette remembered. "We could use it to buy the kids a game or go out to eat. But we didn't pay bills with my money."

Then Steve lost his job. One evening, distraught, Steve locked himself in the bedroom. Bernadette was afraid he might try to hurt himself. She called the police. Officers arrived, one of them carrying an AK-47 assault rifle.[31] Bernadette met them at the door. "What are the guns for?" she remembered asking them. "My husband needs help, but he doesn't need this." Jaydin and his younger brothers sat in the back of a squad car as the officers burst through their parents' bedroom door. Moments later, they heard the shots ring out. Steve had been lying in bed holding a knife. When he refused to drop it, the officers shot him. At least the children were spared the sight of it, Bernadette thought. "You should have seen the amount of blood," she said.

When Steve died, it was the second time Jaydin lost a dad. Jaydin's biological father Terrance was shot and killed in a robbery when Jaydin was four. Terrance had been an involved father who doted on Jaydin. When he was killed, Bernadette told Jaydin what happened. "I didn't think that at four, he would really understand what that meant," Bernadette said. "But he totally did. His knees just buckled."

Years later, Jaydin took Steve's death hard too. "Steve treated Jaydin as his son from the day we met," Bernadette said. Jaydin called Steve "Dad." He wrote a poem to read at Steve's funeral.

After Steve's death, Bernadette took the kids and moved in with her mother for a month. When they returned home, the trauma was still raw. At night, Bernadette would try to fall asleep in the bedroom where her husband had been killed. The kids are what kept her from giving up. Every day, she willed herself to get them ready for school and then head to work at the welfare office. She also pursued a lawsuit against the New Orleans Police

Department. Financial restitution would help the family make up for losing its primary breadwinner, but more than anything, Bernadette wanted someone in power to acknowledge that what had happened to her husband was wrong.

Bernadette lost the case, and soon afterward lost her job at the welfare office. Try as she might, she could not find another job with the city or the state. She wondered if she had been blackballed from public-sector employment for going after the police. Eventually, she found a job with an insurance company. Still, she was barely making ends meet. Income from Bernadette's new boyfriend Mike was the only reason the family avoided foreclosure.

Around the house, Bernadette and the boys seemed to simply tolerate Mike. Jaydin's younger brother Jason put up a big fight when Mike moved in. None of the boys called Mike "Dad." Bernadette, for her part, resented that Mike sometimes read her journals. But as Bernadette explained to her sons, there was no other choice. "Mike helps us a lot," she told them. "I need the help right now." Mike's income had become even more critical in February of Jaydin's senior year when Jaydin had major leg surgery to heal a basketball injury. Jaydin needed round-the-clock care for several weeks, and seeing no other good option, Bernadette quit her job to take care of her son.[32] Jaydin had recovered well, but Bernadette struggled afterward to find another job. Instead of getting to go back to work for the welfare office, Bernadette applied for welfare herself.

Bernadette felt like she was hanging on by a thread, but she reassured herself that her boys were still getting to lead the life she wanted for them. In their quiet corner of New Orleans East, Jaydin and his brothers could play basketball out on the street, waving as the neighborhood association security guard drove past.[33] Dorian, who lived less than a mile away, would often come over to skateboard with Jaydin or sit out trash talking with him on the front patio. On warm evenings, Bernadette would set out a bucket of chilled water

bottles for the boys and their friends, standing back and smiling as they gulped them down. She made sure there was always enough for them to eat, cooking hearty dinners of shrimp pasta or hot sausage sandwiches. The boys enjoyed her food just as much whether she paid for it with a paycheck or food stamps.

Jaydin also seemed to be thriving in school. No one ever called home to complain about Jaydin's behavior; he had been respectful of teachers his whole life. He studied hard for the ACT, and he had good enough grades to make it into a four-year state college. Even as his senior year wound down, Jaydin seemed interested in his schoolwork. And in a few days, Jaydin would go to prom with a young woman who Bernadette liked a lot more than Jaydin's old girlfriend. Bernadette smiled as she saw that Jaydin, still splayed out on the chair where he had collapsed after school, was on a FaceTime call with this new young woman, Joelle.

Jaydin still had one more big school assignment on his plate. For his Capstone project, Jaydin had chosen to research discrimination against Muslim Americans. To supplement his reading on the topic, Jaydin was interviewing Muslims about their personal experiences with discrimination. This afternoon, he had scheduled a phone call with his mother's friend Malik, a man who had joined the Nation of Islam while serving a 10-year prison sentence.

Jaydin could be a shy interviewer, but he was keenly interested in what his participants had to say. A few weeks before, when he interviewed a science teacher at Strive named Ms. Yusuf, Jaydin at first shrunk into himself and struggled to make eye contact. "What does being Muslim mean to you?" he asked, haltingly. Ms. Yusuf began to describe how Islam brings her a sense of discipline and balance. Jaydin seemed to relax, listening

intently to Ms. Yusuf's answer. When it was time for a follow-up question, Jaydin did not need to look at his notes. "What do you get out of the religion?" he asked.

"I get a sense of spiritual balance," Ms. Yusuf replied. "Knowing that there's more than just me in this world, this life. There's a purpose. I'm not just on earth to make money and pass away. There's a bigger picture." Jaydin nodded along, his eyes gleaming with interest. When Jaydin asked about discrimination, Ms. Yusuf told him stories about verbal abuse hurled her way at bus stops, about feeling nervous at airport security, and about a growing sense of unease walking down the street. The whole time, Jaydin listened transfixed.

Teachers who knew Jaydin well were not surprised that his project on Islam had captured his attention. "He's so curious," his advisor Coach Sanchez said. Once, Coach Sanchez mentioned being Jewish, and Jaydin perked up. "He wanted to know everything about Judaism," Coach Sanchez said. Jaydin asked if he could go with Coach Sanchez to Synagogue. Coach Sanchez, worried about the appearance of proselytizing at school, called Jaydin's mother to check in. "I don't want to overstep a boundary," he told Bernadette. But Bernadette loved the idea, telling Coach Sanchez about Jaydin's longstanding interest in world religions.

Jaydin's phone interview with his mother's friend Malik did not go as well as his interview with Ms. Yusuf. Jaydin looked nervous when Malik called that afternoon, and his face grew pallid as the conversation unfolded. Whereas Ms. Yusuf had been warm and expansive in her answers to Jaydin's questions, Malik was curt. Jaydin asked if Malik had experienced discrimination as a Muslim. "I've never personally faced that," Malik replied. Jaydin stammered, unsure how to proceed. After a long pause, Malik continued. "I've faced discrimination as a *Black* man," Malik said, "but not as a Muslim."

Jaydin tried to pivot the conversation toward anti-Muslim bias. "What about the sisters at the Mosque?" he asked. "Have they ever faced discrimination?"

Malik shut down this line of questioning. "I'm not at liberty to talk about that because I don't know their stories," he said. The conversation proceeded haltingly like this for a few more minutes before Jaydin gave up.

"That was horrible," Jaydin said after hanging up the phone.

Bernadette's boyfriend Mike, who caught snippets of the interview, tried to make Jaydin feel better. "That's just their culture," he said, referring not to Muslims in general but to the Nation of Islam in particular. Jaydin huffed, not acknowledging Mike.

In a funk, Jaydin made his way to his bedroom. The space was a mess, with an unmade bed and clothes strewn on the floor. Wires protruded from an unfinished light switch. A large poster of a mansion with a five-car garage and expensive sportscars hung above his bed. It read "Justification for Higher Education." Jaydin often retreated like this when he got frustrated. A mixture of agitation and shame would flash across his face, and he would struggle to put his emotions into words. "Damn, son," he muttered to himself a few times, rubbing the top of his head and glancing impatiently at the ceiling.

Jaydin often seemed to be trapped like this: unable to quite articulate the thoughts in his head. Teachers who worked with him had noticed this problem. "He has trouble expressing himself verbally," said Ms. Xi, who taught Jaydin in a composition class. "And his writing is loopy." Coach Sanchez noticed the same thing. "When he has to articulate an idea, or put pen to paper, he struggles with it," Coach Sanchez said. Teachers found Jaydin's verbal challenges surprising because of his obvious intelligence. When Jaydin seemed lost for words, it was often clear that his understanding of a topic far outstripped his ability to discuss it. His interest in religion, for example, showed a capacity for empathy and nuance

that did not translate in conversation or on the page. And there were other non-verbal realms, like playing chess, where Jaydin was laser sharp. Jaydin played a lot of chess, and no one at Strive, neither students nor teachers, could beat him. His verbal challenges seemed like a tragic mismatch, hemming in a sparkling intelligence.

What also worried teachers was Jaydin's tendency to pull back when confronted with a challenge. "He has some confidence issues," Coach Sanchez said. "If you bring up his writing challenges, he sort of shuts down. He gets dismissive. Like, 'Yeah, yeah, alright, I got you.' But actually, he doesn't hear it." Ms. Stewart said something similar. "He has some deficits," she said, "and he does not like looking those deficits in the face. That can result in avoidance behavior." As Ms. Astor saw it, Jaydin's verbal blocks and his tendency to withdraw from challenge were closely related. Jaydin would shut down, she said, "when he's frustrated about something but can't articulate why."

Jaydin's teachers did not write him off, though. All recognized his strong inner drive. "Jaydin does not need a lot of external motivation," Mr. Braun said. Ms. Stewart and Ms. Astor both told stories of initially mistaking Jaydin's shyness for standoffishness, then slowly recognizing his sincere desire to please them and do well. "Jaydin is one of the most kind, empathetic kids I've ever met," said Ms. Astor. "He's really invested in his future and in his achievement. And will always try to do his work in class and ask questions when he doesn't understand." And teachers appreciated Jaydin's eagerness to form relationships with them. "He's funny," Ms. Corbin said with an affectionate smile. "He always wants to have an inside joke."

And the person who believed in Jaydin most of all was his mom, Bernadette. When he was born, Bernadette said, "Jaydin was just the most beautiful child I'd ever seen." Even on days like this one, when Bernadette was sleep deprived and stressed from her job search,

and when Jaydin sulked off by himself, Bernadette was still captivated by the sight of him. "I just look at him all day," she said. "I see a lot of Jaydin's father in him. It's unbelievable how he has so may ways like his daddy." Jaydin, she believed, would live out dreams that she and his father had been denied. "I just know there's something special about Jaydin. He's strong. He knows what he wants. He has tunnel vision," she said. "We're going to see something from him."

A.J.

Dismissal time at Strive had devolved into an ecstatic, high-energy circus. It was one of the last Friday afternoons of the school year, and students jostled and pushed around A.J. as he made his way toward the exit. Up ahead, Shadrach had grabbed Kenya in a headlock and begun wrestling him to the ground, goaded on by Paul, Adonis, and a young woman named Ariana. Ariana began smacking Kenya in the stomach as Kenya grinned from ear to ear, happy to be enveloped in the playful attention of friends. A.J. walked tentatively past them, flashing me a bemused half smile.

A.J. had attended Strive all four years, but some of his peers in the small, ninety-student senior class still did not know his name. Although he was tall, with a stocky-but-muscular build, he carried himself timidly. He was also quiet. At a school that devoted substantial energy to making students like Dorian and Kenya stop talking and follow directions, students like A.J. rarely got coaxed out of their shells. During freshman year, A.J. had eaten in dutiful silence as teachers patrolled between lunch tables, sending anyone who talked to detention. When students got the chance to talk in class, many took the opportunity to banter and gossip, but A.J. just followed directions. "Turn and talk to your neighbor about your plan for the A.P. Lit Exam," Mr. Braun had instructed A.J.'s class

111

earlier in the semester. A.J. and his seatmate Tonya, one of the prettiest young women in the grade, turned toward each other and recited their answers almost robotically.

"I need to read more books. And my goal on the A.P. Lit Exam is to make sure I get at least a three," Tonya said.

"I need to make sure I get all my homework done," A.J. replied. As his peers kept talking, A.J. just stared at his page.

A.J. felt that he had missed out on a lot of what high school had to offer. He had joined the football team as a freshman and loved it, learning to use his size and strength to overpower other players as a defensive lineman. But when his mother began commuting to a 10-hour shift at the Exxon-Mobil plant in Baton Rouge, leaving New Orleans each morning shortly after 4 AM and arriving home at 7 PM, A.J. was left on childcare duty for his younger brothers. Alberto, who was five years younger than A.J., was severely autistic. Ricky, his younger half-brother, was a toddler. Both needed constant supervision. Each afternoon, as his former teammates got ready for practice, A.J. would dejectedly catch the bus home. "He just seemed down and kind of defeated," his adviser Ms. Silva remembered. The malaise carried over into school. "Things at school would be hard for him, or he would forget an assignment or mess something up, and you could just see it weigh on him. He carried it quietly, but you could see he was carrying it."

At Strive, A.J. was friends with a nerdy group of guys who were mostly members of Ms. Silva's advisory. They sat together at breakfast and lunch. Eli, a ponytailed videogame enthusiast, was a self-styled slacker. Daryl, one of the few white students at Strive, smoked a lot of marijuana and struggled with mental illness. Jermain, probably the most standoffish member of the advisory, harbored vague plans to become a gangster rapper even though he did not deal drugs or carry a gun. Peter, a young man with a sweet affect whose classmates

sometimes teased him for dating fat women, became homeless during his senior year and stayed for a time with both Eli and Jermain. Marcel, a slender, eagerly upbeat young man from a different advisory, also often sat with A.J. and the others. A.J. considered Marcel his best friend. Vincent was part of Ms. Silva's advisory too, and he was friendly with all of them, but he did not sit with them in the cafeteria. He considered himself the advisory's only streetwise member. "Everyone in that advisory, they're *pushovers* man," Vincent said. When classmates made fun of the other young men, Vincent tried to put a stop to it.

A.J. rarely saw his friends outside of school, and he never had them over to his house. His family moved frequently—they had lived in three different apartments during his senior year alone—and no matter where they lived, their space was mostly an unfurnished mess. The floor of the family's living room was strewn with magazines, rags, and discarded clothes. Alberto, A.J.'s autistic brother, would go on agitated rampages, tearing up A.J.'s school projects or pulling the contents out of dressers. A.J.'s stepfather kept a collection of rusted vehicles parked on the family's small, muddy front lawn. A.J. did not want his friends to see how his family lived.

A.J.'s mother Gloria was not embarrassed about her home the way her son was. To her, the family's living arrangements felt like an upgrade. She grew up in a remote village in Honduras without electricity or plumbing. During the day, she would fetch water from the well. At night, children would gather in lamplight at her grandmother's feet to listen to stories. When she was twelve years old, Gloria's mother sent her to the United States to live with her father, who worked in the offshore oil industry. Both of Gloria's parents were of sub-Saharan African heritage, part of the small population of Black Hondurans. When Gloria arrived in New Orleans, she looked like the other children who played out in the street around her father's 8th Ward house. But she did not speak a word of English.

113

Soon, Gloria's father retired from the oil industry and returned to Honduras, leaving Gloria and her siblings to look after themselves. "We didn't have nobody." Gloria recalled. "It was just me, my two sisters, and my brother." Not long after she began high school, Gloria started dating an older Honduran man. "He used to be nice with us," she recalled. "Since he was older, he used to take us out. All four of us, not just me. He bought us clothes or whatever we needed." Gloria got pregnant, and at age 16, she gave birth to A.J.

Gloria moved in with A.J.'s father. Her grandmother and mother arrived in New Orleans to help take care of A.J., which allowed Gloria to finish high school. After graduation, she worked a series of part-time jobs, cleaning downtown skyscrapers and selling shoelaces from a cart in the mall. Eventually, she had Alberto. Then, Hurricane Katrina displaced the family to Houston. It was in Houston that Gloria received Alberto's autism diagnosis. She had never heard of autism before. "It was really hard," she said, "knowing that this kid is going to be dependent on you for the rest of his life." Alberto had other medical problems too, including terrible seizures. The time in Houston became a blur of medical appointments and hospital stays.

Exasperated that the treatments did not seem to be helping Alberto, Gloria moved the family back to Honduras. She hoped that traditional healing practices available in the country might help Alberto where western medicine had failed. The family returned to the rural costal village where Gloria had grown up. For A.J., it was a lot to get used to at once. They were surrounded by family, and as A.J. recalled, "everybody knew me before I even knew their name." A.J. had grown up speaking Spanish at home, but he had mostly switched to English when he started school. He began relearning Spanish. He also began to learn some of the local culture. African traditions preserved by Maroons—enslaved people who escaped and formed their own communities—were still practiced in the village. To A.J., the

ceremonies looked like "men dressing up in dresses and masks, just jumping all around, with some kind of African music." A shy child, A.J. probably watched at a reserved distance.

Try as they might, the family did not find a cure for Alberto's autism in Honduras. When Alberto reached school age, Gloria decided to return to New Orleans. There, unlike in Honduras, the schools would have the special services Alberto required. Gloria and Alberto moved in with Gloria's grandmother, who was living in a FEMA trailer in New Orleans East. Now separated from the boys' father, Gloria began working full time as a home health aide. A.J. stayed for another year in Honduras with his grandmother before returning to New Orleans too.

A.J. had entered high school and started playing football when Gloria sought out higher paying work. She found it at the Exxon plant, where good wages made up for inflexible hours and a punishing commute. She hated having to break the news to A.J. "I didn't like that he had to leave all of his after-school activities to help me with Alberto," Gloria said, "but I really had no choice. At that time, I was by myself."

At home with his brother, A.J. tried to keep himself occupied. On the advice of one of his freshman-year teachers, A.J. started to teach himself coding, learning basics of Python and Javascript. He also picked up skateboarding, although unlike Dorian, he didn't jump off any ledges. Then, as a sophomore, A.J. met Ms. Jamie, the free-spirited photography club adviser. "I was a little apprehensive about her at first because of the short hair and the tattoos," he said. But like many other students, A.J. fell under Ms. Jamie's spell. When his mother's work schedule allowed it, he started attending weekly photography club meetings after school, learning to take pictures on his phone.

When A.J. looked back on his time in high school, most of the highlights came from photography. "It helped me realize that I'm more of an artistic person than a sports person,"

A.J. said. He went with Ms. Jamie on fieldtrips she organized to the French Quarter and to nearby wetlands. When Ms. Jamie wrote a feature on New Orleans skateboarding for a prominent skate magazine, A.J. volunteered for a photo shoot, doing ollies in front of a colorfully graffitied wall at an abandoned shopping center as Ms. Jamie snapped his portrait. A.J.'s mom bought him a camera, and he started carrying it on his morning bus ride, taking pictures out the window of traffic and high-tension power lines.

School was a grind for A.J. "He was a tough nut to crack," remembered Ms. Astor, his junior-year math teacher. "In math, he had a big fixed mindset about what he could do." (Having a "fixed mindset" was Strive lingo, borrowed from Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck, for not believing that you could learn something.) Vincent remembered how, in Ms. Silva's advisory, A.J. was often melancholy. He would sit looking at his math grade, which usually hovered between a D and a C. "It's killing me," he would tell Vincent with heartfelt sincerity. A.J. also struggled to speak up for himself. One morning at the metal detectors, security guards jostled A.J.'s camera and accidentally damaged the lens. Other students would have made a big fuss. A.J. just fumed, not reporting the damage to anyone at the school. The zoom was broken, but at least the camera still took photos.

And if school was a grind, time at home was worse. "It's pretty devastating when the school year ends," A.J. said. Since returning to the United States, A.J.'s mom Gloria had started a new relationship, giving birth to A.J.'s baby brother Ricky. A.J. loved Ricky, but he only tolerated Ricky's father Winston, who had moved in with the family. Winston, a gregarious D.J. and nightclub manager, was A.J.'s temperamental opposite. He was loud. He threw raucous parties. He roped Gloria into helping him open a bar. "I have to support him," Gloria explained as she gave ever-larger portions of her paycheck to the fledgling

business. On weekend nights, Gloria now had to bartend, leaving A.J. with more babysitting duty. At least the new family business kept Winston out of the house.

Time at home was making A.J. increasingly conservative. After seeing Winston's drinking, A.J. vowed not to drink or use drugs. A.J. also began flirting with the idea of joining Army ROTC in college. The order and discipline of the Army appealed to him after his chaotic life at home. And as he considered candidates in the primary for the 2016 presidential election, he settled on Jeb Bush, the Republican governor of Florida. A.J. liked how Bush paired a relatively moderate stance on immigration with a message of personal responsibility.

As A.J. pushed past Kenya and the others in the hallway on that late-spring Friday afternoon, he reached into his wallet and counted out its contents: eight dollars. He perked up. "Let's go to Wendy's," he told me. Wendy's was A.J.'s special treat, a once-in-a-while indulgence. Out in the parking lot, we saw A.J.'s friends Eli and Daryl getting into Eli's car with two young women, and A.J. let them know the plan. At the restaurant, I told A.J. I would pay for our lunch. (Usually, when I bought food during my fieldwork, I bought it for participants too.) As A.J. and I sat down to eat, Eli, Daryl, and the young women arrived and sat at an adjoining table. Daryl looked on longingly as A.J. unwrapped his burger. "If I'da known we were going to Wendy's, I would have brought some money," Eli said, half convincingly. A.J. decided to treat them. With his eight dollars, he bought Eli a burger and Daryl some fries. No one had much to say during the meal, but A.J. seemed to savor the time anyway, happy to be able to come through for his friends.

On the ride home, A.J. was quiet. As we pulled up to his house, he appeared to steel himself. "Time for some more craziness," he said. He was counting down the days until he could leave home for good.

CASEY

Casey stood examining himself in my bathroom mirror. A talkative, curious young man with a spiky, orange-tipped Afro that seemed to match his energy, Casey often wore an open-mouthed smile that made him look like he had something to say. Usually, he did. We had been talking all afternoon: about hip-hop, about his parents, about the pros and cons of HBCUs, about how he had always hoped to find his romantic soulmate in high school, about weighing his newfound interest in nursing against his long-held plans to become a high school guidance counselor. It was a heady time for Casey. All these currents seemed to be rushing together in his life, pushing him through a transformation that he was doing his best to savor.

"Say, Tom, give me a hand with this tie," he said. It was Casey's prom night, and he had changed most of the way into his tuxedo. I thought he looked fantastic, like a dapper, ten-years-older version of his happy-go-lucky teenage self. Casey seemed more tentative, shyly eyeing his reflection. As I flipped up his starched-white collar and fastened his clip-on tie, I thought back to a conversation from that fall, when Casey explained why he was in no rush to get his driver's license. "I want to stay a kid for a little bit longer," he told me. I wondered if he was thinking the same thing now.

The ostensible reason Casey was getting ready at my apartment was that I lived close to his girlfriend's house. But another advantage of the plan was that it helped distract Casey from a glaring absence. In August, Casey's father, Casey Sr., had been the victim of a chilling murder. Two men sat chatting with Casey Sr. at a neighborhood firepit for more than an hour—"really getting him comfortable," in his son's words—before one disappeared and came back brandishing a gun. Casey Sr., a goofy school bus driver who loved watching

118

Family Guy reruns in his son's room, died in a hail of gunfire as he turned to flee. It should have been him helping Casey get ready for prom, not me.

Casey's parents had been close before Casey Sr.'s death. The couple were married and had two sons, Casey Jr. and Carson. Carson had died at age two of a degenerative childhood disease, leaving Casey Jr. alone with his parents. The three had a lot of fun together. Casey Sr.'s personality filled up the house, helping draw his reserved wife Shantelle out of her shell. Casey Sr. was always cleaning because he could never sit still. As he cleaned, he would sing confidently but off key, belting out even louder if he caught Shantelle rolling her eyes. When Casey Jr. turned thirteen and started sleeping in late, Casey Sr. would sneak into his son's room and plant a wet kiss on his face. "He would kiss you and then run," Casey recalled. "I used to get so mad. I would chase him around the house." Shantelle would yell at them to stop, telling them they were both too old for such foolishness.

Shantelle and Casey Sr. were opposites in many ways. Shantelle was a workaholic, whereas Casey Sr. never held a job for very long. Shantelle was solitary, whereas Casey Sr. had lots of friends. Shantelle, a fastidious rule follower, worked for many years in prisoner intake for the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office, booking newly arrested people before they were transported to jail. She was on shift one evening when Casey Sr., who dabbled in petty crime, came through in handcuffs.

Shantelle and Casey Sr. grew up a few miles apart, in area of the city across the Mississippi River from the rest of New Orleans called the "West Bank." Life on the West Bank moved a bit slower than it did in the rest of New Orleans. Shantelle's parents lived in a quiet, middle-class neighborhood of brick ranch houses. Her mother was a consummate "church lady;" her father worked a good-paying job at the NASA plant and invested in rental properties in the Lower 9th Ward. Casey Sr. was a few years older than Shantelle, and he grew

up less sheltered than her. When the two met, Shantelle was a senior in high school; Casey Sr. had already dropped out and started working.

As Casey Jr. saw it, his parents lived in "two different worlds." He found himself straddling those worlds as he grew up. His mother's world was middle class—a predictable, supportive place where nothing much ever happened. His father's world was out on the streets, where everything was more interesting but also more demanding and unpredictably dangerous. "I've been *around* street stuff my whole life," Casey explained, referring to drugs, guns, and violence. "But that's not really me. I've always been more of a suburbs kid."

When Casey was born, his parents lived in the Fischer housing projects, a rough part of the West Bank in the shadow of the giant Crescent City Connection bridge. But for most of his childhood, Casey had a second bedroom with his maternal grandparents in the suburban home where his mother grew up. The room was Casey's safety valve, sheltering him from difficult circumstances elsewhere in his life. He could stay there whenever he wanted, and he often did. His grandparents' home did not flood after Hurricane Katrina, so Casey and his parents stayed there. A year after the storm, Casey's parents bought a house in a new cul-de-sac a mile down the road from his grandparents. Their suburban dream turned into a nightmare when they discovered their house had been built with a batch of faulty drywall that gave off caustic, sulfurous fumes.[34] With a mortgage to pay and no way to sell the house to anyone else, Shantelle and Casey Sr. settled in. Casey Sr. bounced between jobs: he drove school buses, collected garbage, and worked as a day laborer. When the family needed more money, he cooked crack cocaine on the kitchen stove. "He told me he'll do anything he can to make sure me and my mama are straight," Casey Jr. remembered. "He didn't like some of the things he had to do…. He didn't like to have me around the house

when he was cooking drugs." On those afternoons, Casey Jr. would stay with his grandparents, where his grandmother would cook meatloaf or red beans and rice.

In early grade school, Casey struggled with reading. He had been tracked into special education, and Shantelle worried that he would not pass the LEAP, a high-stakes state test that would require him to repeat fourth grade if he failed. To avoid this possibility, Shantelle sent Casey to a small, low-cost private school that had started as a neighborhood daycare. The school was not rigorous. "The homework was real kiddy stuff," Shantelle remembered. Casey fell further behind.

Three years later, as Casey entered seventh grade, Shantelle enrolled him at a "no excuses" charter middle school called Achieve Academy. "That was a very, very, very huge change," Casey remembered. "At my old school, you had freedom. At my new school, you couldn't even talk in the hallways." Casey racked up demerits: for failing to "track" his teacher, for whispering in class, for not working quickly enough. Students who received three demerits were sent out of class and made to write their multiplication tables by hand. Casey felt lonely at first. It was his first time attending a school across the river. "That's a whole different side of the city," Casey said. "I didn't know nobody. Everybody's looking at me. I'm looking at them. I'm out of my element." Casey begged to return to his old school, but Shantelle held firm.

Over time, Casey grew more comfortable at Achieve. His grades slowly improved. One afternoon, as students changed out of their uniforms to get ready for an after-school dance, Casey made friends with an older boy named Russell after the two noticed that they were both pulling on Nike Blazers. No excuses schools often combine elements of bootcamp with elements of summer camp, and Casey began to enjoy the school's summer camp-style "celebrations," like a contest to get an Oreo from your forehead to your mouth

without using your hands, which Casey won. In eighth grade, the next year of high-stakes testing, Casey easily passed the LEAP test.

Casey stayed in the Achieve network for ninth grade, enrolling at the network's new Achieve High School. By this point, he had made lots of friends. "That was my golden year of high school," Casey said, looking back. "I had lots of days when I would get up and say, 'I really want to go to school.'" Still, Casey began to consider transferring out. One of his cousins and another of his good friends attended a large, historic high school called A.P. Tureaud. "They were telling me how cool Tureaud is," Casey said. "They told me Tureaud was really fun and that you get a lot of freedom." Casey liked that Tureaud had a laxer uniform policy than Achieve: students could wear any style of Dickies pants and any style of sneakers, as long as those items were the uniform color.

A.P. Tureaud also had a lot more going on than Achieve High School. It had a massive marching band, a bevy of sports teams that regularly competed for state championships, multiple visual arts classrooms, a graphic design computer studio, a drama class, and more. Casey, an aspiring rapper, was especially intrigued by the school's spoken word competitions. Small, upstart charter schools like Achieve High or Strive Prep could not compete with these offerings. Tureaud also had a very good academic reputation, which mattered in a city where high schools had long been a source of identity and pride. One of the first questions locals would ask each other when they met was, "Where did you go to school?" No matter who you asked—the mayor, a college professor with four degrees—they understood that you were asking about their high school. Students who enrolled in brand new charter high schools like Achieve High and Strive Prep missed out on this sense of historical identity, and they missed out on the alumni networks of the older schools.[35]

Casey transferred to A.P. Tureaud as a 10th grader, but he was not as happy as he

122

expected to be. He realized that, although he had a few friends at Tureaud, most of his classmates were strangers. Tureaud's new principal had implemented a stricter uniform policy, so Casey was not allowed to wear the Nike sneakers and skinny-legged Dickies he had pictured. Meanwhile, Casey heard from friends at Achieve that the school had relaxed some rules, allowing students to use their phones during free periods and giving upperclassmen off-campus lunch. And although he was quite good at basketball, he realized he was not good enough to make the Tureaud basketball team.

An eager conversationalist, Casey talked about these problems openly. He spent hours on the phone: with his friend Russell from Aspire, with his friend Maggie who probably had a crush on him, and with his cousin Kendrick. Casey would stay up until the wee hours of the morning with his phone on speaker, a muted NBA game playing in the background, complaining about Tureaud and listening with interest to what his friends had to say. Russell told him about his freshman year at Southern University. Maggie gossiped with him about girls they both knew. Kendrick talked with him about the future. Casey had several brothers—children his father had with other women—but Casey was closer with Kendrick. "Kendrick is basically like my brother," Casey said. The two had grown up together, spending lots of time at their grandparents' house where Casey had his second bedroom. Kendrick was a bit more reserved than Casey, but the two were both observant and curious. They kept no secrets from one another.

As Casey contemplated his future, he recognized that his natural interest in other people and his appetite for conversation were gifts. He thought about becoming a therapist or a counselor, and he was particularly drawn to the idea of working with New Orleans high schoolers. "I would talk with them about their lives and about problems they're having," he

said. "Lots of them have problems outside of school, and I would understand where they're coming from." He thought he would be particularly good at working with young men.

During his junior year, Casey found a new person to talk to. At the homecoming dance for a high school across town from Tureaud, Casey met a young woman named Daria. Daria was tall and no nonsense. Casey, who was quick to laugh and easily distracted, found himself trying to act as seriously as possible to get on her level. The two began talking for hours every night on the phone. Daria talked about her plans to become a nurse, her father's incarceration, and her annoying little sister. She pushed Casey to start studying for the ACT, arranging after-school study dates to take practice tests together. When she met Casey's father, she learned where Casey got his silly streak. "You too pretty to have all that lipstick up on you," Casey Sr. told her, laughing when he saw the mortified look on his son's face.

Three days into Casey's senior year, Casey and Daria were asleep in Casey's room when Casey woke up to more than a hundred notifications on his phone. Ten missed calls apiece from his mom, one of his brothers, and his friend Robert. Thirty missed calls from Kendrick. Dozens and dozens of text messages. Most of the texts were vague, but Kendrick came out and said it. "Say, brah, I don't know if it's true or not, but I think your dad dead, son. Call me as soon as you can."

Casey felt numb. "I didn't really cry that whole day," he said. "Daria just wanted to hug me. My grandpa and I brought her home. It didn't hit me until we was driving back. That's when the tears started coming down. I cried and cried that whole night."

Casey kept going to school. His teachers and most of his peers had no idea what had happened. He did not act out, but he had trouble focusing. His grades slipped that semester. He worried that he would fail his environmental science class. More than ever, he wanted to

become a counselor, so he hoped to take psychology in the spring. Failing environmental science would close off that chance.

By October, when I first met Casey, he was outwardly back to being jovial and social. No matter where I caught up with him—his drama class, a college information session, the cafeteria, an assembly—he was surrounded by friends. He ended up passing all his classes that semester. In the spring, Casey took psychology. He liked it well enough, but he had trouble seeing how lessons about experimental research design or the structure of the brain connected to his interest in helping people. Another class offered a clearer outlet for such work. In his senior project class, which was very much like the "Capstone" class at Strive, Casey did research about nurse practitioners. "Did you know that Louisiana has the fifth highest teen pregnancy rate in the country?" he asked me incredulously. In his presentation, he described the different ways nurse practitioners could help with public health crises among Louisiana teenagers, like helping with drug treatment and prescribing birth control. Inspired in part by Daria's interest in nursing, Casey decided he might want to be a nurse too.

On prom night, after Casey finished getting ready, we made the short drive over to Daria's house. Daria's whole family was waiting there with her. As the couple posed for photos, Daria beamed. Casey tried his best to look suave and serious. Eventually, Daria's brothers piled into the pictures, then her parents too.

Couples headed to prom are often confronting the prospect of one final summer together, but Casey and Daria saw a longer future ahead of them. That fall, they would both be enrolling at Southern University. Casey suspected that they might not stay in an exclusive relationship for all of college. "Especially like freshman, sophomore year, we might talk to [hook up with] other people and not really tell each other about it," Casey said. "We're both

still young." But Casey anticipated that they would finish college as a fully committed couple

ready to start their adult lives. "Junior, senior year, I'm really going to get a job," Casey said.

"And we could get an apartment and stay off campus together. Me and her already planned

that." When they graduated, Casey anticipated, they would start on their careers and begin

having children. Casey thought that he would be a great dad, just like his own dad had been.

That seemed to Casey like a perfect life.

WORKS CITED

Anderson, Elijah. 1999. *Code of The Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the City*. New York: Norton.

Bazemore-James, Cori M., Thitapa Shinaprayoon, and Jillian Martin. 2016. "Understanding and Supporting Students who Experience Cultural Bias in Standardized Tests." *Trends and Issues in Academic Support* 4: 4-11.

Bettie, Julie. 2003. *Women without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Dwayne Betts. 2014. "The Stoop Isn't the Jungle" *Slate*, July 10.

Carter, Prudence L. 2005. *Keepin' It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Clarke, Jennifer G. and Rachel E. Simon. 2013. "Shackling and Separation: Motherhood in Prison." *AMA Journal of Ethics*, 15:9: 779-785.

Dance, L. Janelle. 2002. *Tough Fronts: The Impact of Street Culture on Schooling*. New York: Routledge.

DeLuca, Stephanie, Susan Clampet-Lundquist, and Kathryn Edin. 2016. *Coming of Age in the Other America*. New York: Russel Sage.

Golann, Joanne W. 2021. *Scripting the Moves: Culture & Control in a 'No-Excuses' Charter School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Harding, David J. 2010. *Living the Drama: Community, Conflict, and Culture among Inner-City Boys*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hart, Beth Ann. 2019. "Hanging In, Stopping Out, Dropping Out: Community College Students in an Era of Precarity." *Teachers College Record*, 121: 1-30.

Hertler, Steven C. 2017. "Beyond birth order: The biological logic of personality variation among siblings." *Cogent Psychology*, 4(1): 1-18.

Hopkinson, Natalie. 2013. "Oprah Winfrey's Shameful 'Blackboard Wars': Where 'Cops' Meets 'Dangerous Minds,'" *The Washington Post*, March 6.

Jacobs, Bruce A. and Richard Wright. 2006. *Street Justice: Retaliation in the Criminal Underworld.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lane, Jeffry. 2018. *The Digital Street.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Louisiana Department of Child and Family Services. 2022. "Family Independence and Temporary Assistance (FITAP): Who is eligible?"

Marrow, Helen B. 2011. *New Destination Dreaming: Immigration, Race, and Legal Status in the Rural American South.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Martin Peter J. and Alex Dennis. 2016. *Human agents and social structures.* Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

Mowbray, Rebecca. 2011. "Chinese drywall distributor in New Orleans agrees to settlement," *The Times Picayune*, April 26.

Morris, Edward W. 2012. *Learning the Hard Way: Masculinity, Place, and The Gender Gap in Education.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Parker, Kim. 2017. "About one-in-four U.S. workers have taken leave to care for a seriously ill family member," *Pew Research Center*, March 30.

Peprah, Prince et al. 2020. "'With tramadol, I ride like a Jaguar'*:* A qualitative study of motivations for non-medical purpose tramadol use among commercial vehicle operators in Kumasi, Ghana." *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy*, 15(49): 1-15.

Ray, Ranita. 2018. *The Making of a Teenage Service Class: Poverty and Mobility in an American City.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Ray, Ranita and Korey Tillman. 2019. "Envisioning a feminist urban ethnography: Structure, culture, and new directions in poverty studies." *Sociology Compass*, 13(1): 1-10.

Perry, Andre. 2017. "Building educational 'success' on the backs of fired black teachers." *The Hechinger Report*, May 31.

Rios, Victor M. 2015. "Decolonizing the White Space in Urban Ethnography." *City and Community*, 14(3): 258-261;

Rios, Victor M. 2017. *Human Targets: Schools, Police, and the Criminalization of Latino Youth.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ritter, Nancy, Thomas R. Simon, and Reshmar R. Mahendra. 2014. "Changing Course: Keeping Kids Out of Gangs," *NIJ Journal*, 273: 16-27.

Sandelson, Jasmin. Forthcoming. *Looking Out: How Friendships Help Girls Face Poverty's Harms.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Sewell, William H. Jr. 1992. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation." *American Journal of Sociology*, 98(1): 1-29.

Stuart, Forrest. 2021. *Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music, and the Power of Online Infamy.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review*, 52(2): 273-286.

Tavory, Iddo. 2016. *Summoned: Identification and Religious Life in a Jewish Neighborhood.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wang, Leah. 2021. "Unsupportive environments and limited policies: Pregnancy, postpartum, and birth during incarceration." *The Prison Policy Initiative,* August 19.

Waters, Mary C., Patrick J. Carr, Maria J. Kefalas, and Jennifer Holdaway, eds. 2011. *Coming of Age in America: The Transition to Adulthood in the 21ˢᵗ Century.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Webster, Richard. 2019. "New Orleans public housing remade after Katrina. Is it working?" *The Times Picayune*, July 18.

Willis, Paul. 1977. *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs.* New York: Columbia University Press.

ENDNOTES

[10] Over the past two generations in the United States, changes to the economy, to educational pathways, and to social norms have made the transition to adulthood choppier and less straightforward. For the most part, young people do not gain financial independence and permanently leave home immediately after turning eighteen (Waters et al. 2011). Young people who experience the most difficult childhood circumstances are often the most eager to quickly establish independence—what Deluca and colleagues call "expedited adulthood"—but they can consequently find themselves stuck in low-wage jobs, unable to realize their full potential (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016).

[11] "No excuses" style schools like Strive often have an adult permanently monitoring each hallway to deal with students who have been put out of class. At Strive, teachers sat at the "support desk" during their off periods.

[12] Families in public housing paid 30% of their income in rent (Webster 2019).

[13] In several instances, with participants' permission, I have decided not to anonymize previous schools they attended because they are distinctive in important ways. For years after Hurricane Katrina, McDonogh 42 was one of the few remaining K-8 schools in New Orleans with a majority Black, local staff.

[14] Dorian was vaguely aware that Strive's pedagogical approach was new, but he did not know that it was geared specifically for low-income students of color. One evening, as I drove Dorian home, he asked me if high school was different for me "back in the day." Dorian knew that I had grown up in an affluent white suburb, but his question implied that any differences in the way we were taught must come down to era. He thought my teachers might have treated me the same way that Strive teachers treated their students.

[15] DeLuca and colleagues call this an "identity project": a "consuming, defining passion." They find that young people who take on identity projects become likelier to stay on track)DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016).

[16] There are good arguments that the "structure" / "agency" binary can be more misleading than it is helpful (e.g., Martin and Dennis 2016: 7-16). Martin and Dennis level several critiques against the notion social structure, including that it treats social categories (like the family or like social class) "as if they were real entities, independent of the human beings that constitute them," and that it leads to overly deterministic explanations in which individuals "are 'caused' to do things by factors or forces independent of real people." But I think that Sewell's conception of social structure—as a dynamic system of resources and cultural schemas that people creatively mobilize and navigate, even as it constrains their thoughts and actions in ways that continually reproduce the system—mostly addresses these concerns (Sewell 1992).

[17] To be clear, Willis mostly avoids this trap. Although he does not introduce "the lads" as individuals, he shows how inspired and clever they can be in their attempts to undermine the system. And he does not need to explain variation because all "the lads" go on to take working class jobs they see as bland and interchangeable (Willis 1977). Still, it is easy to fall into the trap of writing about culture in an over-determined way.

[18] Participants had to "have been actively engaged in street crime in the last six months," "consider themselves to be active street criminals," and be "the victim of at least one crime for which they had retaliated, or attempted to retaliate, in the last six months" (Jacobs and Wright 2006).

[19] Rios emphasizes how many identities a person can have. This sentence was inspired by an evocative sentence by Rios: "Consider the multiple identities college students navigate. They can simultaneously be one or more of the following: young adults, athletes, obnoxious drunks, travelers, cheaters, daughters, boyfriends, drug users, deviants, assholes, and social justice champions," (2017: 8-9).

[20] For example, most do not join gangs (Ritter, Simon, and Mahendra 2014).

[21] Anderson, for example, writes that acting "street" is closely tied to the type of "oppositional culture" that John Ogbu describes: "The code of the street, and by extension the oppositional culture, competes very effectively with traditional values. As the young people come to see the school and its agents as unreceptive to them, embracing the oppositional culture becomes more important as a way to salvage self-esteem. The mission of the school is called into question, if not undermined" (1999: 97). Such opposition often dovetails with gendered performance. "In constituting urban black masculinity," Morris finds, "boys followed scripts that tended to put them at odds with school-oriented rules and behaviors. These scripts emerged from a discursive tension between the powerful but dangerous urban symbol of the thug or gangsta and the local concept of the feeble, submissive lame" (2012: 112) And Bettie describes how a group of young Latina women rejected academic achievement as part of their rejection of dominant white feminine culture at their school: "Las chicas' girl culture worked as a refusal of schooling and of middle-class prep norms. Girls who did not meet prep norms operated in alternative symbolic economies in which they earned and wore different 'badges of dignity' that symbolically healed their race and class injuries…. [Working class young Latina women] rejected the version of femininity performed by preps, the one most sanctioned by the school, and were simultaneously opting out and being tracked out of the [academic] game preps could more easily win…. [For middle class young Latina women], the association of school-sanctioned femininity with 'whiteness' was a reason to reject it for a racial/ethnic identity that was coded 'low.' In the end, las chicas' particular race-class gendered performance helps entrench them in subordinate class futures" (2003: 94). Other scholars find that identification with non-dominant cultural styles need not necessarily hinder academic achievement. Dance finds that "street culture" makes it harder for young people to engage with education, for example, but she shows how teachers can overcome this resistance (2002). And Carter finds that identification with non-dominant cultural styles is not a repudiation of academic achievement per se, although it can result in academic difficulties if achievement requires self-abnegation. Among Carter's respondents, "no one devalued high academic achievement, or cared if either they or their friends were smart, but they did care if their peers repudiated in-group cultural codes and knowledge" (2005: 53).

[22] Nearly 60,000 pregnant women enter incarceration every year in the United States, and they often lack access to adequate prenatal care. Approximately 2,000 of these incarcerated women give birth each year. Often, they give birth shackled by the ankles, wrists, and/or waist. After at most 24 hours in the hospital, they are separated from their newborns. The babies are placed either with family members or in foster care (Clarke and Simon 2013; Wang 2021).

[23] Because Juan received press attention for his activism, I have changed details about the cause he was advocating for, and I have changed the wording of his speech to "un-Google" it (e.g., Lane 2018; Stuart 2021). In making these changes, I have not exaggerated the size or spirit of Juan's undertaking.

[24] In Louisiana, child support payments cannot be ordered retroactively. But if a single parent applies for welfare, which in Louisiana is called Family Independence Temporary Assistance (FITAP), the state will try to collect child support from the other parent to cover the costs. FITAP recipients "must assign any child support and medical support rights to the state and must cooperate with the agency's Child Support Enforcement Services in establishing paternity and obtaining child support and medical support from the absent parent(s)" (Louisiana Department of Child and Family Services 2022).

[25] Paul regularly used tramadol, and Kenya used it occasionally. Tramadol is a mild synthetic opiate, but the young men perceived that it gave them giddy energy, sometimes staying up through the night after taking a pill. Tramadol abuse was not widely known in the United States while I was conducting fieldwork, but it has become a major problem elsewhere, including in parts of West Africa (Prince et al. 2020).

[26] In her account of how young people of color balance dominant white culture and non-dominant peer culture, Carter identifies three approaches that students take: cultural mainstreamers, noncompliant believers, and cultural straddlers. Cultural mainstreamers wholeheartedly buy into dominant culture and into school, noncompliant believers hold fast to non-dominant (e.g., "street") culture and do not achieve to their full

potential because they feel devalued at school, and cultural straddlers manage to switch fluidly between dominant and non-dominant cultural styles and often excel academically (2005). Paul does not fit neatly into this typology. Although he identifies as having an inner "nerd," he is not able to code switch fluently, in part because his difficult childhood left him without the life experiences needed to master mainstream cultural speech and styles. Paul navigated white spaces by being quiet and deferential.

[27] Anderson describes "campaigning for respect" as a constant negotiating of a social pecking order predicated on the willingness to use violence (1999). Vincent's campaign for respect, in stark contrast, relied primarily on proactively building positive relationships with everyone around him. With peers, and in street contexts, Vincent was willing to use violence if the situation demanded, but that was one (last resort) tool in a much larger cultural toolkit Vincent expertly used to get respect.

[28] For more on teachers' disciplinary practices emerging from unfamiliarity with student culture, see Dance (2002).

[29] For more on how the culture of "no excuses" schools can clash with students' basic desire for respect, see Golann (2021: 95).

[30] For more on race and class bias in standardized testing, see Bazemore-James, Shinaprayoon, and Martin (2016).

[31] The New Orleans Police Department does not equip officers with AK-47s, but privately owned assault rifles (mainly AR-15s and AK-47s) were a surprisingly common sight during my fieldwork. Federal law prohibits buying a handgun until age 21, but there is no such prohibition on buying long guns. I met several young people, including two participants, who purchased assault rifles or pump-action shotguns once they turned 18. During my fieldwork, Academy Sports and Outdoors advertised AK-47s on for sale for $749.99. The rifle was likely the private weapon of one of the officers.

[32] Nearly a quarter of U.S. workers have taken leave from work to care for a sick family member. This burden falls disproportionately on women. Women also report worse long-term career consequences for taking such leaves than men (Parker 2017). See Kim Parker, "About one-in-four U.S. workers have taken leave to care for a seriously ill family member," *Pew Research Center*, March 30, 2017.

[33] One consequence of the suburbanization of poverty is that families facing desperate financial difficulties often live in locations that appear outwardly middle class.

[34] After Hurricane Katrina, thousands of households along the Gulf Coast (re)built with what came to be known as "Chinese drywall." I had heard about this problem, but I had no idea how bad it was until I visited Casey's house. The stench was wretched and gave me a headache. See Mowbray (2011).

[35] After Hurricane Katrina, many of the new charter schools took names unconnected to the city. Schools moved frequently from campus to campus, often with little connection to the alumni communities of the buildings they occupied. After I finished my fieldwork, many of these charter schools began changing their names to resurrect the identities of the city's former schools. For more on the politics and legacy of charter school naming in the early years after Hurricane Katrina, see Carr (2013).

CHAPTER 3: THE EFFORT PARADOX

On a muggy, late-August morning in New Orleans, 90 members of the senior class at Strive Prep Charter High filed into the school's cafeteria, taking their seats for a first-day-of-school assembly.[36] The students, mostly Black and from low-income families, opened bagged breakfasts and began filling out worksheets, writing answers to open-ended questions about their plans to attend college. Teachers and administrators circulated the room enforcing silence. As breakfast wrapped up, Mr. Katz, an energetic white 29-year-old teacher and grade-level chair, stood to address the room. He unsheathed a large metallic sword and held it aloft for all to see. Students gasped and giggled.

"Swords like this are created in something called a forge," Mr. Katz said, projecting quiet intensity. "A forge is a very hot oven. It can get up to thousands of degrees. And in fact the hotter the oven, the better your sword will be. The stronger it will be." He analogized the heat of the forge to the hard work of preparing for college and career. School, he told the students, "is the forge for you. The forge is hot. This is your future in the making. And this year, we are going to turn up the heat even higher." He told students to close their eyes and picture themselves ten or twenty years in the future, looking back on their senior year efforts. With hard work, he told them, they would be able to say, "I really met my goals. I got accepted into the [college] program I wanted to, and I was able to start on my future career." He encouraged them to wholeheartedly chase this goal. "This will be the year of no regrets. You put everything you have on the court. You put everything you have in the forge. And you are going to forge your future." (edited fieldnote)

Mr. Katz's message to students was a manifestation of achievement ideology: the longstanding notion that success in life hinges on personal effort, the more the better. It was also emblematic of a newer trend. In recent years, schools like Strive that serve students of color from low-income families have adopted practices inspired by research in a subfield of psychology focused on "character" (Tough 2013; Sparks 2014). This subfield embraces the thesis that success comes from hard work (e.g., Vallerand, Houlfort, and Forest 2014; Claro, Paunesku, and Dweck 2016). It identifies psychological determinants of effort, like "growth mindset" (Dweck 2006) and "grit" (Duckworth 2016), showing that such qualities correlate with success in various endeavors. Findings from this research have garnered interest as ways to combat poverty (Tough 2013).

Skeptics of grit's potential to foster upward mobility argue that individual effort is often insufficient to overcome the substantial challenges of poverty (Cohen 2015; DeLuca Clampet-Lundquist and Edin 2016; Lardier et al. 2019). Yet these critiques of grit scholarship share an assumption with it: the notion that effort itself is uniformly helpful for

personal advancement. Critics continue to understand effort as a universal positive, arguing only that it is not sufficiently positive to overcome the countervailing resistance of social structure.

There is reason to question the assumption that effort is uniformly helpful for attempted upward mobility. Research in other fields, including public health (e.g., James 1994; Bennett et al. 2004), psychology (McFarlin 1985; Miller and Wrosch 2007), and the sociology of the workplace (e.g., Sullivan 2014; Pencavel 2014), reveals substantial downsides of unrestrained effort for wellbeing and productivity.

Drawing on two years of ethnographic data about the transition to college for students from Strive Prep and another New Orleans public high school, this chapter investigates origins and repercussions of overwork in the context of attempted upward mobility. It describes an *effort paradox*: a challenge that elicits counterproductive goal-directed effort, such that trying harder actually makes success less likely. Despite having their basic needs met—and thus presumably having the freedom to opt for a sustainable workload— several study participants nevertheless failed in college because of overwork and consequent exhaustion.

For participants, being tempted into unnecessary overwork was a structured process. This chapter identifies mechanisms that contributed to participants' failure-through-overcommitment. It demonstrates that decisions to overwork can be influenced by life circumstances that shape how acutely people feel their desires and how efficacious they believe effort to be.[37] For study participants, these factors were shaped by class and race, emerging from experiences of growing up in low-income households and being Black. Experiences of childhood poverty fostered pent-up desire to attain life goals. School-based indoctrination about effort and grit—a curriculum designed specifically for low-income

children of color—imparted misleading lessons about when and how to "double down" on effort. Together, these experiences primed participants to overcommit, to subsequently misdiagnose their resulting struggles as signs of inadequate effort, and to ultimately work themselves into failure.

This study contributes to research on attempted upward mobility, non-cognitive skills, and the sociology of education by highlighting a previously unidentified mechanism of social reproduction: socially structured counterproductive effort. Adding to the list of ways social structure can perniciously coopt low-income people into inadvertent "self-damnation" (Willis 1977:3; Sennett and Cobb 1972; Young 2004; Silva 2013; Ray 2017), this study describes how social structure can render effort aimed at positive goals harmful to advancement. This study also reveals a flaw in policies to help children overcome disadvantage through grit (Tough 2013; Duckworth 2016), showing how overreliance on hard work can actually undermine goal attainment. Furthermore, it advances research in the sociology of education about how society differentially cultivates and rewards personal dispositions. While prior scholarship has primarily focused on the emergence and implications of interactional inclinations like deference to authority (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 1976; Bourdieu 1995; Lareau [2003] 2011; Calarco 2011; Golann 2015; Jack 2019), this study adds to growing evidence that the cultivation of savviness about effort also matters a great deal (Khan 2012; Khan and Jerolmack 2013; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). By tracing structural origins of the effort paradox that befell study participants, this chapter helps point the way toward a sociology of effort that does not lapse into individualism or victim blaming.

EFFORT AND MOBILITY

The question of what role effort plays in "getting ahead" has been contentious. Scholarship focused on psychological traits required for upward mobility views effort as critical for advancement (e.g., Duckworth 2016). Sociological research on attempted upward mobility is much more skeptical about effort, noting structural challenges that stymie even very strong attempts to get ahead (e.g., MacLeod [1987] 2009). Neither side, however, considers how effort can undermine itself when it is expended past sustainable limits.

Psychological Determinants of Effort

In recent decades, a great deal of scholarship has examined "non-cognitive skills" (Heckman 2000), identifying individual-level traits and inclinations other than intelligence that correspond to educational and labor market success (see Farkas 2003; Kautz et al. 2014 for reviews). Most attention focuses on traits that govern productivity and effort (Farkas 2003). Some traits, like "grit"—defined as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth et al. 2007:1087)—are direct metrics of propensity to expend personal effort. Others, like "growth mindset" (Dweck 2006), and "hope" (Lopez 2013), relate to confidence that one's efforts will pay off in the future (Anderson et al. 2016).

Grit in particular denotes the propensity to work very hard toward a goal. Duckworth and colleagues, who introduced the concept of grit, framed their initial study as an inquiry into how and why "a few exceptional individuals push themselves to their limits" (2007:1087). Grit, they write, "entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (2007:1087-88). Measures of grit predict successful completion of grueling tasks, such as making it through a summer boot camp at West Point (Duckworth et al. 2007).

Teaching "character strengths" like grit has become a widespread practice in schools that serve low-income students of color (Love 2019). Many of these schools follow the "no excuses" pedagogical model, which aims to boost students' academic achievement and life outcomes through high and strict disciplinary expectations (Golann 2015). One such network, the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter school operator, provides teachers with a playbook to help foster grit in students (KIPP 2020). Some KIPP schools also give out grit grades on report cards (Sparks 2014). Teachers understand grit to mean an inclination toward extremely hard goal-directed work (Willey 2014).

Targeting grit training at low-income children of color is part of an ignominious historical pattern. Race and class have long served as misguided metrics of individual industriousness. Examples range from the grotesque logic of slave markets, where "a dark complexion became a sign of an innate capacity for cutting cane" (Johnson 1999:149), to modern racial stereotypes that simultaneously associate Blackness with athleticism and laziness (Patterson 1998) or with poor work ethic (Lamont 2000), to baseless ideas about working class listlessness and disorganization (Whyte 1943). Such race- and class-based thinking about effort pervades education (Bowles and Gintis 1976; MacLeod [1987] 2009; Bettie 2003; Carter 2005; Tyson 2011).

Indeed, the faulty belief that students of color from low-income families are not learning hard work from their parents often undergirds grit training. At no-excuses schools, for example, administrators set out to instill students with an ethos of vigor and productivity, trying to counteract what some perceive as "cynical and apathetic attitudes on the part of families" (Matthews 2009:102, 160). Such thinking singles out parents of color for critique. "Black culture," Thernstrom and Thernstrom argue in their book *No Excuses*, "has much to

do with the racial gap in academic achievement," (2004:120). They point in particular to "the low expectations of [Black] parents" (2004:147). Despite evidence that Black parents actually have *higher* academic expectations than white parents after controlling for socioeconomic status (Yamamoto and Holloway 2010), and despite the fact that poor people in the United States often espouse an ideology of hard work and work doggedly hard to make ends meet (e.g., Newman 1999), some school leaders nevertheless assert that their students require exposure to "middle class" values to counteract the putatively harmful influence of parental culture. "Are we conservative here?" rhetorically asks a no-excuses school leader quoted by Thernstrom and Thernstrom. "Of course we are. We teach middle-class values like responsibility" (2004:65).

Critics decry these ideas as racist and classist, arguing that grit education is disproportionately aimed at low-income students of color and that it shifts focus away from the external structural challenges these students face (e.g., Herold 2015; Love 2019). In reply, defenders argue that grit training is not intended solely for low-income students (e.g., Tough 2013) and that concepts like grit are compatible with larger efforts at structural reform (Herold 2015; Anderson et al. 2016).

Structural Resistance to Effort

Another, related critique argues that grit alone is not enough to propel upward mobility. In leveling this critique, scholars invoke effort-versus-structure imagery, describing personal advancement as a struggle between individual effort pushing forward in one direction and structural challenges pushing back in the other. For example, DeLuca and colleagues write that the challenges of poverty are an "undertow," acting as "a drag on [young people's] momentum as they attempted to launch," (DeLuca et al. 2016:120). In the

face of such overwhelming resistance, the authors argue, "grit is just not enough," (DeLuca et al. 2016:145). Other critics of grit make variations of this argument, describing aspirants' best efforts as simply no match for structural challenges (Cohen 2015; Lardier et al. 2019). And more broadly, the effort-versus-structure concept often appears in arguments against other forms of achievement ideology (e.g., Williams and Kornblum 1985; MacLeod [1987] 2009; Newman 1999; Alexander, Entwisle, and Oson 2014).

A clear implication of the effort-versus-structure argument is that effort is wholly beneficial. Authors describe effort as the fundamental counteracting force required to overcome structural challenges. For Newman, to be upwardly mobile is to "push toward the top" (1999:174). Alexander and colleagues describe how "the urban disadvantaged try to lift themselves up" (2014:99) against "the drag of conditions that hold others back" (2014:14). Williams and Kornblum call low-income young people who excel despite difficult childhood circumstances "superkids" who display particularly pronounced "drive and motivation" (1985:16-17).

For authors who invoke the effort-versus-structure argument, the point is not that effort is the cure for poverty; they argue that structural resistance can scuttle even heroic efforts. But they imply that all else equal, more effort is always better. Eldar Shafir, whose research shows that scarcity creates a "bandwidth tax" on mental effort (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013), was quoted in a news article laying out this assumption quite clearly. "I have no problem with the idea that whoever you are, having grit will be better than not having grit," he said. It is just that the poor face "stresses that are much harder to ignore" than stresses facing the affluent, meaning that grit will only get them so far (Cohen 2015).

The assumption in mobility scholarship that effort is uniformly beneficial for "getting ahead"—such that expending additional effort will increase the odds of success, and at worst cannot hurt them—deserves greater theoretical and empirical scrutiny. At least three distinct literatures reveal substantial downsides of unrestrained effort.

One literature in public health documents the bodily consequences for Black Americans of long-term, high-effort coping in response to discrimination, a phenomenon called "John Henryism" (for reviews, see Bennett et al. 2004; Felix et al. 2019). Such high-effort coping has been linked to hypertension (e.g., Clark, Adams, and Clark 2001), depression (Hudson 2016), and increased cortisol levels (Merritt, McCallum, and Fritsch 2010). John Henryism is named both for the legend of John Henry, a Black "steel driving man" said to have dropped dead after winning a race against a steam-powered tunnel-boring machine, and for John Henry Martin, a Black former sharecropper who worked hard enough to buy a 75-acre farm but prematurely wore out his body in the process (James 1994).

Another literature, focused on effort and employment, shows that overwork can lead to decreased productivity and poor health. When employees work too long, each additional hour's labor yields lower output than the hour before (e.g., Pencavel 2014; Collewet and Saurmann 2017). Overwork also takes a toll on employees' mental and physical wellbeing (Iwasaki, Takahashi, and Nakata 2006; Kuroda and Yamamoto 2018). In extreme cases, overwork can lead to death (Sullivan 2014).

A third literature in psychology examines the harm caused by "nonproductive persistence": effort expended in pursuit of an unobtainable goal. Research shows that nonproductive persistence makes the consequences of inevitable failure worse, leading to wasted time and diminished health (McFarlin 1985; Miller and Wrosch 2007).

This chapter makes a point that is complementary to but distinct from the contributions described above. Many of the above works examine cases where effort is narrowly effective but yields terrible collateral consequences. For example, John Henry Martin's hard work paid off in that he successfully acquired his farm, but his success was overshadowed by the repercussions for his health. By contrast, this chapter shows how unrestrained effort can be harmful even in a narrow sense, making success at a chosen task less likely. Thus, this chapter also goes one step further than studies about the decreased productivity or even outright futility of unrestrained effort (e.g., McFarlin 1985; Pencavel 2014). It examines cases where goal-directed effort is *counterproductive* to the task at hand.

The Effort Paradox

Effort becomes counterproductive when it is exerted unsustainably hard in pursuit of a goal that could otherwise be met with more moderate exertion. For example, it is counterproductive for a marathoner to set out at a sprint because this strategy will lead to premature exhaustion. The types of failure examined in this chapter are analogous: instances of unforced overexertion where a person voluntarily overcommits in an attempt to achieve life goals, only to tire from the untenable effort.[38]

People can fall victim to an effort paradox even if their efforts are justly rewarded. This is because effort paradoxes emerge from cumulative fatigue that accrues regardless of how well an effort is paying off. Even professional marathoners, who see the largest possible payoff for their efforts (e.g., running at the fastest possible speed for a given level of effort), can still set out unsustainably hard. Indeed, the relationship between the size of a payoff for a given task and the effort people put into that task is

not straightforward (Bell and Freeman 2000; Stewart and Swaffield 2008). Being at a disadvantage relative to others certainly *can* prompt overwork, as in cases of Black people who "work twice as hard to get half as far" because of discrimination (DeSante 2013). But it can likewise dissuade effort, as in cases of people who give up when they see the deck stacked against them (e.g., Willis 1977).

Excessive effort can only properly be understood as counterproductive when there is a viable alternative to work less hard. The availability of such an alternative is an important scope condition for the effort paradox. An amateur marathoner tasked with running a world record time might set out at an unsustainable pace, for example, but it makes little sense to view this effort as counterproductive because there is no other feasible option. Similarly, when young people in poverty are forced to work to make ends meet while simultaneously trying to advance (e.g., Goldrick-Rab 2016; Hart 2019), the resulting overextension is unavoidable. By contrast, if a young person has the material support to focus solely on advancement, they gain some autonomy to choose how hard to work. If they nevertheless become overextended and prematurely exhausted, their excess effort can rightly be viewed as counterproductive to its aims, because comparatively moderate effort could have yielded success.

The ethnographic case study that follows identifies processes structured by poverty and racism that can prompt this type of counterproductive striving. Young people who fall victim to such an effort paradox fail not despite their best efforts but precisely because of them.

STRUCTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE EFFORT PARADOX

Effort can prove counterproductive to its aims in cases of overextension, when a person tries to do too much for too long. For the young men I profile, processes structured by poverty and racism influenced the temptation to overextend. This chapter identifies two such processes, although others likely exist. One process amplified and multiplied the young men's desires, which could prime them to become unnecessarily overcommitted if given the chance. Another process inculcated the young men with misleading intuition about the importance and efficacy of individual effort, which could prompt them to misapprehend signs of overcommitment as evidence of inadequate personal willpower. Together, these processes left some participants poised to overwork, setting the stage for them to fall into an effort paradox. However, these influences were not fully deterministic. As I show in subsequent sections, exposure to these processes did not guarantee counterproductive overwork. Material constraints and cautionary life experiences could create checks on voluntary overcommitment.

Process 1: Disadvantage Amplifies and Multiplies Desires

Like most young people, this study's participants aspired to build purposeful, fulfilling lives. Poverty and its attendant hardships sharpened their yearning to achieve these goals, making them feel this desire especially fervently and urgently. The resulting intensity of their desires left them eager to unreservedly chase their life goals if given the chance. Poverty also proliferated the goals the young men might pursue, multiplying the outlets into which the young men could choose to pour effort. In similar work, Ray (2017) shows how conditions of poverty leave young people unsure how to split their energies between short-

and long-term goals. This section builds on Ray's work by emphasizing how deprivation can make the yearning for long-term goals feel compellingly acute and pressing.

Some participants, like Dorian, had already found pursuits that felt like a calling. Dorian, a tall young man with a throwback flattop haircut and a winning, confidently goofy gap-toothed grin, had fallen in love with the arts—especially photography. Dorian had not thrived academically in high school, clashing with teachers and administrators over disciplinary practices he considered stifling. But he had discovered interests outside of school, in the city's overlapping worlds of skateboarding culture, fashion design, photography, and filmmaking. For Dorian, these undertakings had become what DeLuca and colleagues call an "identity project," a "source of meaning that provides a strong sense of self and is linked to concrete activities to which youth commit themselves," (DeLuca,et al. 2016:66). Dorian had embraced his identity project, aided in no small part by his knack for cultivating relationships with adult mentors whose work he admired. By the spring semester of his senior year of high school, Dorian was working with one mentor on a series of photographic portraits of New Orleans street life, with another who was shooting and editing a full-length documentary set in rural Louisiana, and with several others who ran local skate-inspired fashion brands that he featured in his photography.

Other participants, like Kenya, were not yet sure what pursuits they would embrace in life. But they were no less committed to building bright futures for themselves. Kenya, a taciturn young man with an unhurried gait, believed that many people in his life expected him to fail. After serving a yearlong expulsion for taking marijuana to school, Kenya returned to Strive Prep for his junior year and came to feel that his teachers saw him as irredeemably delinquent. He recalled telling the principal: "It feel like y'all treat me different since I came back." He appreciated that his senior-year teachers seemed to see more

potential in him, especially his science teacher. "I feel that she expects a lot out of me," he said, "and I like that." He intended to prove his doubters wrong. "I want to go to college, hopefully," he told me, soon after we met.

For all participants, poverty amplified their desire to make something of their lives. Experiences of material deprivation, and of watching caregivers struggle to provide for them, left them determined to escape such strain. Kenya's perspective is illustrative. His mother Tamika, a tenth-grade dropout, struggled during Kenya's childhood to keep him and his siblings housed and fed. As she battled homelessness and worked a series of jobs she despised—checking in Johns as a front desk attendant at a seedy motel, earning below minimum wage changing the diapers of elderly clients—she told her five children that education was their ticket to a better life. Kenya took her message to heart. "You ever eaten a just-mayonnaise sandwich?" he asked, recalling a time he and his siblings went hungry when his mother was out of work. "If you don't go to college, you're screwed."

Childhoods of poverty also left participants feeling acutely aware that they had been denied opportunities afforded to better-off peers, which lent urgency to their yearning for the lives they wanted. Dorian, for example, fixated on the fact that Strive Prep, like many Title I schools serving students from low-income families, did not offer formal visual arts classes (Parsad and Spiegelman 2012). Dorian believed that he and his peers possessed vast reservoirs of potential that remained untapped because of such lack of exposure. "I guarantee you we have so much talent we don't know about," he told me. "We are educated out of our creativity." This sense of injustice led Dorian to approach his work with missionary zeal. Between photo shoots, he began to plaster the walls of his bedroom with hand-drawn plans for a website, which would feature his photography and work from other young artists in the city. Stashed away in the drawer of a battered dresser, on a carefully

143

handwritten page of a spiral notebook, Dorian kept the text he would feature under the site's

"About" tab:

> DORIAN'S WRITING: We believe the world is nothing without self-expression through creativity. […] A world without creativity is black and white. Stripped of soul. […] Art is our religion. You as a creator, your job is to voice this religion through your creative crafts to the world. Where you showcase this religion is whether [sic] it's a museum, the streets, an alley, or where you performing. Those places are our churches, cathedrals, temples, to spread this creative plague. […] The art frees us and shows the world who we are.

This statement—part personal credo, part call to arms for his generation—perfectly captured the urgency and sincerity Dorian brought to his work. He felt a void that needed filling.

A sense of obligation to needy family members also intensified participants' desires. Vincent, an energetic, jovial young man with a wispy beard, dearly wanted to become a reliable breadwinner for some of his closest loved ones. An aspiring entrepreneur, Vincent had begun mowing lawns after school and on weekends. He planned to create a string of family businesses that could one day employ any relative who needed a job. His family's finances were stable, but they had not always been. He had seen how difficult it was for his stepfather to find reliable work after his release from prison. He also anticipated that his incarcerated cousin, with whom he spoke regularly on an expensive prison-operated video conferencing service, would face similar employment challenges upon his release.

> VINCENT: [My cousin] tells me, "I'm gonna need you. Try to keep your business going." Like the grass cutting. He gonna need the help. And then I got little cousins who don't got no job experience and shit like, you know what I'm saying? So they gonna need my help. So like I said, there's so much going on. That's why I be hard on myself. Discipline myself to do the things I got to do.

Vincent had come to see his life as a high-stakes entrepreneurial mission to forge a bright future for his family.

For five of the eight participants, the memory of tragically deceased immediate family members also intensified their desire to succeed. The symbolic stakes felt every bit as important as the material stakes. Casey, for example, lost his father in a shooting at the

beginning of his senior year of high school. After his father's death, Casey returned over and over again to memories of his father's confidence in him. "He didn't have to tell me to push myself," Casey said. "He already saw it in me." Like many of his peers coping with the premature loss of family members or close friends, Casey believed that he could honor his father's legacy by thriving in life. "I know he's still looking down and watching," Casey told me. "I want to make him proud." The thought was at once an inspiration and a gnawing source of additional pressure.

Poverty not only intensified the young men's desire to build fulfilling lives, it also multiplied the outlets into which they could pour their effort. With little money at their disposal, they would have to work to attain many intermediate objectives on the way to building the lives they wanted—objectives that more affluent young people could attain with no additional effort. For example, Dorian knew that in order to fulfill his dream of becoming a professional photographer and filmmaker, he would eventually need to buy expensive photography equipment and a high-end computer for photo and film editing. To attain his desired life, he also intended to pursue a college education in photography and film. Working to acquire photography equipment would require Dorian to direct his effort in one direction; working to earn his degree would require him to direct his effort in another. He would have to choose whether to pursue these goals one at a time or simultaneously. And he would have to decide how vigorously to work for each one.

By sharpening their desires and requiring effort to fulfill all of them, poverty laid the groundwork for participants to overcommit. It fostered a pressing, deep-set urge to do everything in their power to build the lives they wanted. It also created a plethora of alluring-but-demanding outlets for this urge.

Process 2: Misleading Effort Training Yields False Sense of Efficacy

Other factors set the stage for overwork by teaching the young men misleading lessons about effort. In school, participants were steeped in messaging and experiences that taught them to overcome adversity by trying harder. Concepts like "grit," "digging deep," and "perseverance" became go-to strategies of action for students facing challenging workloads. Doubling down on effort became a familiar, intuitive, and accessible approach to goal attainment in students' cultural "toolkit" (Hannerz 1969; Swidler 1986).

At Strive Prep, the no-excuses school that seven of the eight participants attended, messaging about effort was pervasive. During my fieldwork, it began with the speech that opens this essay about forging swords, and it never let up. Each school day, students received repeated reminders about the importance of trying their hardest. They walked to class under banners that read "Dig Deeper," "Stretch yourself," and "Without struggle, there is no progress…and no greatness." Teachers regularly used the concepts of "urgency," "hustle," and "grit" to frame their feedback to classes. In one typical instance, an English teacher called for students' attention to reprimand them for not putting enough effort into their reading assignment. "I'm not seeing you work with urgency," he said, as A.J. listened intently. "You should be working hard now so that you don't have homework. Get to work, stay at level zero [silent]. I should see you looking hard at your book, not just staring blankly at your book."

Emphasis on personal effort often occurred in situations where students were given little autonomy (see Golann 2015), such that "trying hard" became a simple matter of complying with very explicit instructions. Using two techniques popularized by author and pedagogical consultant Doug Lemov—"What to Do" (Lemov 2010:417) and "Narrating

146

Positive Behavior" (Lemov 2018)—teachers structured and praised students' efforts. A characteristic case occurred one morning in environmental science class.

> TEACHER: Wave to me if you need more time. OK, if you just gave me a wave continue finishing the ocean wave part of your packet. You have eight minutes. [Sets timer.] We are doing this at level zero [silently]. Begin.
> JAYDIN: [Looks back down and continues writing in packet.]
> DORIAN: [Sharpens pencil.]
> TEACHER: Team 3 needs more time on their packet. They are working silently from their textbooks. Excellent. Jaydin and Devonte have started silently working from their textbooks. Those of us using our four terms in our responses are showing me that they are really going to be prepared for the exit ticket [end-of-class quiz].

In such structured classes, students could choose *whether* to exert effort, but not *how* to do so. They gained little practice guiding and regulating their own work.

Moreover, both Strive Prep and O.C. Haley paired effort-based messaging with forgiving academic policies that taught misleading lessons about the efficacy of unrestrained exertion. Although effort-based messaging was not as all-consuming at O.C. Haley, there was still plenty of it, with teachers and administrators regularly linking "hard work," "hustle," and "focus" to student success. And both schools, like many high schools across the country, adhered to a philosophy of "teaching for mastery" (e.g., Block 1980), meaning that grades depended on students demonstrating competence with presented academic material. Alternate grading methods could leave students with little recourse if their grades were poor close to the end of a semester. But in practice, grading for mastery meant that students often enjoyed second or third chances to improve low marks. Students monitored their grades through online portals like PowerSchool, identifying tests or assignments on which they had done poorly. Teachers would let students retry failed work in class, during lunch, or after school. Because students had clear outlets to salvage failing grades, teachers and administrators often admonished them to dig themselves out of figurative holes. Students received a clear message: if you find yourself in a bind, the way out is to buckle down, try harder, and make up for past mistakes through effort and force of will.

Midway through the fall semester at O.C. Haley, the principal called the entire senior class into an assembly to deliver just such a rallying cry.

> PRINCIPAL: If you ask me how many people are going to graduate on time? I would say, right now, less than 50%.
> STUDENTS: [Bustle of gasps and murmurs.]
> PRINCIPAL: Hear these words. You might show up [to graduation] with your mama, your grandma, your nana, you uncle, and them. That is not going to move me. The only way you graduate is if you turn this around. It's on you. I'm telling you right now, you'd better get to your teachers, look on PowerSchool, and bust your butt to get it done. […] The only way forward is to put the effort in. To put the work in. It's the only way.

Casey, who had been grieving the loss of his father and had failing grades in drama and environmental science, listened from the audience. Later, when prompted by a teacher to set academic goals for himself, Casey wrote: "Make sure I'm not lazy to do my work, and cut back on wasting time on things that are foolish." By trying harder, he resolved, he would pull his grades up.

Effort-based training in schools did not create a blanket mindset that made students always work too hard. Rather, it provided students with a repertoire that they selectively activated when they were facing daunting levels of work they believed was important. As Dorian reflected, years after high school:

> DORIAN: If gym class was hard, I'm not gonna be like, "Well, I gotta persevere." Fuck no. I just don't care enough about it. But if I'm with [a film mentor], and we're doing a long shoot and I'm on audio, I care about that. If shit gets hard, I'm really thinking to myself, "I'm gonna push through."

Learned reliance on grit, like many cultural repertoires, influenced not "the ultimate values toward which action is oriented" but rather the strategy undergirding the action (Swidler 1986:273).

In these ways, effort-based training in schools taught students that the proper response to a daunting workload is to exert copious effort. All the while, however, they missed out on crucial lessons about how to moderate and direct their efforts in more autonomous, less forgiving circumstances.

THE EFFORT PARADOX PLAYS OUT

Once college began, participants' level of material freedom dictated their leeway to allocate effort as they saw fit. Juan, facing the largest material demands, had little choice but to devote all of his effort to making ends meet. He was caring for his young son, he needed to help with household expenses, he faced a long commute, and he lacked childcare options. Although he registered for the fall semester, he never set foot on campus.[39] Jaydin and Paul faced smaller-but-still-substantial demands. Neither had children, but both needed to help with bills. Jaydin's mother was out of work. Paul was splitting rent and bills with his older sister. Despite these challenges, each perceived the opportunity to work simultaneously for subsistence and advancement. Both started college classes, but each would also need to work a low-wage job to help make ends meet (see e.g., Goldrick-Rab 2016, Hart 2019). This path required de facto overcommitment and maximal effort.

On the other hand, Dorian, Casey, Vincent, Kenya, and A.J. did not need to work to make ends meet. Stable living arrangements—either on campus or at home—meant they did not need to worry about daily survival or try to escape unlivable circumstances.[40] Loans and Pell Grants gave them small windfalls of money to spend. College class schedules gave them more flexible time than their high school schedules had permitted. With few non-negotiable demands on their time outside of class, Dorian, Casey, Vincent, Kenya, and A.J. could choose how many commitments to take on and how hard to exert themselves. As I discuss in a subsequent section, A.J. and Kenya managed to resist the urge to overcommit. Dorian, Vincent, and Casey, however, were tempted into taking on more commitments than they could feasibly meet.

Overcommitting Despite Viable Alternatives

In the early weeks of the first semester of college, Dorian, Vincent, and Casey seemed to thrive. For example, Dorian was enthusiastic about his intro to drawing and intro to graphic design classes, where he learned to sketch objects in perspective, color match when mixing paints, and embrace abstract ideas he had previously shied away from in his art. On the days I attended these classes with him, he appeared to thrive, focusing intently as he filled pages and canvases with colorful compositions. He also found a happy home in his writing class, where the curriculum focused on performing in-person interviews and using them to write nonfiction essays. Dorian had experience conducting interviews through his photography work. At his professor's invitation, he gave a thirty-minute lecture on interview techniques, holding his classmates' rapt attention as he presented his work.

Once they sensed that their classes were off to a good start, Dorian, Vincent, and Casey did not relax or slack off. They saw a chance that felt too good to pass up. They could keep up in their classes while also using time and energy outside of class to work toward cherished life goals.

Dorian's extra work was aimed at jumpstarting his artistic career. He hoped to save up for the camera and computer he had long wanted. His current status quo—an amateur-level D-SLR camera and phone-based photo editing software—was workable but far from ideal. To begin saving, Dorian found a part-time job for a design-build company, where he photographed local renovation sites and updated the company website with his pictures. Dorian resolved to start the job while keeping up in his classes. "I'm going to get on my grind," he told me.

Dorian did "get on his grind." He went to classes in the mornings, where he worked hard. After class, he would hustle off campus for photo shoots, and then edit pictures and

150

work on school assignments late into the night. His weekends were packed too. For example, one Saturday, he had four shoots back to back, the first beginning at 7 AM and the last wrapping up well after dark. That final shoot—a private party and book launch where Dorian met the mayor—gave him a taste of the life he was striving for. His pace was "intense" and "tiring," Dorian admitted, but the experiences it afforded him were heady and addictive.

Dorian's story of becoming spread thin is emblematic of the process I watched play out for participants who fell victim to the effort paradox. For Dorian, college studies and work outside of college felt like part of the same overarching mission to build the life he wanted. Dorian saw his job as closely aligned with his film and photography studies in college—it was all part of the same "identity project" to become the person he wanted to be (Deluca et al. 2016). "I'm learning a lot [at this job], and I'm getting my money up for this camera," Dorian told me. "It feels good."

Vincent, the aspiring entrepreneur, similarly saw a close alignment between his studies and his outside-of-college work. Vincent was pursuing a mortuary studies degree at a community college to prepare to one day open his own funeral home, and he was continuing to build his lawn care business. The classes and the mowing were part of the same overarching entrepreneurial project to open a string of family enterprises, which he hoped would also one day include a barber shop. "Grass always grow. Hair always grow. And people always die," he said, his eyes twinkling above a wry smile. He planned to save money he earned from lawn care to buy a pickup truck, which would help him take farther-flung mowing jobs. He knew that pursuing school and entrepreneurship would require energy and commitment, but he felt eager to take on the challenge. "It's about time to just take care of business now," he told me as college began. "So I'm ready to get it. I'm ready to get it on."

And it was the same for Casey, who saw both college and an off-campus job as twin tickets to independence. During his spring semester, Casey took a job at Nordstrom to save up for a security deposit and rent for an apartment. Getting the apartment would allow him to take summer classes at a nearby community college that shared credits with his university, helping him work toward graduation. It would also allow him to spend more time with his childhood best friend, who would be his roommate. To Casey, the college classes and the job both felt like avenues to adulthood; he saw them both as part of the same project:

> CASEY: I'm about to have a job…. I'll tell them my school schedule and then we gonna be poppin'. And I'm gonna get my car after my mom file her taxes. She's gonna pay the insurance and get a battery, 'cause it needs a battery. And then this summer, I'ma stay here in [city name]. I'm gonna work my job and take classes at [city community college]. And I'm gonna get an apartment so I can stay here. So yeah, job, apartment, car. I'ma be grown!

His excitement was palpable as he spoke; he was eager to put in the work to build the life he imagined.

Doubling Down

As their semesters progressed, Dorian, Vincent, Casey, Jaydin, and Paul found it increasingly difficult to keep up with the demands of their undertakings inside and outside of class. Sometimes there were direct scheduling conflicts, such as when a work shift overlapped with class time. More often, the combined undertakings simply required more effort than any reasonable person could consistently put forth.

All of the young men were overcommitted, but not all had the same options. Jaydin and Paul had no choice but to keep their jobs—Jaydin's at a takeout seafood stand, Paul's at a fast food restaurant. However, they could opt to withdraw from classes in time to avoid failing grades and maintain financial aid eligibility. Dorian, Vincent, and Casey could also withdraw from classes, or they could quit their jobs.

Failure did not happen all at once. Warning signs of overcommitment came first: fatigue, missed classes or assignments, low exam scores. In moments of reckoning, the young men interpreted these signs not as evidence of incompatible undertakings and unreasonable workload but rather as indicators of inadequate personal will. After absorbing years' worth of effort-based messaging in school, this interpretation felt natural to the young men. They responded by doubling down, resolving to overcome their problems by staying more focused and trying harder. This is one of the ways that trying harder proved counterproductive to success: it kept participants locked into unsustainable levels of commitment past a point of no return.

Casey, for example, acknowledged that working left him with little time for studying and homework, but he resolved to persevere through hard work. He was in danger of losing his financial aid if he finished the year with too low a GPA. He texted me about his plans for salvaging the semester:

> CASEY: [My GPA] has to be 1.5 or they take my financial aid away… but ima just grind for the rest
> of the semester. The only class I really have problem with is Math, so ima get it together in the class
> cause I failed one quiz already and we took 3
> RESEARCHER: Got it
> CASEY: Bout [to] get on my grind

Such a last-minute sprint to pull his grades up felt familiar to him—it followed the pattern he had learned in middle school and high school, where "teaching for mastery" (Block 1980) led to frequent end-of-semester pushes. "I'm not going to lie," he told me. "This is how it usually go. My grades start out bad, and then I do what I gotta do to pull them up." Doubling down on effort had become Casey's go-to strategy in his "toolkit" of options for dealing with overwhelming challenges (Swidler 1986).

Indeed, years later, looking back on his decision to double down on employment and coursework, Casey chalked up his intuition about hard work to what he had learned in

school. At the no-excuses middle school he attended, Casey recalled, "we used to have five key words," he said, "and one of the words was perseverance." During the school's long days, teachers would tell Casey and his peers how to cope with exhaustion:

> CASEY: Perseverance, they used to be big on us about perseverance. You know, you gotta push through man! […] I used to be at the bus stop at 6 in the morning, and then not get back home 'til 5. You have to persevere through that. That was how they shaped my mindset to be. Like, just perseverance, man.

Casey had learned to equate the feeling of backing off with giving up, and giving up was not something he was inclined to do.

Dorian's first moment of reckoning came in October of his first semester of college. As he tried to keep up with his photography job and his classes, he began to show worrying signs of strain. He was realizing that his boss at the photography job was mercurial and demanding. "She just put unnecessary stress on me," Dorian said. Whenever he would make edits to the company's website or upload new photos, Dorian reported, his boss would second guess his work and make him redo it. He was also slipping behind in Spanish, not keeping pace with the homework and struggling to wake up in time for class. He looked exhausted whenever I spent time with him. "I can't wait until this semester over," Dorian told me. "I'm going to sleep for days."

Dorian had suffered some depressive episodes in high school, and I could sense that he might be sliding into another one, exhausted from his frenetic work and perhaps overwhelmed by the prospect of fulfilling all of his commitments. After a tumultuous weekend in which he missed photo gigs and quarreled with his parents, he skipped his Monday classes and considered dropping out of college. But by Tuesday, he had changed his mind. He resolved to make appointments with his professors to take stock of work he had missed and redouble his efforts. "I'm gonna get it together," he told me.

Dorian's professors were understanding. For example, his English professor met one-on-one with Dorian in her office, granting him an extension on an assignment and creating a plan with him to help him get caught up. The pattern of having an inflexible boss but flexible professors held true for Casey, Paul, and Jaydin too. They would likely be fired for missing a work shift, but if they missed a class, they sensed they would have leeway to get caught up. This leeway was only temporarily helpful. Because the young men were trying to do more work than they could sustain, eventual failure was inevitable.

Dorian tried even harder, as he had vowed to do. However, although he gritted it out until the end of the semester, he seemed increasingly haggard and scattered. His class attendance grew spotty. He completed and presented a beautiful final project in his design class, which he passed. But in a poignant irony, he failed English, the class where he had given the guest lecture. He also failed Spanish.

Dorian's second moment of reckoning came before his second semester of college. Vowing to do better at all of his undertakings, Dorian doubled down on his work-and-school approach. He quit the photography job, realizing that it was more demanding than it was worth. Not yet having saved enough for the camera and lenses, he took a job as an overnight valet at a downtown hotel. Between his classes and his new job, he would be working at least as many hours as he had the previous semester, but he seemed optimistic he could pull it off.

As he reflected years later on his decision to double down on simultaneously pursuing employment and college, Dorian recalled his faith in willpower and determination. "I thought I could do both, basically," he said. "I thought that by working hard enough, I could handle it." When the going got tough, Dorian recalled, "I was like, 'Alright, I'm going to persevere through this shit.'"

After their own moments of reckoning, Vincent and Jaydin also doubled down, vowing to focus more and work harder to succeed where they had previously failed. Like Dorian and Casey, they attributed their early struggles not to overcommitment but to lack of adequate effort. Vincent's moment of reckoning came at the end of his first semester of college. He had missed too many days working on his lawn care service to pass his classes. Rather than reevaluating his commitments, he vowed to simply try harder the next semester. "The thing that happen with me is…I'm not all the way there," he told me. "I'm not ten times as focused as I could be."

Jaydin's moment of reckoning came after he fell behind in his classes during the fall semester. Jaydin had not been working quite as hard as Vincent, Dorian, and Casey. After initially struggling to balance his work and school commitments, Jaydin had stopped going to classes for a time, sheepishly trying to avoid the stern rebukes he anticipated his professors might give him. But as the deadline to withdraw approached, he resolved not to quit. Like Vincent, he attributed his struggles to inadequate effort, and he pledged to catch up through force of will. "I can do it if I want to," he said.

Paul, for his part, never quite arrived at a moment of reckoning about his overwork. Beginning midway through his fall semester, a simmering gun conflict pushed Paul slowly into hiding, forcing him to stop attending classes and quit his job. It is telling that it took the threat of death to dissuade Paul from strenuously chasing his dream of upward mobility. Like the other young men, he was deeply committed to this work.

Failure: Exhaustion and Elimination

Doubling down could spark a flurry of activity that helped the young men temporarily catch up, but their commitments were unsustainable. They were fundamentally

156

trying to do too much. This was the other way that effort proved counterproductive to success: when exerted past a sustainable threshold, it led to exhaustion and failure.

For Dorian, failure took the form of burning out. Physically and emotionally exhausted, he fell apart midway through his second semester of college. As the spring semester began, he would come home from work at 6 AM, sleep for perhaps two hours, and then wake up in time for his 10 AM math class. Before long, the exhaustion started to show. He had bags under his eyes. His relationship with his girlfriend deteriorated. One morning, less than two months into the semester, Dorain's mom called me to ask if I had seen him. She had heard from his girlfriend that the two had broken up, and that Dorian may have been arrested. "I don't know where my child is," she told me, her voice breaking. I called the jail to see if he was there, feeling a mix of relief and dread when I learned he was not. Eventually, his mom called back. She had learned that Dorian had suffered a breakdown, dialing 911 in the middle of the night to say he was suicidal. The police had picked him up on the street, placed him in handcuffs, and taken him to the hospital.

When I went with Dorian's mom to visit him in the emergency room, Dorian was nearly catatonic. He lay curled up under a thin sheet on an examining table, his eyes open, his breaths coming in and out with a slight tremor. His mother bent over to hug him. She picked a piece of lint out of his hair and then settled into a chair to wait. Hours later, Dorian was admitted to the psychiatric ward, where he stayed for almost a week.

When he was released, Dorian had missed midterms in his classes and overrun minimum attendance requirements. He met with a college counselor, who briefly considered whether Dorian might be able to salvage his semester. Dorian would need to get each professor's approval to do makeup work and exams. The counselor told him to consider this option only if he had "a superhero sense of energy right now." Dorian, whose superhero

sense of energy early in the semester had prompted his breakdown, looked thoroughly drained. Both agreed that it would be best for him to withdraw from his classes. Dorian blamed his failure on insufficient personal effort and willpower. "It's on me," he said. "I'm not in the mindset. And I'm not really focused on it. And I don't know why I can't, like, I really can't make [college] my #1 priority. I'm not trying to say like I'm not strong enough to make it. But—" he trailed off.

Casey and Vincent did not burn out, but they failed just the same.[41] Doubling down had kept each one committed to an untenable path. Exhausted, both men eventually stopped managing to maintain their frenetic pace in both work and school, falling behind in their classes as a result. Casey stuck with the department store job, even as he grappled with the stifling limits it placed on his ability to study and do homework. Vincent continued to work to expand his lawn business during his second semester, even as he scrambled to catch up academically. At the end of the school year, neither had cleared the minimum GPA threshold their colleges required for continued financial aid eligibility.

Jaydin, having passed up the opportunity to withdraw from classes after resolving to work harder, tried briefly to stick to his new resolution. However, he was quickly daunted by the schoolwork he would need to make up, and he fell back into the self-reinforcing pattern of missing class. Although Jaydin would not have been able to quit his job because he needed to support his mother and siblings, and thus might not have had a viable path to academic success that semester, his decision not to withdraw nevertheless proved counterproductive to his advancement. With failing grades in all his classes, he lost his financial aid eligibility, and he was saddled with a 0.0 college GPA that would be hard to overcome in the future.

Only two participants, A.J. and Kenya, passed their first-year classes. Relative to their peers who succumbed to the effort paradox, A.J. and Kenya exerted themselves comparatively narrowly and modestly. Attempts at upward mobility can vary in terms of acceptance of risk (Hamilton and Armstrong 2021), and A.J. and Kenya were both risk averse. By focusing on their academics and foregoing opportunities to work toward complementary goals, they avoided becoming spread thin. By moderating their efforts, they avoided exhaustion.

For A.J. and Kenya—unlike for their peers Dorian, Vincent, Casey, Jaydin, and Paul—typical days required only moderate quantities of work, allowing for substantial downtime. During a typical college day I spent with A.J., he attended 3 total hours of class, spent 20 minutes conducting an interview with a professor for the college newspaper, and spent an additional 2 hours working on an English essay and writing code for his computer science class. He spent the remaining waking hours of his day either eating meals or relaxing in his room, where he played the videogame *Dead or Alive* and streamed several episodes of *The Bernie Mac Show* on his laptop. Likewise, during a typical college day I spent with Kenya, he spent 2 hours attending that day's classes, approximately 15 minutes completing an English class homework assignment, and the remaining hours of the day hanging out with his roommate as they watched YouTube videos, played the videogame *NBA 2K*, and made trips to a tucked-away stoop to smoke marijuana. With typical days like these, both young men completed their academic requirements with energy to spare.

Inclinations that Focus and Moderate Effort

A.J. and Kenya were subject to the same processes that primed overcommitment in their peers. What helped them nevertheless resist these influences to overcommit? Two inclinations appeared to help A.J. and Kenya keep their efforts focused and limited: a sense of caution and a sense of contentment. Both intuitions emerged, at least in part, from each young man's structural position.

More than other participants, A.J. and Kenya could see that their immediate life circumstances would deteriorate if they left college. Like Dorian, Vincent, and Casey, they were materially secure enough during their first semester of college that they did not need to work to make ends meet. However, unlike Dorian, Vincent, and Casey, they had a strong sense that college was a refuge. Dorm life away from New Orleans offered A.J. and Kenya tangible benefits that they were keen to hold onto.

For A.J., moving away to college felt like an escape from his chaotic and demanding childhood home. An introvert, A.J. did not like the frequent parties that his mother and stepfather threw. He also felt burdened by caring for his severely autistic younger brother. At college, by contrast, A.J. could spend all his time focused on himself, and he got to live in a quiet dorm room.

For Kenya, remaining enrolled at his out-of-town college offered him a chance to save his best friend Paul's life. Kenya, soon after learning that Paul was embroiled in a gun conflict in New Orleans, resolved that he wanted Paul to transfer to his out-of-town college to stay safe. Although Kenya was less materially at ease in college than A.J.—Kenya's dorm lacked hot water, and the cafeteria food gave him diarrhea—he resolved that he wanted to remain enrolled despite these hardships so that Paul would agree to the transfer. Paul indeed transferred for the spring semester, and the two became roommates.

For these reasons, A.J. and Kenya experienced college as a refuge in a way that the other young men did not. Dorian and Vincent, for example, lived in clean, supportive homes with plenty of food, and both felt safe in New Orleans. Both lived at home during college, and the prospect of leaving college did not threaten to take their stability away. Likewise, Casey felt supported and safe at home in New Orleans, so his move away to a dorm did not change his sense of basic wellbeing in a way that it did for A.J. and Kenya.

For A.J. and Kenya, the tangible and immediate downsides of failing college fostered a sense of caution. A.J. worried most about his grades. Describing his first finals period in an essay, he wrote:

> A.J.'S WRITING: Terrible scenarios would spin through my head like a broken record from morning to night. In a dream, I saw myself getting bad grades, leading to me getting kicked out of from this university that I've worked so hard to get into.

With such worries front of mind, A.J. turned down an off-campus tutoring job that he believed would leave him too little time to study. "There's only 24 hours in a day," he later explained, looking back on his decision. "You've got to leave enough time for school." Kenya, already scarred from his yearlong expulsion in high school, worried most about disciplinary infractions. His worries amplified when, in an improbable stroke of bad luck, he and his first-semester roommate were nearly expelled after a gunman held them hostage in their dorm room following an on-campus shooting. Administrators wrongly suspected that Kenya and his roommate willingly sheltered the fugitive. Eventually, Kenya was let off with a warning letter accusing him of "aiding and abetting" and "conspiracy." Kenya had already taken a cautious approach to his college commitments and relationships, but afterward, he followed an even more carefully circumscribed pattern of behavior. He only left his room to attend class, pick up cafeteria food, and furtively smoke marijuana, otherwise sticking to himself and (in the spring semester) spending time with Paul. "Last semester scared me,"

Kenya said, as he explained his caution. "I still have the letter [the disciplinary board] gave me. I look at it every time I go home." In purposefully limiting his horizons, Kenya effectively swore off many of the endeavors that were prompting some of his classmates to become spread thin. He stuck to his routines and kept his head down, worried that anything more would only bring trouble.

For A.J. and Kenya, the sense that life outside of college could be a great deal worse also fostered a sense of contentment. With few pressing desires, they were less inclined to chase opportunities outside class. "It feels better," A.J. told me emphatically as he reflected on his new life in college. "I don't have the same excuses I had as when I was in high school." Similarly, as Kenya holed up in his dorm room with Paul, he reminded himself that he was lucky to be there. "I almost went to jail," he told me, reflectively. And he found that his Spartan life in a mostly bare room with few possessions suited him just fine. "I don't care about material things," he said. Indeed, as his birthday approached, I watched as friends and family members asked him what gifts he would like. He told everyone that he had everything he wanted.

DISCUSSION

It is intuitive that hard work to escape poverty should help people succeed. This intuition undergirds achievement ideology in the United States, and it motivates policies that prescribe grit training for young people from low-income families.

This chapter shows how effort can become counterproductive to success in cases of overexertion, and it identifies two social processes emerging from race- and class-based domination that contribute to this *effort paradox*. Specifically, conditions of material deprivation can amplify and multiply long-harbored desires, and misleading effort-based

training can bolster the false sense that it is always efficacious to try as hard as possible. Given the material autonomy to work toward life goals, people subjected to these prior influences can be tempted to overcommit, trying unsustainably hard to achieve what might otherwise be attainable with more moderate exertion over a longer timeframe. Consequently, they work themselves into failure. These findings yield insights for theory about grit, structural barriers, and the contingent usefulness of personal dispositions—insights with practical implications for situations in which people are expected to overcome disadvantage through hard work.

A New Critique of Grit

This chapter presents a new critique of grit and, by extension, a new critique of achievement ideology. Previous critiques argue that strenuous personal effort is often insufficient to overcome structural barriers (e.g., Deluca et al. 2016). By contrast, this chapter shows that grit-oriented mindsets can lead to overextension and exhaustion, prompting failure not despite vigorous effort but because of it. When Dorian thought to himself, "I'm going to persevere through this shit," he was being gritty, and it was to his detriment.

This insight about how grit can perniciously undermine attempts to achieve life goals has important practical implications. Most immediately, it calls into question the widespread practice of encouraging disadvantaged people to exert themselves strenuously when chasing their dreams. Schools like Strive, which tell their students to "dig deep" and "put everything you have on the court," may be inadvertently sowing seeds of overcommitment and failure. Such practices should be reconsidered. Moreover, even schools like O.C. Haley—which also use effort-based messaging, albeit less systematically than schools like Strive—should consider a more nuanced approach. This study's findings suggest that learning how to pace

and regulate effort may be more important than learning to double down and try as hard as possible.

Diversifying Theory of Structural Challenges

The chapter also reveals how conceiving of structural challenges as sources of external resistance (e.g., "barriers," "undertow") can sometimes be misleading. This imagery suggests an inaccurately simple effort-versus-structure model, in which personal advancement hinges on trying harder, having barriers removed, or both.

Participants' experiences suggest that fostering upward mobility is not nearly as simple as the effort-versus-structure concept suggests. Vigorous effort, rather than being uniformly helpful for overcoming structural challenges, can instead undermine such attempts. Advancement is not a one-dimensional push-and-pull struggle; it actually requires multidimensional balance and counterintuitive restraint. Barriers are perhaps best conceived as structural challenges that prevent people from *accessing* opportunities. In reforming opportunity structures, removing barriers may be the first of many necessary steps. Further reform requires "moving beyond access" (Engle and Tinto 2008)—creating institutions that are not only accessible but also nurturing and forgiving. This will require instructors to patiently work with disadvantaged students as they learn the ropes, providing them the attention and leeway that privileged students already enjoy (e.g., Jack 2019; Calarco 2020). But it will also demand larger institutional changes to give students more than one chance to succeed. For example, it will require reforms to federal student aid, which currently terminates if students fail their first year of college (Department of Education 2021).

Thoughtfully broadening sociology's conceptual typology of structural challenges could more fully capture the range of mechanisms that undermine goal-directed efforts like

attempted upward mobility. New analogies, like the "tightrope" and the "mobility puzzle" (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Ray 2019), better capture how structural challenges can manifest in fickle and vexing ways, punishing efforts that are misdirected or applied in the wrong order. This study's findings, in which structural conditions incite struggle and simultaneously render it counterproductive, suggest some additional analogies: quicksand, for example, or the matador's red cape in a bullfight. These images convey that some structural challenges elicit effort, only to turn it against the person exerting it.

When Dispositions Work and When They Don't: From Interaction to Effort

Expanding theory about how structural challenges thwart individual effort demands corresponding extensions to theory about the knowledge and habits required to successfully navigate such challenges. The stories of failure and success contained in this chapter provide insights about when a "sense of constraint" might be useful (Lareau [2003] 2011; Golann 2015). A great deal of attention has been paid to dispositions that shape *interactions*, especially with authority figures (e.g., Lareau [2003] 2011; Calarco 2011; Golann 2015). The resulting theory describes how a sense of constraint can be harmful: it holds people back from seeking specialized treatment from which they could benefit. But interactions are not the only realm where people self-limit, and results from this study suggest that a sense of constraint might be advantageous in the context of portioning and regulating personal effort. A.J. and Kenya purposefully held back their efforts, in part, because they perceived limits in their lives that could render greater quantities of effort risky or counterproductive.

Likewise, eager inclinations toward commitment and effort, normally thought to be uniformly helpful, can actually be detrimental without adequate privilege. Dispositions cultivated in privileged young people in the United States—a sense of entitlement (Lareau

[2003] 2011), a faith in limitless future potential (Khan 2011), a drive to accomplish as much as possible in and out of the classroom (Demerath 2009)—may only be advantageous when someone has the money and cultural capital required to ease goal-fulfillment and cushion the blow of mistakes. For disadvantaged young people, by contrast, such inclinations could lead to exactly the types of overextension and failure this chapter describes.

These insights contribute to nascent research on what it means for young people with varying degrees of privilege to "work smart." For example, Khan shows that young people in elite educational settings learn to seem very busy while actually strategically slacking off (Khan 2012; Khan and Jerolmack 2013). And work strategies that are smart for privileged students can be devastating for less privileged ones, such as the alluring-but-fraught "party pathway" documented by Armstrong and Hamilton (2013). Future research should continue to explore the origins and implications of young people's goal-directed efforts, probing what "working smart" entails for people in different social positions.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this chapter identifies two structural processes that prompted overwork in the case it examines, these processes were probably not the only ones at play. For example, just as race and class shape effort-based socialization, so too does gender (e.g., Bettie 2003; Morris 2012). Because I focused only on men, and because gender was not as front-of-mind for me as race and class while I conducted fieldwork, this study likely missed gendered processes that inflect how young people choose to exert themselves. Paying greater attention to gender would have allowed for a more fully intersectional analysis, providing an account of how society's "matrix of domination" pushes low-income young Black men to overwork (Collins 1990, 2004; Crenshaw 1991).

Moreover, although the effort paradox examined in this chapter was influenced by poverty and racism, these findings do not necessarily mean that whiteness and privilege shield young people from overwork and exhaustion. Indeed, different processes can prompt overwork and terrible outcomes for privileged young people (Demerath 2009; Mueller and Abrutyn 2016).

These limitations point the way toward future research. This study is an invitation to identify structural processes that prompt counterproductive effort in other cases and settings, with a particular focus on how these processes reinforce inequality. The effort paradox could be conceptually useful, for example, in explaining the struggles of parents who burn out or become overwhelmed as they strive for perfection in their childrearing, careers, and personal lives. In both the case examined in this chapter and in the case of parenting, processes that lead to overextension may disproportionately affect less-advantaged people—low-income students in one instance, women in the other. Moreover, some of the processes themselves are analogous, including indoctrination about the importance and efficacy of effort. A blog for working mothers, for example, advises: "Where There is a Work-Life Will, There is a Work-Life Way," urging women to be "tenacious" and do "whatever it takes" to both advance their careers and care for children (Sollmann 2015; see also, e.g., Damaske 2011; Collins 2019). This "do it all" ethos sets the stage for exhaustion (Hochschild and Machung [1989] 2012).

The effort paradox could also be a useful tool for research about burnout on the job (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter 2001; Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli 2006). It could draw greater empirical and theoretical scrutiny to circumstances where workers appear to have leeway to choose their level of commitment but nevertheless become spread too thin (e.g.,

Sullivan 2014). It could also help elucidate how burnout both results from and amplifies inequality (Gorski 2019).

The search for effort paradoxes can expose inner workings of how inequality is perpetuated. Such cases reveal subtle and pernicious ways that circumstances elicit people's best efforts, only to turn those efforts against them.

REFERENCES

Anderson, Charity, Ashley Cureton Turner, Ryan D. Heath, and Charles M. Payne. 2016. "On the Meaning of Grit…and Hope…and Fate Control…and Alienation…and Locus of Control…and…Self-Efficacy…and…Effort Optimism…and…." *The Urban Review* 48(2):198–219.

Armstrong, Elizabeth A. and Laura T. Hamilton. 2013. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Alexander, Karl, Doris Entwisle, and Linda Olson. 2014. *The Long Shadow: Family Background, Disadvantaged Urban Youth, and the Transition to Adulthood.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Auyero, Javier, ed. 2015. *Invisible in Austin: Life and Labor in an American City.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bell, Linda A, and Richard B Freeman. 2001. "The Incentive for Working Hard: Explaining Hours Worked Differences in the US and Germany." *Labour Economics* 8:181-202.

Bennett, Gary G., Marcellus M. Merritt, John J. Sollers III, Christopher L. Edwards, Keith E. Whitfield, Dwayne T. Brandon, and Reginald D. Tucker. 2004. "Stress, Coping, and Health Outcomes among African-Americans: A Review of the John Henryism Hypothesis." *Psychology & Health* 19(3):369-383.

Bettie, Julie. 2003. *Women without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Block, James H. 1980. "Promoting excellence through mastery learning." *Theory Into Practice* 19(1):66-74.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1995. "Structures, Habitus, Practices." Pp. 31-45 in *Rethinking the Subject: An Anthology of Contemporary European Social Thought*, edited by James D. Faubion. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Bowles, Samuel and Herbert Gintis. 1976. *Schooling in Capitalist America.* New York: Basic Books.

Calarco, Jessica M. 2011. "'I Need Help!': Social Class and Children's Help-Seeking in Elementary School." *American Sociological Review* 76(6):862–82.

Calarco, Jessica M. 2020. "Avoiding Us versus Them: How Schools' Dependence on Privileged 'Helicopter' Parents Influences Enforcement of Rules." *American Sociological Review*, 85(2): 223-246.

Carter, Prudence. 2005. *Keepin' it Real: School Success Beyond Black and White.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Castleman, Benjamin L. and Lindsay C. Page. 2014. "A Trickle or a Torrent? Understanding the Extent of Summer 'Melt' Among College-Intending High School Graduates." *Social Science Quarterly* 95(1):202-220.

Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez. 2014. *Where Is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States.* w19843. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Clark, Rodney, Jann H. Adams, and Vernessa R. Clark. 2001. "Effects of John Henryism and Anger-Coping on Mean Arterial Pressure Changes in African American Women." *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 8(4): 270–281.

Claro, Susan, David Paunesku, and Carol S. Dweck. 2016. "Growth mindset tempers the effects of poverty on academic achievement." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113(31):8664-8668.

Cohen, R. M. 2015. "Can 'Grit' Save American Education? Grit, privilege, and American education's obsession with novelty." *The American Prospect*, April 10. Retrieved November 10, 2020 (https://prospect.org/education/can-grit-save-american-education).

Collewet, Marion, and Jan Sauermann. 2017. "Working Hours and Productivity." *Labour Economics* 47:96–106.

Collins, Caitlyn. 2019. *Making Motherhood Work: How Women Manage Careers and Caregiving.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* New York: Routledge.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2004. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism.* New York: Routledge.

Cooper, Marianne. 2014. *Cut Adrift: Families in Insecure Times.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43(6):1241-1299.

Damaske, Sarah. 2011. *For the Family?: How Class and Gender Shape Women's Work.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Deluca, Stephanie, Susan Clampet-Lundquist, and Kathryn Edin. 2016. *Coming of Age in the Other America.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Demerath, Peter. 2009. *Producing Success: The Culture of Personal Advancement in an American High School.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Department of Education. 2021. "If you want to keep receiving your federal student aid, make sure you stay eligible." Accessed January 10, 2021: https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/eligibility/staying-eligible.

DeSante, Christopher D. 2013. "Working Twice as Hard to Get Half as Far: Race, Work Ethic, and America's Deserving Poor." *American Journal of Political Science* 57(2):342–356.

Dreilinger, Danielle. 2015. "College-going rate at New Orleans high schools improves to 59 percent." *Times-Picayune.* April 7. Retrieved October 5, 2015 (www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2015/04/new_orleans_school_college_rat.html).

Duckworth, Angela. 2016. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance.* New York: Scribner.

Duckworth, Angela, Christopher Peterson, Michael D. Matthews, and Dennis R. Kelly. 2007. "Grit: Perseverance and Passion for Long-Term Goals." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92(6):1087-1101.

Dweck, Carol. 2006. *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success.* New York: Ballantine Books.

Edin, Kathy and Laura Lein. 1997. *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work.* New York: Russell Sage.

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes, Second Edition.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Engle, Jennifer and Vincent Tinto. 2008. *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students.* The Pell Institution.

Farkas, George. 2003. "Non-Cognitive Skills." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29(1):541–62.

Felix, Ashley S., Robert Shisler, Timiya S. Nolan, Barbara J. Warren, Jennifer Rhoades, Kierra S. Barnett, and Karen Patricia Williams. 2019. "High-Effort Coping and Cardiovascular Disease among Women: A Systematic Review of the John Henryism Hypothesis." *Journal of Urban Health* 96(1):12–22.

Golann, Joanne W. 2015. "The Paradox of Success at a No-Excuses School." *Sociology of Education* 88(2):103–19.

Goldrick-Rab, Sara. 2016. *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gorski, Paul C. 2019. "Fighting Racism, Battling Burnout: Causes of Activist Burnout in US Racial Justice Activists." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42(5):667–87.

Hakanen, Jari J., Arnold B. Bakker, and Wilmar B. Schaufeli. 2006. "Burnout and Work Engagement among Teachers." Journal of School Psychology 43(6):495–513.

Hamilton, Laura T., and Elizabeth A. Armstrong. 2021. "Parents, Partners, and Professions: Reproduction and Mobility in a Cohort of College Women." *American Journal of Sociology* 127(1): 102–151.

Hannerz, Ulf. 1969. *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Hart, Beth Ann. 2019. "Hanging In, Stopping Out, Dropping Out: Community College Students in an Era of Precarity." *Teachers College Record* 121:1-30.

Heckman, James J. 2000. "Policies to Foster Human Capital." *Research in Economics* 54(1):3–56.

Herold, Benjamin. 2015. "Is 'Grit' Racist?" *Education Week*, January 24. Retrieved March 30, 2021 (https://www.edweek.org/leadership/is-grit-racist/2015/01).

Hudson, Darrell L., Harold W. Neighbors, Arline T. Geronimus, and James S. Jackson. 2016. "Racial Discrimination, John Henryism, and Depression Among African Americans." *Journal of Black Psychology* 42(3): 221–243.

Hochschild, Arlie and Anne Machung. [1989] 2012. *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home.* New York: Penguin.

Ipsos Public Affairs. 2015. "How America Pays for College: Sallie Mae's National Study of College Students and Parents." Washington, DC: Sallie Mae.

Iwasaki, Kenji, Masaya Takahashi, and Akinori Nakata. 2006. "Health Problems Due to Long Working Hours in Japan: Working Hours, Workers' Compensation (Karoshi), and Preventive Measures." *Industrial Health* 44:537-540.

Jack, Anthony Abraham. 2019. *The Privileged Poor.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

James, Sherman A. 1994. "John Henryism and the Health of African-Americans." *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 18:163-182.

Johnson, Walter. 2001. *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kautz, Tim, James J. Heckman, Ron Diris, Bas Ter Weel, and Lex Borghans. 2014. *Fostering and Measuring Skills: Improving Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Skills to Promote Lifetime Success.* w20749. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Khan, Shamus Rahman. 2011. *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

KIPP. 2020. "Focus on Character." Retrieved November 10, 2020 (https://www.kipp.org/approach/character).

Kohn, Alfie. 2014. "The Downside of 'Grit.' *The Washington Post*, April 6. Accessed October 21, 2020 (https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/downside-grit).

Kuroda, Sachiko, and Isamu Yamamoto. 2019. "Why Do People Overwork at the Risk of Impairing Mental Health?" *Journal of Happiness Studies* 20(5):1519–1538.

Kusenbach, Margarethe. 2003. "Street Phenomenology: The Go-Along as Ethnographic Research Tool." *Ethnography* 4(3):455-485.

Lamont, Michèle. 2000. "The Dignity of Working Men." Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lardier, David T., Kathryn G. Herr, Veronica R. Barrios, Pauline Garcia-Reid, and Robert J. Reid. 2019. "Merit in Meritocracy: Uncovering the Myth of Exceptionality and Self-Reliance Through the Voices of Urban Youth of Color." *Education and Urban Society* 51(4):474–500.

Lareau, Annette. [2003] 2011. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Lemov, Doug. 2010. *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College.* New York: Jossey-Bass Teacher.

Lemov, Doug. 2018. "Narrating Positive Behavior: Talking to Students vs. Talking about Students." Accessed June 1, 2020 (https://teachlikeachampion.com/blog/narrating-positive-behavior-talking-students-vstalking-students).

Lopez, Shane J. 2013. *Making Hope Happen: Create the Future You Want for Yourself and Others.* New York: Atria.

Love, Bettina L. 2019. *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom.* Boston: Beacon Press.

MacLeod, Jay. [1987] 2009. *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood,* Third Edition. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Maslach, Christina, Wilmar B. Schaufeli, and Michael P. Leiter. 2001. "Job Burnout." *Annual Review of Psychology* 52:397-422.

Matthews, Jay. 2009. *Work Hard, Be Nice.* New York: Algonquin.

McFarlin, Dean B. 1985. "Persistence in the Face of Failure: The Impact of Self-Esteem and Contingency Information. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 11(2):153-163.

Merritt, Marcellus M., T.J. McCallum, and Thomas Fritsch. 2011. "How Much Striving Is Too Much? John Henryism Active Coping Predicts Worse Daily Cortisol Responses for African American but Not White Female Dementia Family Caregivers." *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 19(5):451–460.

Miller, Gregory E., and Carsten Wrosch. 2007. "You've Gotta Know When to Fold 'Em: Goal Disengagement and Systemic Inflammation in Adolescence." *Psychological Science* 18(9):773–777.

Morris, Edward W. 2012. *Learning the Hard Way: Masculinity, Place, and the Gender Gap in Education.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press

Mullainathan, Sendhil, and Elda Shafir. 2013. *Scarcity.* New York: Picador.

Mueller, Anna S. and Seth Abrutyn. 2016. "Adolescents under Pressure: A New Durkheimian Framework for Understanding Adolescent Suicide in a Cohesive Community." *American Sociological Review* 81(5): 877-899.

Newman, Katherine. 1999. *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City.* New York: Vintage Books.

Patterson, Orlando. 1998. *Rituals of Blood: The Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries.* New York: Civitas.

Parsad, Basmat, and Maura Spiegelman. 2012. *Arts Education in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools.* Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Pencavel, John. 2015. "The Productivity of Working Hours." *The Economic Journal* 125(589):2052–2076.

Perna, Laura, ed. 2010. *Understanding the Working College Student: New Research and its Implications for Policy and Practice.* Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Ray, Ranita. 2017. *The Making of a Teenage Service Class: Poverty and Mobility in an American City.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Sennett, Richard and Jonathan Cobb. 1972. *The Hidden Injuries of Class.* New York: Norton.

Silva, Jennifer M. 2013. *Coming Up Short: Working Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty.* New York: Oxford Universtiy Press.

Silva, Jennifer M. 2019. *We're Still Here: Pain and Politics in the Heart of America.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Small, Mario Luis. 2009. *Unanticipated Gains: Origins of Network Inequality in Everyday Life.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Snyder, Thomas D., Cristobal de Brey, and Sally Dillow. 2019. *Digest of Education Statistics 2017.* Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Snyder, Thomas D. and Sally A. Dillow. 2015. *Digest of Education Statistics 2013.* Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Sollmann, Kathryn. 2015. "Work + Child Care: Where There's a Will, There's a Way." Retrieved December 7, 2020 (https://inpowercoaching.com/work-child-care-where-theres-a-will-theres-a-way).

Sparks, Sarah. 2014. "New Character Report Cards Rate Students on Grit." *Education Week*, June 5. Retrieved November 10, 2020 (https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/06/05/34measuring-motivation-b4.h33.html).

Stack, Carol B. 1974. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community.* New York: The Free Press.

Stewart, Mark B., and Joanna K. Swaffield. 2007. "The Other Margin: Do Minimum Wages Cause Working Hours Adjustments for Low-Wage Workers?" *Economica* 75:148-167.

Sullivan, Teresa A. 2014. "Greedy Institutions, Overwork, and Work-Life Balance." *Sociological Inquiry* 84(1):1–15.

Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51(2):273–286.

Tavory, Iddo and Stefan Timmermans. 2014. *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Thernstrom, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom. 2004. *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Tough, Paul. 2013. *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Tyson, Karolyn. *Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, & Acting White after Brown.* New York: Oxford University Press.

US Census Bureau. 2011. "Education Attainment and Years of School Completed" (Tables H-13 and H-14). Retrieved March 3, 2013 (http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/index.html).

Vallerand, Robert J., Nathalie Houlfort, and Jacques Forest. 2014. "Passion for Work: Determinants and Outcomes." Pp. 85-105 in The Oxford Handbook of Work

Engagement, Motivation, and Self-Determination Theory, edited by Gagné, Marylène. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Watts, Alan. 2011 [1951]. *The Wisdom of Insecurity*. New York: Knopf.

Whyte, William Foote. 1943. *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Willey, Leyla Bravo. 2014. "Why teaching kids 'grit' works." Accessed November 10, 2020 (https://www.kipp.org/news/the-new-republic-why-teaching-kids-grit-works).

Williams, Terry and William Kornblum. 1985. *Growing up Poor*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.

Willis, Paul. 1977. *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Yamamoto, Yoko and Susan D. Holloway. 2010. "Parental Expectations and Children's Academic Performance in Sociocultural Context." *Educational Psychology Review* 22:189-214.

Young, Alfred. 2004. *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

ENDNOTES

[36] All individual and institutional names in this paper are pseudonyms. I have also altered a quotation that would have been searchable online.

[37] I define effort as physical and mental exertion deployed to achieve some goal. I define overwork as exerting effort at a level that is difficult or impossible to sustain.

[38] Effort can also be counterproductive when the task itself demands relaxation. Examples include trying to float in water and trying to fall asleep. Watts called this "the law of reversed effort" or the "backwards law" ([1951] 2011). The effort paradox I describe is a sociological cousin of this psychological concept. Unlike "backwards law" scenarios, effort paradoxes undermine tasks that plainly demand conscious effort. Effort paradoxes are problems of allocating and pacing effort, not problems of "quieting" the conscious mind.

[39] See Castleman and Page (2014) for more on "summer melt."

[40] See DeLuca et al. on "expedited adulthood" (2016:138).

[41] The notion of "burnout" implies both physical exhaustion and feelings of cynicism and emotional detachment (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter 2001). Vincent and Casey remained enthusiastic about their undertakings despite their faltering efforts, so theirs are not clear-cut cases of burnout.

CHAPTER 4: IN THE SHADOWS [42]

INTRODUCTION

One sweltering summer afternoon, Paul felt the world closing in around him.[43] A Black nineteen-year-old from New Orleans with a slim build, a spiky Afro, diamond stud earrings, and a serious demeanor, Paul had been caught in a simmering gun conflict for almost a year. When the conflict began, Paul was living a full life. He attended morning classes at a local community college, worked afternoons at a Burger King, walked or took the bus to visit friends around the city, and enjoyed his role as a doting uncle in the home he shared with his older sister and her two young children. Gradually but inexorably, the conflict robbed him of these facets of his life. Paul could no longer ride the bus or go out in public, he could not go home, he had cut off contact with some of his closest friends because he no longer trusted them, and he took pains to make sure that only a handful of people knew where to find him. He passed his days indoors with his girlfriend and her parents in a small house on the outskirts of the city, miles from his former home, on an otherwise empty block surrounded by junkyards, railroad tracks, and a swamp.

Predicaments like Paul's, in which people anticipate that adversaries are searching for them and trying to kill them, may be an all-too-common consequence of gun violence in the United States—a predictable outgrowth of cyclical patterns of conflict in which one shooting precipitates the next (Papachristos 2009; Papachristos, Braga, et al. 2015). Yet to date, qualitative studies of gun violence and its consequences have provided only glimpses of this quandary. Accounts of life in some of the most violent US neighborhoods feature regular mentions—almost asides—of people who become targeted for violence. Time after time,

175

these individuals disappear from the field site and consequently disappear off the page (Wilkinson 2003; Rich 2009; Karandinos et al. 2014). These stories suggest that targeted threats of violence are particularly disruptive. But because targeted individuals vanish, we learn little about how they perceive and cope with such threats.

This study investigates life under the targeted threat of violence. It draws primarily on an in-depth ethnographic case study of Paul's experience with a "beef," which in New Orleans means a long-running gun conflict in which individuals assume that an opponent or opponents are trying to find them and kill them.[44] The case study examines how beef forced Paul into increasing degrees of isolation. Secondarily, the chapter describes how six of Paul's friends coped with targeted threats from their own beefs—some of which resulted from Paul's beef, and some of which were unrelated. Their experiences help place Paul's story in context, clarifying processes that can lead to the extreme isolation Paul eventually experienced.

Findings reveal that targeted threats of violence affected participants' relationships and routines very differently than the more generalized, probabilistic threats of violence that shaped their pre-conflict lives. Perceiving such generalized threats of violence can render certain people and places out of bounds, but it often simultaneously enhances solidarity within a person's core social network (Horowitz 1983; Anderson 1999; Jones 2009; Karandinos et al. 2014; Chan Tack & Small 2017) and increases a person's rootedness to comparatively safe places (Thrasher 1963 [1927]; Harding 2010; Rosen 2017). This study shows how knowledge of a specific, targeted threat of violence, by contrast, can imbue formerly trusted relationships and locales with newfound apparent danger. A person's connections to people and places, which otherwise help keep them safe, can become ways

176

for their opponents to find them. Targeted threats of violence can thus be particularly disruptive to the targeted individual's life.

This chapter's findings help build a fuller picture of "the long reach of violence" (Sharkey 2018), a topic that is becoming more urgent because of a recent spike in gun violence in the United States (Gramlich 2022). Most research about the effects of gun violence focuses on the aftermath of shootings, tallying either the physical and emotional trauma of gunshot injury (e.g., Rich 2009; Lee 2012; Ralph 2014) or the collective consequences of shootings on entire communities (e.g., Small 2004; Nurmi et al. 2011). This chapter, instead, shows that terrible social consequences of conflicts involving guns can also accrue *before* a shooting takes place. Feeling hunted, already marginalized young men retreat from their former lives. Their attempts to stay safe can have far-reaching consequences, shaping how conflicts unfold and the toll they inflict.

THREATS OF VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL DISRUPTION

Acts of violence lastingly disrupt social life, not least because they cause people to anticipate more violence (e.g., Davis & Friedman 1985). In the following sections, I argue that research on the consequences of threats of violence on social participation would benefit from a closer examination of how targeted threats of violence upend life for affected individuals. The specificity of perceived threats of violence varies a great deal, from generalized fear of falling victim to unplanned, spur-of-the-moment violence on one end of the spectrum to knowledge of an imminent targeted threat against oneself on the other. Although such targeted threats may be common, we know less about their effects than about those of more generalized threats of violence.

Drawing Boundaries to Cope with Generalized Threats of Violence

When people anticipate the possibility of violence, without knowing specifics of who might perpetrate the violence or how the violence might unfold, one way they respond is by establishing boundaries that they believe will help keep them safe. These boundaries are both spatial and relational, and people live their lives within the resulting social worlds. For privileged white urban dwellers, the boundaries can be informed by racist tropes and a vague-but-sweeping aversion to the "ghetto," reinforcing neighborhood segregation by race and class (e.g., Anderson 1990; Wilson & Taub 2007). For low-income residents of color who live in neighborhoods with elevated rates of violence, such boundaries are often much finer grained but no less pronounced. Residents of such neighborhoods often keep careful track of places they do not feel safe, maintaining precise mental maps of areas to avoid (Harding 2010, p. 114; Garot 2010; Rosen 2017; Fader 2021). Similarly, they often rule out relationships that might expose them to a physical conflict or oblige them to join one (Anderson 1999; Jones 2009; Chan Tack & Small 2017). Indeed, avoiding the perceived risk of violence is a key driver of the "selective solidarity" that can characterize relational life in segregated, high-poverty neighborhoods—helping residents determine whom to associate with and whom to avoid (Raudenbush 2016).

For residents of violent neighborhoods who are involved in crime, and thus more exposed to dangerous circumstances that elevate the odds of victimization (Peterson et al. 2006), boundaries of potential social interaction may be drawn differently, but they are often equally stark. Such individuals might choose friends who are also inclined to use violence (Sharkey 2006), or they might hang out in "staging areas" associated with crime and therefore avoided by most members of the public (Anderson 1999). But they nevertheless scrupulously steer clear of the territory of rival cliques or gangs unless they are looking for a

fight, and they similarly forswear cross-group friendships (Vigil 1988; Sánchez-Jankowski 1991; Harding 2010).

Though such safety boundaries impede interaction with people and places they render out-of-bounds, they conversely concentrate interaction within the social worlds they delimit. Spatially, this can lead to increased activity within particular safe places. Guarded "safe passage routes" through violent neighborhoods funnel groups of children and their parents into narrow, protected corridors on their walk to school (Davey 2013). Similarly, "cosmopolitan canopies"—areas of cities where residents can let their guard down and interact across divisions of race and class—emerge in part because of the threat of crime, violence, and police harassment in surrounding areas (Anderson 2011). Once people draw spatial safety boundaries, the designated safe areas can become places of deeply ingrained routine, familiarity, and a sense of "rootedness," (e.g., Thrasher 1963 [1927]; Patillo 2007). Residents who are not involved with crime sometimes attribute their sense of neighborhood safety to close relationships with the people who are involved with crime (Duck 2015).

Similarly, relational safety boundaries can foster solidarity inside of them: groups of people cohere as they face pressure from without. Examples include friendships forged in response to the threat of violence (Harding 2010; Chan Tack and Small 2017), neighbors who cement bonds by "riding" for one another (Karandinos et al. 2014:13), families that rely tightly on each other as they "hunker down" to create safe oases within their homes (Rosen, 2017:281), and gangs that become wellsprings of "intimacy and companionship" for their members as they collectively face external threats (Horowitz 1983:196).

Of course, spatial and interactional boundaries are not always enough to help people avoid the threat of violence. Sometimes, circumstances make it impossible to maintain such boundaries. In neighborhoods where residents do not have close relationships with gang

members, those residents often feel threatened even on their own blocks, learning to convey passivity and deference to gang members as they walk down the street (Garot 2010; Contreras 2018). Gangs of different ethnicities can also be squeezed together on the same street corner, making spatial boundaries impossible—a predicament gang members sometimes solve by simply ignoring one another (Martinez and Rios 2011). Boundaries can also be impossibly constricting. In some neighborhoods, parents hoping to keep their children away from drug dealing and street culture must keep them inside, forbid them from making neighborhood friends, and drive them to outside schools and activities—burdens that many families do not have the resources to bear (Duck 2015).

Targeted Threats of Violence

In the instances of generalized threats of violence described above, people do not know of a particular threat against them, but they anticipate that circumstances in their lives may expose them to violence. Such generalized, probabilistic expectations of violence are not the only way that threats of violence manifest. On the other end of a spectrum of specificity, threats of violence can also be precisely individually targeted, as when gang members find themselves in retributive crosshairs, or when young people seek out particular peers for fights as part of campaigns for respect (Vigil 1988, Anderson 1999). Fear of such targeted violence is doubtless less prevalent than fearing chance encounters with violence, but it is a substantial problem in its own right.

In US cities, targeted gun violence is a major problem. Thousands die per year in such shootings (e.g., National Gang Center 2012). And murders are the tip of the iceberg because most shooting victims do not die. An estimated 4 in 5 victims of gun

violence survive, but they are often left with permanent disfiguring and debilitating injuries (Lee 2012; Ralph 2014).

Targeted gun violence is also a very concentrated problem. It is often contained within relatively small social networks (Papachristos et al. 2012; Papachristos, Braga, et al. 2015). Often, but not always, people caught up in these conflicts are young men of color who live in low-income urban neighborhoods and are connected to the informal economy (Wilkinson 2003; Rich 2009; National Center for Health Statistics 2018). The number of young men readmitted to hospitals for treatment of second or third shootings is a stark illustration of how highly concentrated the toll of gun violence is on the population at highest risk (Rich 2009). One study found that *half* of the young men treated in a Washington DC emergency room for assault-related injuries, mostly gunshots, had been previously hospitalized for such treatment (Goins et al. 1992).

Many of these gunshot victims, and perhaps many more people who do not end up getting shot, likely anticipate that someone is trying to find them and kill them. This is because retribution is a regular outgrowth of conflict in street contexts where formal law enforcement is viewed as ineffectual or illegitimate (Jacobs and Wright 2006).[45] Within high-violence social networks, murder (or attempted murder) is often an exchange, ricocheting back and forth in predictable patterns, with one shooting sparking the next (Papachristos 2009; Papachristos, Braga, et al. 2015). A powerful set of social forces propels these exchanges of violence. Anger and the desire for revenge are part of the mix (Katz 1988; Copeland-Linder et al. 2012). So too are pervasive distrust in law enforcement to provide justice and widespread belief in the importance of getting payback to preserve status and deter future attacks (Anderson 1999; Gould 2003; Kirk & Papachristos 2011). Retaliatory cycles escalate easily because one side's sense of getting even is usually the other side's sense

of overreach and unnecessary provocation (Jacobs and Wright 2006). Together, these factors mean that one act of gun violence can be logically expected to precipitate another. A single shooting can also create many potential future targets. People often target their retribution at someone other than the perpetrator because they are angry, uncertain, and in a hurry to exact revenge (Jacobs and Wright 2010). Friends, family, or associates of an assailant are often fair game for retribution (Sánchez-Jankowski 1991; Papachristos 2009). For all these reasons, credible fear of a direct threat to one's life may be an experience endemic to high-violence social networks in the United States.

Coping with Targeted Threats of Violence

We know a great deal about how people cope with generalized threats of violence, but we know comparatively little about coping with targeted threats. I argue that this gap in our knowledge emerges from a gap in data. A careful reading of accounts of life in some of the most violent US neighborhoods reveals numerous cases of people becoming targeted for violence and subsequently vanishing from the field site (Wilkinson 2003; Rich 2009; Karandinos et al. 2014). For example, Benito, a drug dealer profiled in an ethnography about violence in a Philadelphia neighborhood, vanishes for eight months after a shootout in an intensifying conflict with adversaries (Karandinos et al. 2014). Yet such accounts provide few specifics about how targeted individuals understand their predicament or what happens to them after they disappear. In many cases, this data gap may result from the fact that targeted individuals become inaccessible to the researcher after they go into hiding.

These repeated glimpses suggest that targeted threats of violence are a recurring aspect of gun conflict in the United States. They also indicate that the spatial and relational effects of targeted threats of violence can be very different than those of more generalized

182

threats of violence. Because such threats may be a near-inevitable outgrowth of many instances of inter-peer gun violence in marginalized communities, and because their social consequences are poorly understood but likely severe, they are ripe for closer study.

METHODS

This chapter grew out of the larger ethnographic project this dissertation describes. Two members of the study's core ethnographic cohort, Paul and Kenya, ended up isolating themselves in response to targeted threats of gun violence. I also learned that other young men I had gotten to know during the project, who were not core ethnographic participants in my larger study of college-going, had dealt with similar targeted threats against their lives. This chapter is based on ethnographic observations of how Paul and (to a lesser extent) Kenya coped with the threats targeted at them, along with interview data from five of Paul's friends who experienced similar threats.

Ethnography

As I describe in previous chapters, the larger ethnographic project from which this research emerged involved two years of full-time fieldwork. To begin the project, I gained permission from two local public high schools to embed with their senior classes. During my first year of fieldwork, I spent approximately 350 hours conducting classroom observations over 86 separate days at Paul and Kenya's high school. Over my two years of full-time ethnographic research, I spent a total of approximately 710 hours over 189 separate days with Paul, Kenya, or the two of them together, not including the 350 hours of school observation time.

After my full-time fieldwork concluded, I remained in close touch with Paul and Kenya, talking with them frequently on the phone and via text. I also went to visit them four times that next year. I continued to take fieldnotes on these interactions. Although this chapter is primarily based on my two years of full-time ethnography, I also include data from one additional year of these follow-ups.

I thought hard about my relationships with participants, trying to be as ethically sound and intellectually open as I could while spending time with them. I am white, and I grew up in an upper-middle-class household. Doing an ethnographic study from such a position of relative power can create ethical and empirical problems for researchers (e.g., Rios 2015). Fostering a collaborative relationship with ethnographic participants is one way to guard against these problems. I tried my best to put my participants figuratively "in the driver's seat." My goal was to show up consistently, maintain deep and sincere interest in their lives, and let them set the agenda when we spent time together. I also talked with participants about my research ideas, taking their feedback seriously (Auyero 2015).

I did my best to navigate the ethical challenges posed by bearing witness to an unfolding deadly conflict. I aimed to do no harm and to try to prevent harm when possible. As soon as I learned about Paul's budding conflict, I applied for and received a certificate of confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health, hoping it might provide some protection if I or my fieldnotes were subpoenaed (Khan 2019). I also retroactively de-identified my fieldnotes. I made it clear to Paul and his friends that, first, I did not want them to go on the offensive, but that, second, if they intended to, I did not want to know about their plans or be party to them in any way. They honored my second request. Soon after his conflict started, I connected Paul with CeaseFire, a "violence interrupter" program that attempts to broker peace between aggrieved parties.[46] After a month, however, Paul was

involved in a series of shootings, and he stopped meeting with the outreach workers. When Paul told me he wanted to transfer to an out-of-town college to stay safe, I helped him complete the transfer.

Interviews

In addition to my fieldwork with Paul and Kenya, I interviewed five other young men in their social network who dealt with beef. As Table 2 shows, the young men I profile contended with at least 12 different instances of anticipating that an adversary was attempting to kill them. This chapter primarily narrates Paul's conflict, because it was the only one I watched unfold as it was happening. But the chapter also relies on accounts from Paul's friends about their own conflicts to contextualize the isolationist strategies I watched Paul use. Their stories help me identify how different severities of targeted threat can prompt different strategies to stay safe.

By the time I conducted interviews with these young men, I had already gotten to know them well through my fieldwork. During my project, I spent at least 80 hours with Akeem over 26 separate days, 70 hours with Shadrach over 27 days, 9 hours with Lawrence over 4 days, 16 hours with Rasha over 9 days, and 14 hours with Jay over 6 days. Much of this contact occurred as I spent time with Paul and Kenya. Consequently, the young men I interviewed had seen that Paul and Kenya trusted me enough to share intimate details of their lives—including about illegal gun ownership, drug use, and drug dealing—and that I had kept this information confidential.

I digitally recorded the interviews and transcribed them. During the interviews, I asked the young men about their experiences dealing with beef. In particular, I asked for

TABLE 2: PROFILED YOUNG MEN AND THEIR LIFE-THREATENING DISPUTES

Pseudonym	Connection to Study	Life-Threatening Dispute(s)
Paul	Ethnographic participant	(1) Dispute with former friend and friend's associates sparked by a stolen pistol
Kenya	Ethnographic participant	(2) Dispute with Paul's opponents after they threatened Kenya's life because of his friendship with Paul, (3) dispute with a former friend over a different stolen pistol
Akeem	Kenya's brother	(4) Dispute with young man who stole Kenya's pistol, (5) dispute with father and brothers of an ex-girlfriend
Shadrach	Paul's friend	(6) Dispute with classmate about a young woman, (7) dispute with Paul's opponents because of his close friendship with Paul
Lawrence	Paul's friend	(8) Dispute with classmate about a young woman, (9) dispute of unspecified origin that resulted in Lawrence getting shot and moving to Texas for safety
Rasha	Paul's friend	(10) Dispute with former friend who tried to set him up
Jay	Paul's friend	(11) Dispute with classmate about a young woman, (12) dispute with Paul's opponents after they threatened Jay life

specific details about how they had tried to stay safe after their conflicts began. I also asked about the social and emotional toll of the isolationist strategies they described.

Knowing participants well before I interviewed them enhanced the quality of the data I was able to collect. For example, when Lawrence described the murder of his best friend the previous year, we were on the same page; I had already heard extensively about the young man's death from three of my ethnographic participants. To a degree, this context

helped me guard against the possibility that the young men were saying one thing but doing another (Jerolmack & Khan 2014). For example, when Shadrach told me about how he would scope out young women's apartments from afar before visiting them to avoid walking into a trap, I believed this information because I had previously seen him do exactly that when he asked me for rides. I was also able to corroborate much of what interviewees told me because I had heard the same stories independently from different young men. For example, when Jay told me about running into Paul's opponents on the street, I remembered that Paul had told me about Jay's encounter months beforehand.

I conducted one interview apiece with Akeem, Jay, Lawrence, and Rasha. I conducted two interviews with Shadrach. These interviews took place during my closing months of fieldwork.

Cases, Inference, and Setting

Qualitative researchers face tradeoffs between depth and breadth, and I chose depth. The advantage of my having followed Paul as his beef progressed is that it allowed me to carefully observe how his safety strategies unfolded over time, revealing previously unknown ways that gun conflicts can cause social isolation. The disadvantage of this approach is that it gave me less leeway to learn about how other young men facing targeted threats of gun violence try to stay safe, as I might have been able to do if I had spent my time recruiting dozens of respondents.

Because of its small number of enrolled young men, this study probably did not observe the full range of ways that young people like its participants try to stay safe in beefs. In this respect, the study has not reached saturation (e.g., Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). But this kind of saturation is not required for a study to provide generalizable contributions

to theory. Even qualitative studies with a sample size of one, which do not attain this type of saturation, can build our understanding of the social world by describing previously unknown phenomena. As Small observes:

> A well-executed single-case study can justifiably state that a particular process, phenomenon, mechanism, tendency, type, relationship, dynamic, or practice exists…. This, in fact, remains one of the advantages of ethnographic work, the possibility of truly emergent knowledge (2009:24).

And in another respect, this study *did* achieve saturation. By following Paul for a year as his conflict unfolded, I observed the full range of ways that Paul could think of to stay safe. By the end of my fieldwork, each additional day I spent with Paul revealed little new information about his safety strategies.

To build theory from a case study, it is important to carefully describe theoretically salient parameters of the case(s) being examined, because such specification clarifies when and where we would expect a process identified in a case to apply. The present study examines cases of young men trying to stay safe from threats of gun violence that they anticipate will be targeted directly at them. These threats take the form of months- or years-long conflicts between individuals or very small groups in which adversaries seek one another out through known whereabouts and social connections and in which collective affiliations like neighborhoods or formalized gangs do not play a prominent role. Participants perceived some threats against them to be more severe than others. Paul's beef, with several close calls that left him with no doubt that adversaries were closing in on him, was a particularly severe case.

Beefs in New Orleans do not hew closely to predictable social or geographic boundaries. Before Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was a city with powerful neighborhood identities. Each of the city's 17 "wards" had a distinct character, and there were also finer-grained boundaries within wards defined by prominent streets and school catchment zones

(Campanella 2006). Prior to the levee failures, spatial affiliations patterned a great deal of the city's violence, with antagonism between opposing blocks, rival neighborhood-based schools, and long-feuding public housing projects prompting residents to square off against one another. Post-Katrina physical upheaval changed these patterns of violence (Corsaro & Engle 2015). A slew of policy decisions, including the demolition of public housing (Arena 2012), the provision of post-storm financial help to homeowners but not renters (Herring and Rosenman 2016), and the replacement of neighborhood-based public schools with open enrollment charter schools (Buras 2015), raised rents and dispersed formerly geographically based social networks. All the young men profiled in this chapter endured multiple childhood moves. Perhaps as a result of this upheaval, neighborhood identity was not a factor in their gun conflicts.

Collective affiliations like gangs also did not play a prominent role in the conflicts documented in this chapter. Although the young men in this study described how conflicts posed threats to their individual reputations (e.g., Anderson 1999), they did not express the belief that threats against their friends were an affront to any kind of collective identity. Paul's friends did not consider themselves a gang or crew, and although several chose to help Paul with his beef out of a sense of friendship and loyalty to Paul, they considered Paul's beef Paul's problem and tried their best to keep it that way.

Analysis

I began analyzing my data well before I left the field. I was struck by the drastic changes Paul was making to his life to stay safe, and this prompted me to re-read fieldnotes about his life before the conflict, search for literature that documented similar processes, and seek out additional information in the field about strategies young men employed to stay

189

safe. My search for additional empirical information led me to conduct interviews with Paul's friends about their experiences with beef, and it prompted me to pay increasingly careful attention in my observations and fieldnotes to safety strategies Paul and Kenya were using. This iterative process of reflection, consulting prior studies, and conducting empirical research helped me home in on key evidence and key insights simultaneously (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). After leaving the field, I compiled all my written data from fieldnotes and interview transcripts pertaining to participants' routines, interactions, and sense of safety before and after their conflicts began. Following studies that made a similar distinction (e.g., Rosen 2017), I analyzed participants' spatial and relational safety strategies separately. This distinction helped elucidate differences between the effects of generalized versus specific threats of violence for the social participation of affected individuals.

PAUL'S BEEF IN COMPARATIVE CONTEXT: HOW TARGETED THREATS CAN CAUSE ISOLATION

Life Before a Targeted Threat

During the time I spent with Paul before his conflict began, I watched him live a full life within relatively clear spatial and relational boundaries of safety. Orphaned early in high school, Paul had established a supportive household with his older sister Britt and her two young children. He felt comfortable spending time outside in a large swath of the city around their apartment he called "my neighborhood," which encompassed several of the city's wards. Paul also worked the cash register at a fast-food job in his neighborhood in full public view. Paul did not feel comfortable everywhere in New Orleans: I saw that he preferred not to spend time outside in far-flung areas of the city he did not already know well, preferring to wait in my car. "I'm not about to be posted up [hanging out outside]

190

anywhere except in my neighborhood," he explained. I also saw how Paul was reticent to interact with unfamiliar male age-group peers. At a packed street-side candlelight vigil I attended with him, for example, I watched as he assiduously avoided eye contact with any young men he did not already know well. However, he came alive around his friends. For example, the summer after his high school graduation, I watched how he, Kenya, Shadrach, and Jay functioned as a de facto family, sharing food, clothing, and laughter as they helped raise one another. Paul took it upon himself to make sure Shadrach made it on time to summer school each day, waking him up in the mornings and chastising him if he missed the bus. Within his day-to-day social and spatial sphere—his friends, his family, and his neighborhood—Paul appeared to thrive.

Paul sometimes dealt drugs and carried a gun. This meant that his safety boundaries were different than those of participants in my ethnographic project who were not street involved. When he was carrying drugs and a gun, he knew that a police stop would result in arrest. This rendered anywhere with police presence off limits (see Haldipur 2018; Fader 2021). Paul stayed vigilant for police, disappearing into acquaintances' homes or down the narrow alleys between the city's "shotgun" houses if a patrol car appeared. But on the other hand, being "in that life" made him comfortable spending time on violence-prone street corners that other participants in my larger ethnographic project avoided. His sense of safety in these places did not owe to their tranquility: he had witnessed at least four shootings and stabbings. Rather, it owed to his sense that, within his neighborhood, he could manage the risk.

> PAUL: This my neighborhood. I go, really, wherever I want [here]. If I get into it [get into a
> conflict] with somebody, I know how to solve it. I know how to handle myself. Most times, instead

of fighting, they go get a gun or something. But I got people I can call…. It's a lot about the way you handle yourself. I stay away from trouble.

As Paul saw it, his relationships and reputation in the neighborhood, his level head, and his readiness to defend himself helped him stay safe.

Paul's friends described similar boundaries of safety that defined their pre-conflict lives. Each of the young men said that before their conflicts began, they felt comfortable walking and taking public transportation around large swaths of the city they already knew well. "I done walked all over the world," Shadrach said, listing a collection of mostly Downtown wards he used to frequent. But like Paul, the other young men placed limits on where they would go, trying to stay safe by refraining from entering unfamiliar areas of the city. Shadrach expressed a typical opinion when he explained: "I stay in Downtown, that's it. Uptown, they rock way different out there." Paul's friends were also cautious about engaging with male age-group peers they did not already know well. Revealing too much personal information about themselves to street-involved peers, the young men believed, could attract unwanted attention that might lead to a future conflict or robbery. You want to "make it hard for different people to catch up with [you]," Rasha explained.

Like Paul, the other young men profiled in this chapter sometimes carried guns and dealt drugs. They believed that dealing drugs necessitated carrying a gun. As Rasha explained, "You gotta worry about people coming after you because they know you got [drugs]." But before their conflicts began, the young men felt comfortable leaving home without their weapons if they were not dealing. For example, Paul, Lawrence, Shadrach,

Rasha, and Jay each frequently played basketball at a variety of outdoor parks without carrying weapons with them.

Perceiving a Targeted Threat

I first learned about Paul's beef on a sunny, late-summer afternoon. He got in my car, cast a wary glance out the rear window, reclined the passenger's seat as far back as it would go so that he would be out of sight, and told me to drive. "I got a lil' situation," he told me. He said that several days earlier, he had met up with a friend of his from middle school to trade pistols. The trade turned out to be a robbery, and Paul lost his gun. Paul's friend Rasha, who had been waiting for Paul around the block, chased the robber and his accomplices, shooting at them from afar and wounding one of them. Paul and Rasha then fled to a friend's house, where they waited for several hours, hoping to avoid both police attention and immediate retaliation from the young men. Within days, Paul acquired a new pistol, ready to defend himself and perhaps go on the attack.[47]

Many influences seemed to push Paul to feel locked into his new conflict. He was angry, he wanted revenge, he believed the police offered no recourse, and he wanted to show that robbing from him carried consequences—motivations well known to spur cycles of violence (e.g., Katz 1988; Anderson 1999). But a sense of defensive caution also contributed to Paul's belief that a deadly conflict was unavoidable (see Smilde 2007). "He might be thinking, 'When I see him, I'm gonna kill him'" Paul said, referring to the young man who robbed him. This expectation of targeted violence came to dominate Paul's life.

The experiences of Paul and his friends shed light on how young men can come to perceive targeted threats against them. Paul and his friends agreed that the initial disputes that spark beefs are often petty. "You think it's serious, but it really be stupid," Lawrence

193

said. "It be over females." Disputes also began over stolen property: money, drugs, or guns. Table 2 details the targeted threats that Paul's friends dealt with.

Three of Paul's friends—Kenya, Shadrach, and Jay—felt targeted by Paul's opponents as Paul's beef unfolded. Jay was held up at gunpoint by Paul's opponents. He talked his way out of the jam by denying he knew Paul, but he suspected the strategy would only work once. Shadrach was not held up at gunpoint, but after hearing what happened to Jay, he felt targeted too. Paul's opponents knew that Shadrach and Paul were close friends, so Shadrach believed they would not let him go the way they had let Jay go. "Let's say them dudes catch me and I'm not even with Paul," Shadrach speculated. "You think I'm gonna get a pass?" And Kenya eventually felt targeted too, receiving threatening phone calls from Paul's opponents when he returned home from college. With the onset of these threats, Kenya, Shadrach, and Jay each considered themselves to be beefing with Paul's opponents.

Each of Paul's friends also dealt with beefs unconnected to Paul's conflict. Akeem, Shadrach, Lawrence, and Jay found themselves in beefs sparked because of romantic partners. Kenya, Akeem, and Rasha all wound up beefing with former friends after those friends betrayed them by robbing them or trying to set them up. Lawrence also found himself in a beef whose origins he was hesitant to discuss but whose consequences—a gunshot wound and a forced move—he described clearly.

The young men's interpretations of masculinity fueled their conflicts and helped prevent their de-escalation. Street norms that push people toward violence—including misogynist conceptions of women as property, the desire to not seem reliant on others for help, and the perceived need to project a fearsome reputation—are closely intertwined with hegemonic masculinities (Miller 2001; Connell 2002; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Mullins 2006; Jones 2009). For study participants, sparks of conflict sometimes occurred

when young men felt emasculated—a phenomenon that is already well documented (Mullins 2006). "I beat a dude up in front his old lady [girlfriend]," Lawrence said, for example. "He called himself beefing with me after that. After that, I took his girlfriend. Then he really started beefing." Particularly relevant for this study's findings are the ways masculinity can shape people's sense of the *inevitability* of violent conflict. When I asked Paul about peaceful ways to resolve his beef, shortly after the conflict began, he simply replied: "It's too late for that." As Mullins shows, lack of trust and fatalism are defining features of the types of masculinity that drive street conflicts (2006). For Paul and his friends, lack of trust and fatalism shaped their sense that deadly conflict was unavoidable and in turn informed the individualist, isolationist strategies this chapter documents.

Guns also accelerated the initially petty disputes that gave rise to beefs (see Wilkinson 2003). Paul, Kenya, Jay, Akeem, and Shadrach each had guns pointed at them during the initial run-ins that sparked their beefs. Rasha's beef began when he realized that his friend was planning to help former classmates find and kill him. Only Lawrence perceived a deadly targeted threat *after* being shot at. Lawrence had not taken threats from the young man he beat up seriously until that young man shot at him from a block away and missed.

These run-ins were enough to make each young man anticipate that their opponents might try to kill them in the future. Crucially, the young men did not need to be shot at to perceive a deadly threat; knowing that their adversaries had guns was enough. For example, when Paul inferred that his beef had begun, no one had shot at him, and he had not shot at anyone. It was Rasha who had chased and shot at the young men who robbed him. Moreover, Paul's opponents had not stated an intention to kill him—at least that Paul knew about. Still, Paul anticipated that the young men who robbed him might try to kill him,

motivated by some combination of payback for Rasha's shooting and preemptive defense against Paul. Paul felt singularly targeted because his adversaries did not know Rasha, who had been out of sight at the time of the robbery.

The young men described a widespread shared understanding that once an interpersonal conflict became sufficiently serious, each side had to assume that the other harbored deadly intentions. Lack of trust and fatalism—manifestations of masculinity that can propel conflict (Mullins 2006)—contributed to this bleak perspective. "It's a point of no return," Shadrach explained. As Rasha said, "You know if you see me you gonna kill me and I know I see you I'm gonna kill you." A Ceasefire volunteer I met after connecting Paul with the organization confirmed that this belief is pervasive in the population that Ceasefire serves. "They think, 'Beef is never squashed until your enemy is dead,'" he said. This belief "creates an environment where you think violence is the only way. You don't think a conflict can be resolved peacefully."

Such logic can feel inescapable because life-and-death stakes—created by the pervasiveness of guns—can push each side to maximally compensate for the possibility of being targeted. To assume that an opponent does not intend to kill you is to risk fatal complacency. Even if a person does not feel deadly animus toward an opponent, Paul explained, "What you thinking might be different than what he thinking." And it is easy to infer that opponents will draw similar inferences, creating a recursive he-thinks-that-I-think-that-he-thinks feedback loop that can reinforce each party's sense of targeted threat. Shadrach explained this logic.

> SHADRACH: B--ch, I know that was you that did that to me. B--ch, you know that *I* know that was you that did that to me, [his emphasis]…. At the end of the day, it's either I'm gonna go or he gonna go. I ain't trying to go. So what it's gonna be?

196

Such reasoning can push young men to go on the offensive, but it also bolsters the rationale for self-isolation to guard against being found by opponents.

"You Gotta Move Cautious" — Isolating to Guard Against Chance Encounters with Opponents

After their beefs began, Paul and his friends began to isolate themselves to stay safe. I tally their isolationist measures in Table 3.

As Table 3 shows, all the young men began avoiding public gathering places, started consistently carrying guns (and thus avoiding the police), and cut off contact with people connected to their adversaries. These isolationist strategies guarded against the possibility of running into opponents by accident. Paul and his friends began to use these strategies when they perceived *targeted* but *passive* threats: when they anticipated that opponents might not be actively searching for them but would likely shoot them if their paths crossed.

Table 3 also shows that Paul and several of his friends were forced to take more drastic isolationist measures, like home confinement. As I discuss in subsequent sections, Paul and the others resorted to these crisis isolationist strategies once they anticipated that opponents were *actively* searching for them.

Immediately after the robbery and shooting that sparked his beef, Paul began to take spatial and relational precautions to guard against chance encounters with his opponents. Spatially, he started avoiding the public spaces where he believed his opponents were likeliest to be. His horizons narrowed as a result. The decision meant no more pickup basketball games at the parks and community centers he had frequented since childhood, no more time on porches or corners in his neighborhood, and certainly no more visits to two of his best friends, brothers Jay and Blake, who lived blocks from his opponents. "With beef, you gotta move cautious," he explained.

TABLE 3: SAFETY STRATEGIES USED BY PARTICIPANTS

	Ethnographic Participants		Interview Participants				
	Paul	Kenya	Akeem	Shadrach	Lawrence	Rasha	Jay
Spatial Precautions							
Avoid public gathering places	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Always carry gun, thus avoid police	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Avoid public transit	•	•	•	•	•		•
Avoid or quit public-facing job	•	•		•	•	•	•
Crisis strategy: Home confinement	•	•			•		
Crisis strategy: Move from home	•				•		
Relational Precautions							
Cut off friends tied to opponents	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Crisis strategy: Sever romantic tie	•			•	•		
Crisis strategy: Preemptively cut off or limit contact with trusted friends who have no close ties to opponents	•	•	•		•		

Sometimes, I learned these new limits by bumping up against them. For example, although I had previously accompanied him to nearby Wal-Marts, Paul now only felt comfortable entering the stores if they were nearly deserted. "How I see it is lots of people," he explained to me, after I had driven him twenty minutes to cash a check at a Wal-Mart he thought might be safe, only to have him turn around as soon as we walked in the door and encountered an eight-person line at the Money Mart counter. "Cuz see, you never know, they got so many people there, I really might see dude, ya'heardme? And then I'ma do what I gotta do, but they got buku [a lot of] eyeballs and cameras up in that b-tch." He continued to visit friends around the city, but he would only hang out with them indoors and out of sight.

In the early months of his beef, Paul thought that his adversaries did not know where to find him. This helped him preserve some of his most important pre-conflict routines. His opponents lived in a different neighborhood than him, and he had recently moved apartments and switched jobs from Quizno's to Burger King before his beef began. So, although he cut any unnecessary time outside, he still attended community college classes

in the mornings, went to work in the afternoons, and occasionally made quick trips to the corner store a block from his new apartment.

Paul also continued to ride the bus to work and to college. The other option, walking, would have taken more than an hour and made him even more vulnerable. But bus rides left him feeling deeply uneasy. Once, as he waited at a bus stop, he saw me driving by and called for a ride. He palpably relaxed as he got in the car, thanking me not for saving him time but for keeping him safe. "I appreciate it," he said, "because I sure don't like standing all out there in the open."

The police created another nagging concern that limited Paul's ability to move freely around the city after his beef began. Paul had begun carrying his new pistol anytime he left the house, tucking it in his pants or sliding it in a sneaker that he would stuff in his backpack, ready to defend himself if he ran into his opponents. He worried about police catching him with it, and he experienced several such close calls. For example, Paul was late one evening when I arranged to pick him up after work. Eventually he emerged from shadows behind a laundromat, visibly shaking and, for the first time I had ever seen, smoking a cigarette. He described a near-miss with the police, who had swarmed to a nearby intersection after a shooting and car crash, leaving Paul feeling trapped inside a store. "It's a good thing I'm a fool at [really good at] this escape shit," he said, describing how he walked as calmly as possible past the police, trying to escape notice, only breaking into a run when he was out of sight. "If a n---a had gone out the store, saw the police, and froze up, n---a woulda got caught."

After Paul's beef began, he also cut off friendships with people he inferred might be closer with his opponents than they were with him. He worried these friends might reveal his whereabouts, whether inadvertently or otherwise. For example, one day, Paul saw one of

his adversaries posing in a short video with Colt, his older friend and mentor, on Colt's Snapchat account. Paul did not call Colt to find out how the two knew each other, nor did he ask around to get more information. Instead, he simply cut off all contact with Colt. "That just be how it is when you beefing," Paul said of his discarded friendship. "Probably he not tryna do me nothing," he said. "But I ain't trying to find out."

Once their own beefs began, Paul's friends took isolationist measures similar to Paul's. Like the changes Paul made, the changes the other young men made were geared to guard against chance encounters with their opponents—encounters the young men anticipated would turn deadly. All began to carry guns whenever they left the house, which forced them to constantly avoid the police. All also began avoiding public gathering places where they had previously spent time. For example, Lawrence, a keen and notably talented basketball player, used to regularly join high-caliber local pickup games. Now, he played NBA 2K on a videogame console instead. "It's a whole different life," he told me. If he did not have to worry for his safety, he said, "I probably wouldn't be here right now. I'd be in somebody's gym playing basketball."

And each of the young men reported that they cut off contact with friends who were tied to their opponents. Kenya, for example, decided to stop associating with a friend who had heard from one of Paul's opponents that he also planned to kill Kenya. "If n---a trust you enough to tell you they gonna smoke [kill] me?" Kenya asked rhetorically, "You ain't my partner."

Soon after their conflicts began, most of Paul's friends also took steps that Paul did not initially take: swearing off public transportation and public-facing work in the city. (Paul was initially willing to keep his Burger King job, in part, because he worked in an enclosed kitchen that was out of public view.) Lawrence, for example, arranged rides from friends so

that he could work at a suburban Wal-Mart. If he worked in the city, he explained, "I'm gonna run into people. And I'm at work. I can't do nothing [shoot first in self-defense]. And people don't care. People will crash out. People will hit you [shoot you] in front of anybody."

The young men who did not swear off public transportation altogether nevertheless reported using it with caution, just as Paul did in the early months of his beef. For example, Rasha continued to take the bus, but only selectively. "I catch a bus people barely catch," he told me, naming a line he considered safe. "If I know buku [a lot of] young people gonna be on a bus? I'm not about to catch that bus."

Increasing Isolation if Opponents Close In

Paul's initial self-isolating measures—refraining from spending unnecessary time outside, avoiding the neighborhood where his opponents lived, and cutting off contact with friends and acquaintances connected to his opponents—were not nearly as drastic as subsequent cuts he was forced to make. Among Paul's friends, there was also variation in how isolated they became as they dealt with beefs of their own. As Table 3 shows, all the young men were forced to take precautions like Paul's initial cuts, but only some of them needed to take more drastic isolationist steps like resorting to home confinement.
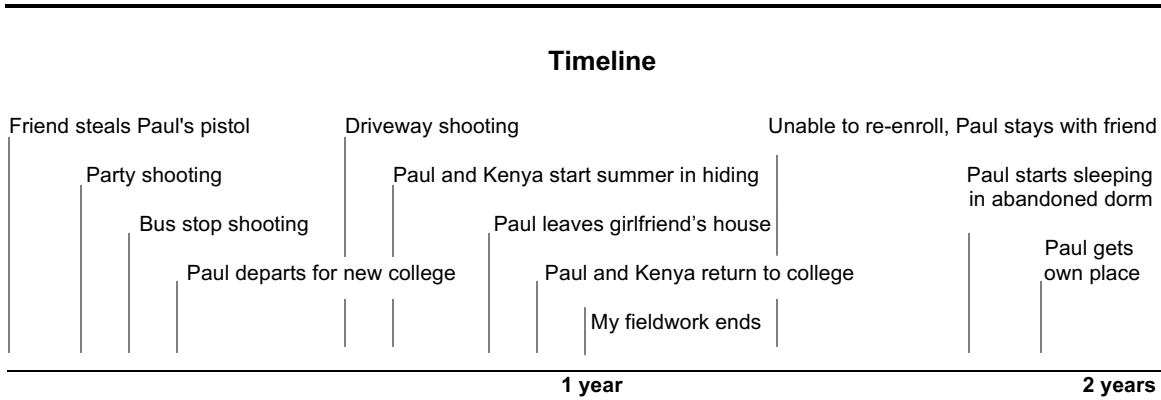
Paul and his friends were forced to make deeper cuts to their relationships and routines once they inferred that their opponents were *actively* looking for them. The possibility of being actively sought out by opponents posed a more insidious threat than the threat of a chance encounter with them. The young men called such active seeking "homework" (see Stuart 2020b:204). Vincent, a participant in my larger ethnographic project about college who did not have beefs of his own, was nevertheless quite familiar with the

idea of homework. "[When it's a] beef in New Orleans?" he explained "dude laying on you. Like, really doing his homework. Trying to kill you." Opponents might try to find out their target's home address. "Never show [anyone you don't trust] where your house is," Rasha warned. They might also try to find a targeted individual through that person's social connections. "They'll use anybody to try to get to you," Kenya said. In these ways, a person's core routines and relationships could become conduits of threat.

Paul did some "homework" of his own. One afternoon about two months after his conflict began, Paul got word from his friend Jay that the young man who stole his gun was standing outside on a residential street. Lawrence drove with Paul and Rasha to the address, where they saw a block party in progress. Paul and Rasha cinched hoodies tight over their faces and fired into the crowd. The young man they were chasing escaped, but one of the young man's friends, who had been present for the robbery, was shot in the leg. I found out about the shooting the next day when Paul mentioned to me, cryptically, that I should check the news to find out about something he had done. This was the second in a series of four shootings that occurred as a result of Paul's beef. I provide a timeline of Paul's beef in Table 4.

After the shooting, Paul spent a day worried that his adversaries might retaliate. He seemed on edge the afternoon I learned about what happened, and he asked for the first time about transferring to the out-of-town college that Kenya attended to stay safe. His new level of unease was short lived. That evening, Paul was surprised to discover that his sister's boyfriend's sister Anna, with whom he occasionally had sex, was also romantically involved with the older brother of the young man who had been shot. I listened as Anna gave Paul useful information. Anna said the young man had no idea who shot him, and his mother would be keeping him inside for the foreseeable future. Later, Shadrach told me that Paul's

TABLE 4: TIMELINE OF PAUL'S CONFLICT

Timeline

Friend steals Paul's pistol	Driveway shooting	Unable to re-enroll, Paul stays with friend
Party shooting	Paul and Kenya start summer in hiding	Paul starts sleeping in abandoned dorm
Bus stop shooting	Paul leaves girlfriend's house	Paul gets own place
Paul departs for new college	Paul and Kenya return to college	
	My fieldwork ends	

1 year	**2 years**

opponents did not know to suspect him because they had been robbing many people. For these reasons, Paul suspected that his opponents would not be actively doing their own "homework" to try to find him in retaliation. (And they still had no idea who Rasha was, so he had no reason to fear retaliation either.) Consequently, Paul continued to go to work and attend his college classes.

Then, a few weeks later, Paul stood at the bus stop near his apartment when he saw several of his opponents parked at the corner store across the street. Later, he told me about what happened, explaining that he thought they had found him by chance and asserting that they would have killed him if he had not seen them first. Paul told me he fired several shots at their car and then ran home. There, he recounted what happened to Shadrach, who independently confirmed details of the story to me.

Paul realized that this chance encounter had given his adversaries new information about his life: his workplace, his bus stop, and his neighborhood. The shooting had also given them new incentive to actively pursue him. When Paul's opponents saw him waiting at the bus stop, he had been wearing his work uniform. Worried that his adversaries now knew his workplace and might begin looking for him there, Paul did not go to work that day and never went back to the job (see Stuart 2020a:142 for a similar story). Paul also decided that

he could no longer ride the bus, as it would require waiting outside at the stop where his opponents had encountered him.

Paul found himself on de facto house arrest. "I don't even be feeling comfortable…around my house," he told me. He decided to stop walking anywhere in his neighborhood. As far as he knew, his opponents still did not know his address, but he worried that they might come back to the neighborhood to look for him.

Paul's close call at the bus stop prompted him to make plans to move. After that shooting, he asked me to begin helping him transfer to Kenya's college for the spring semester. The new semester began, and months passed by without incident. However, this move was not enough to keep him safe, because he continued to go home for weekend visits. One Friday evening after he had returned home to New Orleans, Paul was nearly killed in the driveway of his apartment by a gunman who emerged from a car. Paul narrowly avoided getting shot by brandishing his own gun at the last second, firing as the car peeled away. At the time, Paul was wearing a hoodie and had his back to the street, so he suspected the gunman must have known when and where to come looking for him.

After the gunman found Paul in his driveway, Paul suspected that news of his whereabouts had trickled back to his opponents through Anna. Paul had only been home from college for a few hours, and he had not told anyone about his visit. It seemed that Anna was the one person who could have told his opponents when and where to find him. Paul speculated that Anna might have even intentionally set him up, unhappy because he had increasingly been giving her a cold shoulder after learning about her connection to his opponents. "I basically been ignoring her," he admitted. With that, Paul cut off all contact with Anna, and his sister Britt no longer allowed Anna to drop in at the apartment.

Paul spent the remainder of the spring semester of his freshman year at his out-of-town college. Then, he returned to New Orleans for the summer, where he stayed holed up in his girlfriend's isolated house. Paul was unable to pay his phone bill, so the phone was disconnected, and he was only able to exchange texts with friends from his girlfriend's phone. Eventually, he and his girlfriend fought so much that Paul moved back in with Britt for several weeks, not venturing outside and keeping his presence there a tightly guarded secret.

When Paul's friends took more drastic isolationist measures—like cutting off friends or romantic partners, or staying locked inside their homes—it was likewise because close calls or verbal threats gave them the impression that opponents were closing in on them.[48] Kenya, for example, began getting phone calls from unmarked numbers threatening his life. He also heard, through a neighborhood friend, that Paul's opponents were threatening him. With that, Kenya cut off contact with all his friends from the neighborhood, pointing to connections between them and his opponents that seemed tenuous to me. For instance, he cut off contact with one young man whose sister's girlfriend was the sister of one of Paul's opponents. Convinced that he was surrounded by enemies, Kenya resolved not to leave his house, spending a lonely summer peering through a slit in his blinds. In this way, people and places that Kenya used to associate with safety—his close friends and his immediate neighborhood—had come to seem like conduits for a deadly threat. Because these people and places had been central to Kenya's life, the onset of this threat was quite disruptive for him.

If they felt sufficiently threatened, Paul's friends were also willing to cut off close relationships preemptively, even without seeing evidence of connections between their friends and their adversaries. For example, Lawrence described how he decided to "fall back

off people" after anticipating that adversaries would catch up with him if he continued to have contact with his friends. "I just be going to work, coming back inside. Going to work, coming back inside. I'm not really fucking with nobody," he said. Akeem described a similar sense that even his closest relationships could turn deadly.

> AKEEM: People always say, especially in these situations, 'You can never trust nobody.' But I don't even know how to even say this. Like, it could still be surprising when you see who does it to you [betrays you]. Like, being really on guard? That means not going outside. And, just associating with family. Like, immediate family.

Such statements of distrust, which are closely tied to interpretations of masculinity, are common in street contexts governed by ethics of retaliation (Jacobs and Wright 2006; Mullins 2006). But verbal claims that a person "stays to themself" are not always accurate reflections of behavior (Raudenbush 2016), and indeed, neither Akeem nor Lawrence fully retreated from social life. Lawrence still let a few close friends visit him at his house, and Akeem continued to spend time with one friend from high school who would visit from out of town. Nevertheless, I saw evidence that the two really did cut back substantially on their everyday interactions. Akeem started mostly spending time with his brothers and father. And as one of Lawrence's beefs intensified, Paul and Shadrach noted his absence. "I ain't fuck with Lawrence in like two solid months," Shadrach complained to me.

Consequences of Isolation

By spatially and relationally isolating themselves in the ways I describe, Paul and his friends managed to survive months- or years-long periods when their lives were directly threatened. Their defensive behavior likely helped keep their opponents safe too by reducing the odds of an encounter.

Less obviously but perhaps just as importantly, the isolationist strategies also placed participants in situations that reduced their likelihood of falling into other

conflicts. Desistance from criminal activity often corresponds to changes in life circumstances that "'knife off' the past from the present" (Sampson and Laub 2005:17; Kirk 2020). For participants in this study, the more drastic the cuts they made, the greater the transformation they experienced. Paul's initial cuts, for example, were not enough to preempt several gun battles. However, subsequent cuts isolated him to such an extent that his adversaries were unlikely to find him. And when he finally moved away from New Orleans, he felt he no longer needed to carry a gun to stay safe.

But the isolation prompted by targeted threats of violence also exacted a heavy toll. Before he left New Orleans, for example, Paul had found himself frozen out of any way to make a living or advance his education. Once he stopped riding the bus, he failed his fall semester of courses because he could no longer reliably get to campus. His relationships also withered. Without a job to pay his phone bill, he fell out of regular touch with Lawrence, Shadrach, and Jay. When he was forced to leave home, it shattered the household he and his older sister Britt had built together. Britt sobbed when Paul left. The two were quite close, having stayed together through a tumultuous upbringing with a crack-addicted mother, years of exile in Texas after Hurricane Katrina, and the premature deaths of their parents. Paul's brief, furtive return to Britt's house at the end of the summer was the last time the two would live together.

Paul's isolation was also devastating for his friends. Shadrach reflected poignantly on no longer being able to spend time with Paul.

> SHADRACH: Me and my bro used to be happy, son. We used to do shit, son. We could wake up and go ball. Be in the hot-ass sun. Come up with $10. Get a bag of weed, ya heard me? Smoke. That was a good day for us! Man, [now] he feel like, "I can't even go here. Because if I go here, my life in danger." That's not really living.

And as Paul fell out of touch with his friends, they also fell out of touch with each other. The previous year, Shadrach had told me sentimentally that that he, Paul, and Kenya were

"brothers." But with Paul laid low, Shadrach and Kenya no longer saw each other. I was driving with Kenya one evening when Shadrach called for a ride. To my surprise, Kenya lied to Shadrach about Paul's whereabouts, evidently unsure whether he could trust Shadrach with the information. Paul's formerly tightknit circle had frayed in his absence.

Paul felt so suffocated by his isolation in New Orleans that he decided to move away from the city permanently. After enduring his summer in hiding, Paul returned with Kenya to college for sophomore fall. The two enjoyed an uneventful semester and passed their classes. Then, a technicality left them ineligible for spring-semester housing. Several young men Kenya most wanted to avoid in his neighborhood had moved, so he decided to go home. Paul, on the other hand, felt returning would be too risky. He spent the spring semester sleeping first on a friend's couch and then in an abandoned dorm. The fact that he was willing to endure homelessness underscores his determination not to return to New Orleans. Eventually, he saved up enough money to move into a small apartment.

Although the isolationist strategies documented in this chapter helped the young men stay safe, these strategies could also prolong conflicts by preventing their peaceful resolution. Beefs are most easily laid to rest in person (Whitehill et al. 2013). As a CeaseFire worker told me, "Our number one goal is a face-to-face, sit-down meeting between the two parties." Brokered meetings are one way for these encounters to take place, but they can also occur by chance, in locations where shooting is unlikely because of high visibility and lack of anonymity: a school, a workplace, or a heavily surveilled public space. Young men agree that such face-to-face encounters are often necessary to peacefully lay a dispute to rest, because each side needs to see in the other's eyes that they truly want to quash the conflict. For example, Lawrence described how one of his early

beefs ended, wordlessly, when he saw his opponent on a highly trafficked New Orleans street. "I looked at him, mugged [unflinchingly stared at] him. Let him know, that shit dead, n---a [the conflict is over]. I'm chilling. But I'm not about to let you play with me."

Isolationist strategies can hinder peacemaking by making such face-to-face encounters more difficult. As the CeaseFire worker explained, one of the hardest aspects of their job is that aggrieved parties become very hard to find. "They go underground," he told me.

If beefs are not resolved, they often become protracted stalemates, with each side remaining wary of the other. When I took Paul to meet with CeaseFire workers, for example, one told Paul about several conflicts from his youth that remained unsettled, acknowledging that he is still cognizant that opponents from decades-old beefs might encounter him and kill him on sight. Stalemates can persist even if one party leaves town. Kenya's first beef cooled off when the mother of the former friend who robbed him moved with her children to a distant suburb. Kenya remained on guard, refusing to ride the bus and generally remaining wary in public, but he told me he was unlikely to see the young man again around the city. With Paul's move away from New Orleans, his beef also settled into a stalemate. But his opponents did not move. So although it is likely that no blood will be spilled, the ongoing threat may permanently displace Paul from his former home. As of this writing, years after Paul's conflict began, he has still not moved back.

DISCUSSION

When Shadrach considered the toll of long-running gun conflicts on himself and his friends, he emphasized that such conflicts are devastating even for those who avoid getting shot. "That beef shit, if it don't kill you, it'll take away your life," he said.

This study reveals how targeted threats of gun violence can "take away your life" in ways other than injury and death. It shows that such targeted threats can unsettle social participation and social connection, forcing individuals into varying degrees of isolation. The experiences of Paul and his friends suggest that such threats can, at a minimum, compel individuals to reconsider relationships and routines that might bring them accidentally into contact with their opponents. Their experiences also reveal that targeted threats can become substantially more isolating when individuals anticipate that their opponents are actively looking for them. In such instances, people with whom the targeted individual previously felt safest associating, and places where the targeted individual previously felt safest spending time, can become conduits for adversaries to find them. Consequently, targeted individuals must approach formerly central aspects of their lives with newfound distrust and caution. In extreme cases, they must rip themselves out of formerly cherished contexts altogether.

These findings suggest that targeted threats of violence prompt isolation insofar as they propagate *through* and *from* a person's everyday life and social world. The closer a threat comes to an individual's core relationships and routines, the more disruptive and isolating that threat will be. Fear of a chance run-in with an adversary might require comparatively peripheral cuts, whereas anticipation of being actively sought out can prompt quite drastic retreat and isolation. Analogous cases of being actively sought out for harm reveal comparable consequences. Domestic violence victims who must "go underground" to flee stalking abusive exes (Goodmark 2006), or witnesses who fear retaliation and join the

Federal Witness Protection Program (Early and Shur 2002), similarly cut themselves off from core parts of their lives to avoid targeted violence.

By documenting the consequences of targeted threats in simmering gun conflicts, this study contributes to a growing body of research about "the long reach of violence" (Sharkey, 2018). Prior work on gun violence in marginalized US communities has documented its physical consequences in injuries and deaths (e.g., Lee 2012; Ralph 2014) and the broad psychological and social harm that communities suffer in the wake of shootings (e.g., Burdick-Will 2018). But Sharkey argues that understanding the full impact of violence—its "long reach"—requires considering not only the traumatic reverberations of individual violent acts but also the long-term, deeply ingrained alterations violence causes to "everyday decisions, routines, and networks" for people in affected communities (2018:98). Such analysis requires considering consequences not only of "violent interactions," in which an act of violence occurs, but also of "violent environments" and "violent situations," in which violence is *expected* to occur (2018:86).

This case study provides a clear example of how violence can unsettle life not only in its aftermath but also in its anticipation, showing how its "reach" can extend into the imagined future. Because the losses of vital relationships and routines documented in this chapter stem from the expectation of violence, they can accrue even if no one pulls a trigger. Except for Lawrence, all the young men profiled in this chapter inferred themselves to be in a beef without having first been shot at. They nevertheless isolated themselves, anticipating future violent victimization if they did not alter their lives to avoid their opponents.

This case study also demonstrates that the "reach" of violence can prompt a previously unobserved type of isolation in a high-risk population. It is already well known that residents of violent neighborhoods isolate themselves if they want to avoid violence

altogether (e.g., Duck 2015; Rosen 2017). But this study shows how threats of violence can also prove profoundly isolating for the young people most prone to perpetrating and falling victim to violent crimes. Although these young people might hang out on high-risk street corners and befriend high-risk peers (Sharkey 2006), such routines and relationships can crumble once individuals believe they have been targeted for death. Previous research has provided glimpses of this predicament but has been methodologically unable to follow up with targeted individuals (e.g., Rich 2009; Karandinos et al. 2014). The stories of Paul and his friends thus reveal a new dimension of the suffering caused by gun violence. This toll has likely remained untallied because its victims are some of society's most marginalized members—members pushed even further into the shadows by the problem this chapter documents.

This study also contributes to research about how gun conflicts play out over time. Rather than examining processes that prompt brief flurries of violence (e.g., Sánchez-Jankowski 1991; Wilkinson 2003; Collins 2008; Papachristos 2009; Karandinos et al. 2014), it instead explores the often-long interludes between violent exchanges (Stuart 2020a; 2020b). It shows how the overriding experience of a protracted gun conflict can become one of cautious defensiveness, as affected individuals withdraw from their former lives to stay safe. Such caution shapes how conflicts play out. It reduces the moment-to-moment odds of a violent encounter, but it can also give rise to protracted stalemates and hinder attempts at peacemaking.

At present, a national push is underway to substantially increase funding for gun conflict intervention (Schuppe 2021). This chapter's findings have clear implications for such efforts. First, they reveal another reason why stopping gun conflicts is so critical. It was already well known that shootings have terrible ramifications, but by showing how conflicts

involving guns can begin upending lives even before a shooting takes place, this study reveals an additional layer of previously undocumented consequences. Settling conflicts would not only prevent bloodshed and subsequent social trauma, but it would also help young men like Paul escape the suffocating grip that such conflicts can take upon their lives.

Second, the findings suggest that there may be an unmet need to defuse long-dormant conflicts. Most efforts to interrupt gun conflict focus on disputes that appear imminently likely to explode into violence (Kennedy 2011), but the experiences of young men in this chapter suggest that months- or years-old conflicts continue to inflict a quiet toll even if no shooting takes place. Resolving such latent conflicts would require sustained outreach and trust, as there is presently no easy way to identify young people caught up in them. But it could be an important missing piece of the often fraught, touch-and-go work of redeeming individuals and communities from legacies of violence (Jones 2018).

By opening a window on how young men cope with severe targeted threats, this study adds to a growing body of research about the consequences of gun violence. These consequences are often hidden, rippling silently through people's daily lives.

REFERENCES

Anderson, Elijah. 1990. *Streetwise*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Anderson, Elijah. 1999. *Code of the Street*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Anderson, Elijah. 2011. *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Arena, John. 2012. *Driven from New Orleans: How Nonprofits Betray Public Housing and Promote Privatization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Auyero, Javier. 2015. *Invisible in Austin: Life and Labor in an American City*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Buras, Kristina. 2015. *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance*. New York: Routledge.

Burdick-Will, Julia. 2018. "Neighborhood Violence, Peer Effects, and Academic Achievement in Chicago." *Sociology of Education,* 91(3): 205–223.

Campanella, Richard. 2006. *Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabrics Before the Storm.* Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies.

Chan Tack, Anjanette, and Mario Small. 2017. "Making Friends in Violent Neighborhoods: Strategies among Elementary School Children." *Sociological Science* 4: 224–248.

Collins, Randall. 2008. *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Connell, R.W. 2002. "On Hegemonic Masculinity and Violence: Response to Jefferson and Hall." *Theoretical Criminology*, 6(1): 89-99.

Connell, R. W. and James W. Messerschmidt. 2005. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society*, 19(6): 829–859.

Contreras, Randol. 2018. "From Nowhere: Space, Race, and Time in how Young Minority Men Interpret Encounters with Gangs." *Qualitative Sociology* 41(2): 263–280.

Copeland-Linder, Nikeea., Sara B. Johnson., Denise L. Haynie, Shang-en Chung, and Tina L. Cheng. 2012. "Retaliatory Attitudes and Violent Behaviors Among Assault-Injured Youth." *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 50(3): 215–220.

Corsaro, Nicholas and Robin S. Engel. 2015. "Most Challenging of Contexts: Assessing the Impact of Focused Deterrence on Serious Violence in New Orleans." *Criminology & Public Policy*, 14(3): 471–505.

Davey, Monica. 2013. "In Chicago, Campaign to Provide Safe Passage on Way to School." *The New York Times,* August 26.

Davis, Robert and Lucy N. Friedman. 1985. "The Emotional Aftermath of Crime and Violence." Pp. 90-112 in *Trauma and its Wake.* Edited by Charles F. Figley. Levittown, PA: Brunner/Mazel.

Duck, Waverly. 2015. *No Way Out: Precarious Living in the Shadow of Poverty and Drug Dealing.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Early, Pete and Gerald Shur. 2002. *Witsec: Inside the Federal Witness Protection Program.* New York: Bantam Books.

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes, Second Edition.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fader, Jamie J. 2021. "I don't have time for drama": managing risk and uncertainty through network avoidance. *Criminology*, 59(2): 291-317.

Garot, Robert. 2010. "Who You Claim: Performing Gang Identity in School and On The Streets." New York: NYU Press.

Gramlich, John. 2022. "What the data says about gun deaths in the U.S." *Pew Research Center.* February 22.

Goins, Wendell A., Jonathan Thompson, and Cuthbert Simpkins. 1992. "Recurrent Intentional Injury." *Journal of the National Medical Association* 84(5):431-435.

Goodmark, Leigh S. 2006. "Going Underground: The Ethics of Advising a Battered Woman Fleeing an Abusive Relationship." *UMKC Law Review* 75(4):999-1023

Gould, Roger V. 2003. *Collision of Wills*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Guest, Greg, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson. 2006. "How Many Interviews Are Enough?: An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability." *Field Methods* 18(1): 59–82.

Haldipur, Jan. 2018. *No Place on the Corner: The Costs of Aggressive Policing*. New York: NYU Press.

Harding, David J. 2010. *Living the Drama: Community, Conflict, and Culture Among Inner-City Boys*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Herring, Chris and Emily Rosenman. 2016. "Engels in the Crescent City: Revisiting the Housing Question in post-Katrina New Orleans." *ACME*, 15(3):616-638

Hureau, David M., & Anthony A. Braga. 2018. "The Trade in Tools: The Market for Illicit Guns In High Risk Networks." *Criminology*, 56(3): 510–545.

Horowitz, Ruth. 1983. *Honor and the American dream: Culture and Identity in a Chicano Community*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Jacobs, Bruce A. and Wright, Richard. 2006. *Street Justice: Retaliation in the Criminal Underworld*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Jacobs, Bruce A., and Wright, Richard. 2010. "Bounded Rationality, Retaliation, and the Spread of Urban Violence." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 25(10): 1739–1766.

Jerolmack, Colin, and Shamus Khan. 2014. Talk Is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 43(2): 178–209.

Jones, Nikki. 2009. *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner-City Violence*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Jones, Nikki. 2018. *The Chosen Ones: Black Men and the Politics of Redemption*. Berkeley: UC Press.

Katz, Jack. 1988. *Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil*. New York: Basic Books.

Karandinos, George, Laurie Kain Hart, Fernando Montero Castrillo, and Philippe Bourgois. 2014. "The Moral Economy of Violence in the US Inner City." *Current Anthropology* 55(1):1–22.

Kennedy, David M. 2011. *Don't Shoot: One Man, A Street Fellowship, and the End of Violence in Inner-City America*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Khan, Shamus. 2019. "The Subpoena of Ethnographic Data." *Sociological Forum,* 34(1), 253–263.

Kirk, David S. 2020. *Home Free: Prisoner Reentry and Residential Change after Hurricane Katrina*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kirk, David S. and Andrew V. Papachristos. 2011. "Cultural Mechanisms and the Persistence of Neighborhood Violence." *American Journal of Sociology* 116(4):1190–1233.

Lee, Jooyoung. 2012. "Wounded: Life after the Shooting" edited by E. Anderson, D. Asbury, D. W. Austin, E. C. Kim, and V. S. Kulkarni. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 642(1):244–57.

Martinez, Cid, and Victor M. Rios. 2011. "Conflict, Cooperation, and Avoidance." Pp. 343-362 in *Just Neighbors? Research on African American and Latino Relations in the United States* edited by Edward Telles, Mark Sawyer, and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado. New York: Russell Sage.

Miller, Jody. 2001. *One of the Guys: Girls, Gangs, and Gender.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Mullens, Christopher. 2006. *Holding Your Square: Masculinities, Streetlife, and Violence.* Portland, OR: Willan Publishing.

National Center for Health Statistics. 2018. "Deaths: Final Data for 2016." *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 67(5).

National Gang Center. 2012. "Number of Gang-Related Homicides."

Nurmi, Johanna, Pekka Räsänen, and Atte Oksanen. 2012. "The Norm of Solidarity: Experiencing Negative Aspects of Community Life after a School Shooting Tragedy." *Journal of Social Work* 12(3):300–319.

Papachristos, Andrew V. 2009. "Murder by structure: Dominance relations and the social structure of gang homicide." *American Journal of Sociology*, *115*(1): 74-128.

Papachristos, Andrew V., Anthony A. Braga, and David M. Hureau. 2012. "Social Networks and the Risk of Gunshot Injury." *Journal of Urban Health*, 89(6): 992-1003.

Papachristos, Andrew V., Anthony A. Braga, Eric Piza, and Leigh S. Grossman. 2015. "The Company you Keep? The Spillover Effects of Gang Membership on Individual Gunshot Victimization in a Co-Offending Network: Gang Membership, Networks, & Victimization." *Criminology* 53(4): 624-649.

Patillo, Mary. 2007. *Black on the Block.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Peterson, Dana, Terrance J. Taylor, and Finn-Aage Esbensen. 2004. "Gang membership and violent victimization." *Justice Quarterly*, 21: 793-815.

Ralph, Laurence. 2014. *Renegade Dreams: Living through Injury in Gangland Chicago.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Raudenbush, Danielle. 2016. "'I Stay by Myself': Social Support, Distrust, and Selective Solidarity Among the Urban Poor." *Sociological Forum* 31(4):1018–1039.

Rich, John A. 2009. *Wrong Place, Wrong Time: Trauma and Violence in the Lives of Young Black Men.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Rios, Victor. 2015. "Decolonizing the White Space in Urban Ethnography." *City and Community,* 14(3): 258-261.

Rosen, Eva. 2017. "Horizontal Immobility: How Narratives of Neighborhood Violence Shape Housing Decisions." *American Sociological Review*, 82(2): 270–296.

Sampson, Robert J. and John H. Laub. 2005. "A Life-Course View of the Development of Crime." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 602(1):12–45.

Sánchez-Jankowski, Martín. 1991. *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Schuppe, Jon. 2021. "Biden wants to give anti-violence groups $5 billion. Here's how it could be spent." *NBC News*.

Sharkey, Patrick T. 2006. "Navigating Dangerous Streets: The Sources and Consequences of Street Efficacy." *American Sociological Review* 71(5): 826–846.

Sharkey, Patrick T. 2018. "The Long Reach of Violence: A Broader Perspective on Data, Theory, and Evidence on the Prevalence and Consequences of Exposure to Violence." *Annual Review of Criminology*, 1(1), 85–102.

Small, Mario L. 2004. *Villa Victoria: The Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Small, Mario L. 2009. "How Many Cases Do I Need?": On Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research. *Ethnography*, 10(1), 5–38.

Smilde, David. 2007. *Reason to Believe: Cultural Agency in Latin American Evangelicalism*. Berkely, CA: University of California Press.

Snyder, Thomas D. and Sally A. Dillow. 2015. *Digest of Education Statistics 2013*. Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Stuart, Forrest. 2020a. *Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music, and the Power of Online Infamy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Stuart, Forrest. 2020b. "Code of the Tweet: Urban Gang Violence in the Social Media Age." *Social Problems*, 67(2): 191-207.

Tavory, Iddo and Stefan Timmermans. 2014. *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Thrasher, Fredric. 1963 [1927]. *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Vigil, James. D. 1988. *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Whitehill, Jennifer M., Daniel W. Webster, Shannon Frattaroli, and Elizabeth M. Parker. 2014. "Interrupting Violence: How the CeaseFire Program Prevents Imminent Gun Violence through Conflict Mediation." *Journal of Urban Health* 91(1):84–95.

Wilkinson, Deanna L. 2003. *Guns, Violence, and Identity Among African-American and Latino Youth*. El Paso, TX: Lfb Scholarly Publishing.

Wilson, William Julius, and Richard P. Taub. *There Goes the Neighborhood*. New York: Vintage Books.

ENDNOTES

42 This chapter will be published in the November 2022 issue of the journal *Criminology* under the title "'If It Don't Kill You, It'll Take Away Your Life': Survival Strategies and Isolation in a Long-Running Gun Conflict."

43 All names in this chapter are pseudonyms. I have also changed some identifying details.

44 In other cities or contexts, "beef" can imply a grudge or dispute that is not life threatening, and it can imply a spur-of-the-moment conflict. In New Orleans, "beef" specifically implies a conflict that involves guns. It also implies that a conflict is ongoing or simmering, such that parties need to perpetually look over their shoulders.

45 Jacobs and Wright describe the ethics and mechanics of retaliation, focusing primarily on why and how people choose to retaliate (2006). By contrast, this study focuses primarily on how people try to *avoid* a particularly potent form of retaliation: deadly force.

46 Although implementations of CeaseFire in other cities involve close collaboration with police (Kennedy, 2011), CeaseFire in New Orleans operated independently of police.

47 For more on how ready access to guns fuels shootings, see Hureau and Braga (2018).

48 Lawrence moved to Texas for a year after being shot by adversaries. Akeem cut off contact with his girlfriend, and briefly fled New Orleans, after surviving an armed confrontation outside his house with his girlfriend's father and brothers. As Kenya cut off contact with his neighborhood friends, Akeem (Kenya's brother) also cut off contact with them. He did not feel directly threatened by them, but he wanted to keep Kenya safe.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This dissertation has begun to build an argument about how pathways to upward mobility in the United States can be highly precarious, even once widespread access to these pathways has been achieved. Going to college used to be the exception for low-income young people like the men profiled in this dissertation. Now it is the rule (Snyder and Dillow 2015). But widespread access to society's surest pathway to upward mobility has not resulted in widespread upward mobility; few of the low-income young people who go to college graduate, and rates of upward mobility have not budged (Engle and Tinto 2008; Chetty et al. 2014). By examining what goes wrong for young people like Dorian in college, this dissertation identifies two mechanisms that can make pathways to upward mobility precarious. First, these pathways can tempt the people traveling them into overextension and overexertion, when in fact success requires counterintuitive caution and restraint. Second, progress along these pathways can be derailed by small slipups or misfortunes. Suffer one small stroke of bad luck, or place one foot wrong, and everything can come crashing down. The misstep described in this dissertation—meeting up with a middle school friend to trade pistols—is likely an unusual one for college students. But for participants in this study, it was just one of many mishaps that cascaded into failure, several of which I describe below. My fieldwork also revealed a third mechanism that I do not empirically document in the dissertation: choosing to embark on a pathway toward upward mobility can be costly in money, time, emotional investment, and institutional standing, such that in failure, one ends up worse off for having tried.

In this conclusion, I briefly describe what happened to each of the participants, in the process sketching out more of this project's findings about how mishaps can derail

upward mobility and about how attempts at upward mobility can be costly. I then consider

how theory about precarity developed through the case studies of these young men might

usefully apply to other ostensible pathways of upward mobility. Finally, I describe policy

implications of my findings and avenues for future research.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

As I describe in Chapter 3 of the dissertation, only two participants, A.J. and Kenya,

made it successfully through their first year of college. They were the two participants I was

most worried about before college began because I perceived them to have less vigor and

drive than the other young men. As it turned out, their reticence to throw themselves too

hard into too many pursuits likely helped them avoid the effort paradox.

The outcome this dissertation examines—finishing the first year of college—is not

the same thing as actually achieving upward mobility. By examining processes that prevent

young people from successfully completing their first year of college, this dissertation

identifies mechanisms that can prevent or delay people from achieving upward mobility on a

particularly promising pathway. But successfully completing the first year of college is not

enough to ensure upward mobility, and failing the first year of college does not guarantee a

lifetime of poverty. Although I briefly update each young man's story in this section, it is

important to remember that these stories are still being written.

A.J.: A Patient Kind of "Grit"

In the end, only A.J. graduated from college, earning a bachelor's degree in computer

science. It took him five and a half years to finish. A.J.'s approach to college was a slow,

patient grind. He suffered his share of setbacks and close calls. He failed and had to retake

several math classes, growing discouraged but never despondent. He switched successfully to online classes when the pandemic hit. His final semester was almost derailed by a string of difficulties: a delayed financial aid payment that left him unable to pay for housing near campus, miscommunication with a professor that led him to erroneously assume that a class would be meeting online, and a hurricane-caused gas shortage that left him unable to make the two-hour drive from New Orleans to his classes. Still, despite missing the first three weeks of class, A.J. managed to catch up and graduate. Waiting for him on the other side was a cybersecurity job with an annual salary of $71,000 and a $10,000 signing bonus. When we chat now, A.J. good-naturedly reminds me that he makes twice the amount of money I earn as a graduate student.

A.J.'s story adds important nuance to the critique of "grit" I make in Chapter 3. There is no doubt that A.J. relied on grit to finish college. When he graduated, this is what he had to say on one of his social media accounts:

> A.J.'S WRITING: I never knew what "get it out the mud" meant until today. This is the first time that I feel like I really earned something to be proud of and I got it by any means necessary. I struggled with financial aid, sacrificed summers, and an entire internship's worth of money combined with what my family could provide. This experience taught me if a cause is worth fighting over, I'll do what needs to be done.

A.J. had to "[maintain] effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress"—seemingly right in line with Duckworth's definition of "grit" (Duckworth et al., 2007:1088). But what A.J. did not do was overextend himself, a pitfall that both Duckworth's definition and popular rhetoric overlook. Duckworth and colleagues write that grit involves "working *strenuously* toward challenges," claiming that gritty individuals "*push themselves to their limits*" (2007:1087, my emphasis). A.J.'s success, especially viewed alongside the failures of Dorian, Vincent, and Casey, suggests a more balanced and cautious picture of what successful grit looks like. Done right, being gritty involves remaining committed to a

worthwhile task even in the face of difficulty, but it also requires the patience and self-knowledge to measure out effort sustainably. There is a fine line between pushing oneself to one's limits and pushing *past* one's limits. Given how hard that line can be to discern, it seems likely that many successfully gritty people actually keep themselves a safe distance away from their maximum feasible level of commitment.

Kenya: An Unbridgeable Transition

Unlike A.J., Kenya did not manage to successfully transition to online learning. After his first-year success in college, Kenya returned for a successful sophomore fall. Then, he ran into an administrative challenge. Kenya was enrolled in a community college program that allowed him to live on campus and take classes at a four-year H.B.C.U. He needed to complete the requirements for his associate's degree before he could begin working toward his bachelor's degree. By the semester of his sophomore spring, Kenya only had two more classes required for his associate's degree. The problem was that students taking only two classes were not eligible for on-campus housing. An academic administrator suggested that Kenya move home and complete his last two classes online. Kenya agreed to this plan, but it did not work out well. A self-professed technophobe, Kenya struggled to keep up with the online format of his classes. It did not help that his laptop was old and temperamental. At the end of the semester, he failed both of his online courses. Realizing that online learning was not for him, but seeing no easy way to get back to campus in light of the strict housing policy, Kenya "stopped out" of college and has not returned. Even with his Pell Grants, his three and a half semesters of college left him with approximately $15,000 in student debt.

Kenya's story, like the stories of other participants I share below, highlights the fundamental instability that attempted upward mobility can entail. Kenya's college career got

off to a promising start, but it was derailed by an unforeseen difficulty that seemed surmountable at first before it eventually cascaded into failure. The analogy of a "barrier" or a "roadblock" would imply that such challenges stop people in their tracks, but that is not always how I witnessed Kenya and other participants cope with these kinds of unexpected adversity. Rather, after such challenges arose, participants often persevered for a time, trying to "hold it together" even as their control over their situation became increasingly tenuous. It took months for Kenya to realize that his online classes were not going to work for him. Likewise, two months passed between the beginning of Paul's conflict and when he stopped being able to show up for his classes.

The susceptibility of attempts at upward mobility to this type of instability is a function of poverty. With some money, Kenya could have simply paid for an off-campus apartment and taken his classes in person. Problems that would be forgettable blips for privileged people—a tooth infection, a car accident—can snowball out of control for people without material resources.

Since leaving college, Kenya has worked at a Home Depot near where he grew up. He began as a part-time shopping cart collector in the parking lot. Now, he gets more hours and works on the floor. With Paul gone and his conflict cooling off, Kenya slowly regained his sense of safety, although he still refuses to ride the bus. Last summer, Kenya saved up enough for a security deposit and first month's rent on an apartment. I spent a fun afternoon with him assembling his kitchen table and chairs. Several months later, as many in the city evacuated for Hurricane Ida, Kenya's older brother Akeem—the talented artist— was killed in a hit and run accident while riding his new motorcycle. The next day, Ida ripped the roof off the family's house. Tamika, Lamonte, and Shanice moved into Kenya's new

apartment, grieving and in shock. The power stayed out for days as they planned Akeem's funeral.

I am still heartbroken about Akeem's loss. I cannot imagine how Kenya and his family feel. The thing that has kept Kenya going is news he received, shortly after Akeem's death, that his girlfriend was pregnant. He was elated. "I already know what the baby's name is going to be if it's a boy," Kenya told me. "I feel like Akeem going to come back to us one way or another."

Dorian: The Transfer Trap

After Dorian got out of the psychiatric ward, he spent several weeks crafting an appeal letter to be allowed to re-enroll at his college. Shortly before summer began, he was relieved to receive word that his appeal had been approved. One afternoon, I went with him to the administration building at his college, where he planned to pick his fall courses. There was just one problem. When students do not pass any of their classes, as happened to Dorian, the federal government requires colleges to repay that student's Pell Grant. Students are then on the hook to the college for the balance. I listened as an administrator told Dorian that it would be no problem to re-enroll, but that first he would need to repay the approximately $3,300 he owed.

Dorian looked at his shoes and stammered. "Is— is there a way I can do like a payment plan and register?" he asked.

"You can pay in installments," the administrator replied. "As long as you've paid it all by the fall, you'll be able to enroll. But you do want to pay it. If you don't pay it they send

it to the Attorney General's Office and they do debt collection. It is really better to avoid that."

Dorian did not quite register the part about the debt collection. He had just completed an arduous appeals process, and he was still pretty sure that he could get back into school. He got shuffled to another office, where another administrator looked up Dorian's records and told him the dollar amount he owed.

"I did an appeal for my classes last semester because I was in the hospital," Dorain said. "They approved that." He seemed hopeful that this clarification would change matters.

"Yes, if your appeal was approved, that was an academic appeal," the administrator explained. "But you still need to repay this amount before you can re-enroll." $3,300 was an almost unfathomable quantity of money to Dorian. He left that day pretty sure he would not re-enroll at this college again.

The next fall, Dorian began the process of enrolling at the local community college instead. Unlike the four-year college he had been attending, this community college would be free to attend, its tuition covered completely by the Pell Grant. Dorian was upbeat as the new semester approached, but then he discovered a problem. He had already been to college, so he could not enroll as a first-time freshman. To enroll at the community college, he would need his transcript from his old school. But his old school would not release his transcript until Dorian's debt was repaid. Dorian was stuck. In fact, because of the withheld transcript, Dorian could not re-enroll at *any* college until he paid his old college the $3,300. He had fallen into a predicament I call the "transfer trap."

In the years since, Dorian's photography has taken off. He mostly does portrait work, capturing people in a brooding, high-contrast style that is striking and recognizably his own. He has begun doing album art and similar projects for some of the highest-profile

rappers in Louisiana. He has thousands of followers on Instagram. But artistic success has not come with financial freedom. Some gigs pay well, but many do not. The work comes in fits and starts. Other than a brief foray to Atlanta, where Dorian rented an apartment for several months, he has not moved away from home. He cannot afford to.

Paul: A Little Slipup, Big Consequences

During his semester of homelessness, Paul was just one class away from being able to graduate from his community college program and enroll full-time at the four-year H.B.C.U. where the program was based. He attended his class, kept up with his job at a local Popeye's, and spent his nights on his friend's couch or on the floor of a dark, dank, abandoned dorm building. One morning in April, Paul woke up to find that out that he had been "purged." At Paul's college, students dreaded purges. They came in rounds: students were allowed to start their classes before their financial aid was approved and their tuition was paid. But if the money did not come through in time, they were dropped from their classes. Paul had apparently missed an email that required him to check a box to approve the semester's fees. I tried to intervene on his behalf, calling a sympathetic administrator I knew and researching more about his predicament. There was nothing to be done. Paul would have to repeat the class. More frustrating still, because he would not be able to sign up for a full course load until he passed the class, he would remain ineligible for on-campus housing.

In graduate school, I have made mistakes like Paul's at least a dozen of times. At a well-resourced and forgiving place like Harvard, these mistakes are rarely a big deal.

Administrators reach out to students until a problem is resolved, and there are lots of second chances. The colleges my participants attended were much less administratively forgiving.

Paul did not end up re-enrolling in college. He got his own apartment near campus right as the summer started and lived there for several months, but by Thanksgiving he had decided to leave. He could not safely build a life in New Orleans, so he moved in with a much older half-sister in a city thousands of miles away. He found work at a Fed Ex shipping depot and started driving for Uber Eats. After helping his sister out with bills and making his car payments, he does not have much money left over at the end of the month. His new neighborhood is dominated by gangs—a fact he finds quaint and bizarre because New Orleans does not have gangs in the same way. Paul keeps his head down and tries to go about his business. He has not made very many friends. A few times—like for Akeem's funeral—he has returned to New Orleans to visit Kenya, his sister Britt, and other close friends. When he comes back, he stays indoors or makes sure he can get a ride in a car with tinted windows. He is surviving but not thriving, stuck in a liminal existence far away from the people he loves most and the city he understands best.

Vincent: A Car Crash and a Tempting Life Outside of College

Chapter 3 describes how Vincent overcommitted during both of his semesters of college, succumbing to the effort paradox. On its own, this likely would have been enough to guarantee failure. But during his spring semester, Vincent also got into an accident that left him mostly unscathed but that totaled his car. For some participants, failure could result from a piling on of sufficient-but-not-necessary causes, any one of which might be enough to make college untenable. Vincent's car accident was such an occasion. It left him without an easy way to get to class. Vincent was working hard anyway, but after the accident, he felt

that he had no choice but to double down on his outside-of-school efforts to save up for a new car.

Over time, Vincent's dream of becoming a funeral director slowly lost its allure. He reached out to several funeral directors about internships, and although they initially seemed receptive, none ever actually let him in. Meanwhile, he started earning more money. He found a job installing industrial spray insulation at new construction sites, and he was thrilled that it paid almost $15 an hour. He also started to sell more and more marijuana. At the end of his first year of college, Vincent found out that he would become a father. Getting a car and an apartment in anticipation of the new baby began to seem a lot more important than getting a funeral certification.

Vincent now has a beautiful son and daughter, and he leads a happy life. He has bounced around between jobs, but he earns enough money to get by, and he spends lots of his time surrounded by a bevy of family members and close friends. He does not feel defined by not having finished college.

Casey: A Tooth Infection, A Purge, A Transfer Trap

In Chapter 3, I describe how Casey fell into the effort paradox during his second semester of college. I do not tell the story of how Casey's first semester of college was also derailed. Shortly before final exams during his freshman fall semester, Casey got a fever, and he began to have trouble chewing his food. A visit to the dentist revealed that he had an impacted, infected wisdom tooth. Surgery would cost $1,828. Casey did not have the money, and neither did his mother, who had just paid a substantial sum out of pocket for treatment after a breast cancer relapse. For several days before his final exams, Casey was not able to eat, and his fever intensified. He ended up failing his math class and his English class

because of dismal performances on his final exams. Unable to satisfactorily finish the assignments for his chemistry lab, he received a D in that class. These grades put a serious dent in Casey's plans to become a nurse, and he began to shift his thinking back toward becoming a high school guidance counselor. The grades also put him on thin ice for retaining his Pell Grant eligibility—ice he fell through when his spring classes also did not go well.

The next academic year, Casey registered for classes at a community college near the H.B.C.U. he used to attend. He and his childhood friend Russell got an apartment together, and Casey got a job at a Starbucks. Casey had learned some lessons about overcommitment the last semester, so he made sure to limit his work hours, sign up for a course load that would not be overwhelming, and make sure that his work schedule never conflicted with class. The first three months of the semester went well. Casey was getting good grades, and he was enjoying his job well enough. Then, in late October, Casey found out he had been purged from all his classes but English. His Pell Grant application had been rejected because his mother had submitted incorrect tax documents, mistakenly believing that copies of her paperwork from H&R Block would suffice.

Casey was despondent. "Man, it sucks, because I was doing good in my classes. And I liked them! That was what I had to look forward to," he said. "I just got a twenty out of twenty on a quiz in my business class. And we have a test tomorrow, but now I'm not gonna be able to go. So like, even if they reinstate me, it'll probably be too late." Considering that semester a lost cause, he moved back in with his grandparents in New Orleans.

A few weeks later, he showed up at a community college in New Orleans to register in advance for spring classes. They told him he would not be able to sign up. He still owed $377 from the one English class that had not been purged from his schedule the previous

semester. Casey had not withdrawn from the class in time to avoid his tuition obligation. $377 was not as insurmountably large a sum as the $3,300 Dorian owed, but it was more than Casey had at the time. Already discouraged, Casey threw in the towel on the idea of spring classes.

In the years since, Casey has mostly worked as a security guard, often pulling 12-hour overnight shifts. He has become increasingly interested in history, politics, and global affairs. After learning about Carter G. Woodson's *The Miseducation of the Negro* in a book by radio host Charlamagne Tha God, Casey insisted that we form a book club and read it together. We would read a chapter a week, then discuss each chapter over the phone. We made it most of the way through the book, with the impetus always coming from Casey. Casey is also eager to talk about current events. A few times a month, he calls me, launching into conversation with questions like: "Say, Tom, you heard what Mitch McConnell just said about the stimulus?"

Seeing Casey intellectually blossom in this way is poignant considering his limited opportunities. The older Casey gets, the more remote the possibility of returning to college seems to him.

Jaydin: Culture Shock, Shame

Jaydin never went back to college after his first semester. He was the only one of my participants who felt culturally uncomfortable and out-of-place on campus. He and Dorian both attended a racially diverse university where Black students were in the minority. Participants who attended the community college or the H.B.C.U. felt right at home on campus. So did Dorian, who yearned for new experiences and bristled when I suggested he could join the Black Students Association. But Jaydin had trouble shaking the sense that he

was an impostor and that everyone around him could tell—a feeling that compounded when he returned to class after stretches of absence. Jaydin has remembered that feeling, and it has made him reticent to go back.

Jaydin also took his departure from college especially hard. He felt ashamed. He retreated after dropping out, avoiding me for a few months. At work, he got into an argument with his manager and lost his job. He spent most of the spring semester inside his house. Dorian, one of his best friends, rarely saw him anymore. Jaydin was unable to pay his phone bill, so his phone got disconnected. His mother Bernadette had never seen him like this. "What do we do with him?" she asked me one day, genuinely perplexed.

Eventually, Jaydin found good paying work in a union construction job, and he began to rebuild his confidence. In the past few years, Jaydin has bounced around between jobs and apartments. This summer, he and his longtime girlfriend had a beautiful son. Jaydin feels like economic opportunity in New Orleans is limited, and he is contemplating moving with his family to try his luck in a new city.

Juan: Precarity and "Summer Melt"

As I describe in Chapter 3, Juan registered for college but did not show up on the first day. This is a widespread phenomenon among low-income young people called "summer melt" (Castleman and Page 2014). Shortly before the new semester began, Juan's mother had a disagreement with her landlord and decided to move the family. Juan's old house was close to a good daycare for Benny, and it was a relatively short bus ride away from campus. But the new house, across the Mississippi River from campus and on the very edge of the New Orleans metropolitan area, would have required a two-and-a-half-hour bus ride, with several changes, to get to campus. Facing this long commute, and with no viable

childcare options near class because of recent state budget cuts to on-campus daycare, Juan decided to delay going to college.

In the years since, Juan has never enrolled. He has mostly found work as a security guard, and he has started a custom firearm painting business. Right before the pandemic, Juan got married to a wonderful young woman named Lizzie. I got to go to their small wedding in the office of a Justice of the Peace. Juan's son Benny and Lizzie's two sons wore matching outfits. Everyone in the blended family gets along well. Shortly after the pandemic began, Juan and Lizzie moved with their children to Houston, where they are very happy. They just had a child together. In Houston, Juan likes the inexpensive rent, and he appreciates that his neighborhood is a lot safer than anywhere he ever lived in New Orleans.

PRECARIOUS MOBILITY

As I continue to develop the data and arguments contained in this dissertation, I will be building new theory about what makes upward mobility so difficult in the United States today. Opportunities like college are no longer blocked outright for people like the young men I profile in this dissertation. As they graduated from high school, Dorian and the others perceived an array of tantalizing options that they were eager to pursue. But these opportunities were riddled with hidden hazards, risks, and costs. As I discuss in Chapter 1, I call the work of navigating these fraught opportunities *precarious mobility*. Based on the experiences of my participants, I suggest that this work is fundamentally unstable, in that small, unexpected problems can quickly escalate into total failure. It is counterintuitive, in

that success demands cautious strategies that feel at odds with one's inner drive. And it is high consequence, in that failure often leaves one much worse off for having tried.

The concept of precarious mobility could help reveal parallels between different ostensible pathways to upward mobility that low-income people in the United States pursue, drawing attention to how inherently risky and tenuous the work of trying to get ahead often is. The concept applies well to tantalizing pathways that entail long odds of success and/or high downside risk. The young people I got to know during my fieldwork considered several such pathways other than college, including athletics, drug dealing, multilevel marketing schemes, and military service. As a concept, precarious mobility emphasizes a user's-eye view of what can make the work of pursuing such fraught opportunities so vexing and counterintuitively difficult. When trying to get ahead in a field that seems promising but is in fact unpredictably treacherous, it can be tempting to go "all in," making a large personal commitment and investing substantial energy and resources to meet it. But it is often better to take a cautious, skeptical approach, making smaller commitments and placing less on the line so as not to become overextended or lose everything in the event of failure.

The concept of precarious mobility is closely related to the concept of "predatory inclusion," which Keeagna-Yamahtta Taylor uses to describe the process of home buying and home ownership for Black families in the United States (2019). Predatory inclusion "refers to a process whereby members of a marginalized group are provided with access to a good, service, or opportunity from which they have historically been excluded but under conditions that jeopardize the benefits of access," (Seamster and Charron-Chénier 2017). redatory inclusion sets the stage for precarious mobility. It creates opportunities that appear inviting and promising, but that slyly conceal hidden exploitation and risk.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Making pathways to upward mobility in the United States less precarious would be best accomplished with sweeping societal changes. One such change is that for low-income students like the young men profiled in this dissertation, college should be free, and there should be living stipends that lessen the need (or even the temptation) to work a job outside of class. These changes would prevent most of the problems this dissertation documents. They would also require extraordinary political will. Political winds change swiftly and unpredictably, so such changes might not be out of the question, but they are hard to imagine happening soon.

In lieu of such large, fundamental changes, my research also points to smaller policy shifts that could make a big difference. One shift is that primary and secondary schools should carefully examine the explicit and implicit lessons they teach their students about "grit," altering their curricula to emphasize balance and pacing. They should also give students opportunities to practice doing work in unstructured settings, building in safe opportunities to try different approaches and fail. Such experiences would help students learn how to channel their efforts effectively and sustainably. Young people should be taught that feeling overwhelmed is a sign not of inadequate personal willpower but rather of overcommitment. They should also be taught that cutting back on untenable commitments is something that successful people do all the time. Curricula that simplistically teach young people to double down and try harder in the face of adversity are not setting them up for success.

Another simple change is that the Department of Education should stop requiring colleges to repay the Pell Grants of students who fail. This would prevent students like Dorian and Casey from falling into the transfer trap that I document.

234

Colleges that serve lots of low-income students require many reforms to make them more administratively hospitable. Paul and Casey were each "purged" from their classes three months into the semester over problems that might have been solvable with a phone call and a five-minute advising conversation. The colleges my participants attended have graduation rates that range from the single digits through the mid-twenty percentage points. They should be doing everything they can to hold onto students. Instead, they are shedding these students left and right.

My findings suggest several promising directions for future research. One straightforward project would be to use Department of Education data to find out how many Pell Grants colleges are required to repay each year, which would reveal the number of students who annually fall into the transfer trap. Interviews with people in this predicament would help reveal how they navigate it and how it affects their educational trajectories. Based on my experiences during fieldwork, I suspect that this problem is widespread and consequential.

Research should also pay greater attention to the administrative difficulties low-income students encounter at the colleges they most often attend. Three decades ago, Tinto proposed his influential model of student "integration," hypothesizing that students' persistence and success in higher education hinges on their "social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college" (2012 [1987]:116). Integration, for Tinto, is a sense of belonging fostered by positive interactions and experiences. Leaving college, Tinto posits, is a *choice* prompted by insufficient integration (2012 [1987]:114). But at the universities my participants attended, especially the community college and the H.B.C.U., students who felt at home on campus and who were succeeding in their classes were nevertheless frequently kicked out for administrative reasons. The

dominant way of thinking about why students leave college, which emphasizes feelings of attachment and individual choice, likely misses important processes beyond students' control that derail or exclude them against their will.

This oversight results from a bias toward studying the experiences of students who attend selective residential colleges. Inspired in part by Tinto's invitation to study students' sense of belonging, and by a growing interest in the role of cultural capital in educational success (e.g., Bourdieu 1977), a large subfield of the sociology of higher education has investigated the experiences of low-income students and students of color on campuses dominated by well-to-do white students (e.g., Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996; Hurtado and Carter 1997; Torres and Charles 2004; Aries and Seider 2005; Bergerson 2007; Lehmann 2007; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009; Torres 2009; Stuber 2011; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Jack 2014, 2016). These studies, all of which examine flagship public universities or selective private residential colleges, shine a bright light on how culturally inhospitable these institutions can be to students who are not affluent and white. But though vital for other reasons, this body of work is of limited use for understanding why so many disadvantaged students leave college. Together, flagship public universities and selective private residential colleges enroll less than 10% of low-income college students (Engle and Tinto 2008). By contrast, community colleges and lower-tier four-year public colleges enroll nearly two-thirds of low-income college students (Engle and Tinto 2008). There is ample reason to believe that social conditions on these less-selective campuses do not play the same role in alienating low-income students as social conditions at selective residential schools. With fewer affluent white students, less-selective colleges are probably less likely to prompt "culture shock" among disadvantaged students. Moreover, campus social life may play a comparatively limited role in shaping the college trajectories of low-income students, because most of these

236

students—indeed, the majority of all US college students—live at home and commute to classes (Engle and Tinto 2008; Ipsos 2015).

Therefore, more work should focus on the problems that low-income students encounter at less-selective and non-selective colleges. Emerging research suggests a host of problems unrelated to cultural alienation that can derail low-income college students at less-selective institutions. These problems include poorly designed and poorly administered pathways from matriculation to degree completion (e.g., Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum 2013), difficulties balancing work and school (e.g., Perna 2010, Hart 2019), and financial struggles (e.g., Goldrick-Rab et al. 2016). Such problems suggest that leaving college might not always be a choice in the way Tinto posited. They also suggest that the concept of "integration," which implies a sense of belonging, may not always be the right way to explain students' departures from college. This project adds to this body of evidence, providing an up-close view of student struggles at the types of colleges that low-income young people most often attend.

WORKS CITED

Aries, Elizabeth and Maynard Seider. 2005. "The Interactive Relationship Between Class Identity and the College Experience: The Case of Lower Income Students." *Qualitative Sociology* 28(4):419–43.

Armstrong, Elizabeth and Laura Hamilton. 2013. *Paying for The Party: How College Maintains Inequality.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bergerson, Amy Aldous. 2007. "Exploring the Impact of Social Class on Adjustment to College: Anna's Story." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 20(1):99–119.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction." Pp. 487-511 in *Power and Ideology in Education,* edited by Jerome Karabel and A. H. Halsey. New York: Oxford University Press.

Castleman, Benjamin L. and Lindsay C. Page. 2014. "A Trickle or a Torrent? Understanding the Extent of Summer 'Melt' Among College-Intending High School Graduates: Summer Melt Among College-Intending Students." *Social Science Quarterly* 95(1):202–20.

Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez. 2014. *Where Is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States*. National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved 12/6/15 (http://www.nber.org/papers/ w19843).

Engle, Jennifer and Vincent Tinto. 2008. *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students*. The Pell Institution.

Feagin, Joe R., Hernan Vera, and Nikitah Imani. 1996. *The Agony of Education: Black Students at a White University*. New York: Routledge.

Goldrick-Rab, Sara. 2016. *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hurtado, Sylvia and Deborah Faye Carter. 1997. "Effects of College Transition and Perceptions of the Campus Racial Climate on Latino College Students' Sense of Belonging." *Sociology of Education* 70(4):324.

Ipsos Public Affairs. 2015. "How America Pays for College: Sallie Mae's National Study of College Students and Parents." Washington, DC: Sallie Mae.

Jack, Anthony Abraham. 2014. "Culture Shock Revisited: The Social and Cultural Contingencies to Class Marginality." *Sociological Forum* 29(2):453–475.

Jack, Anthony Abraham. 2016. "(No) Harm in Asking: Class, Acquired Cultural Capital, and Academic Engagement at an Elite University." *Sociology of Education* 89(1):1-19.

Lehmann, Wolfgang. 2007. "' I Just Didn't Feel like I Fit in': The Role of Habitus in University Dropout Decisions." *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 37(2).

Perna, Laura W. 2010. *Understanding the Working College Student: New Research and its Implications for Policy and Practice*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Rosenbaum, James, and Janet Rosenbaum. 2013. "Beyond BA blinders: Lessons from occupational colleges and certificate programs for non-traditional students." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27(2):153-72.

Seamster, Louise, and Raphaël Charron-Chénier. 2017. "Predatory inclusion and education debt: Rethinking the racial wealth gap." *Social Currents* 4(3): 199-207.

Snyder, Thomas D. and Sally A. Dillow. 2015. *Digest of Education Statistics*. Washington DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Stuber, Jenny M. 2011. *Inside the College Gates: How Class and Culture Matter in Higher Education*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Torres, Kimberly. 2009. "'Culture Shock': Black Students Account for Their Distinctiveness at an Elite College." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32(5):883–905.

Torres, Kimberly C. and Camille Z. Charles. 2004. "Metastereotypes and the Black-White Divide: A Qualitative View of Race on an Elite College Campus." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1(01).

Tinto, Vincent. 2012. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.