Adversity, Ambivalence, and Mental Health: The Emotional Costs of Severe Deprivation

Adversity, Ambivalence, and Mental Health: The Emotional Costs of Severe Deprivation

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Abstract

This dissertation uses small-scale ethnographic fieldwork to examine the affective underside of severe deprivation and its institutional management. Chapters 1-3 draw on three years of participant observation in a low-income network. Chapter 1 outlines the key research participants' trajectories and illustrates the proliferating nature of poverty's trials. Chapter 2 traces some consequences of cumulative adversity by focusing on the on-again, off-again quality of several relationships in my participants' network. Dispossession increased participants' reliance on each other, not only materially, but for emotional nurturance. However, poverty also made it more difficult to meet each other's needs. Disappointment and sometimes violence ensued, breaking up social ties. Nevertheless, at the next crisis, people found themselves rekindling their relationships for lack of a better alternative. The travails of chronic scarcity thus worked both as *strains* on relationships and sometimes as *traps* that brought people back together under the pressure of necessity. This resulted in relationships marked by deep *ambivalence*. A stronger institutional safety net would free poor people from having to negotiate emotional fulfillment under the pressures of economic survival.

Given the distress documented in chapters 1 and 2, however, it is also reasonable to consider psychological and therapeutic interventions. Chapters 3 and 4 examine uses of mental health services as institutional responses to suffering. I argue that treatment and counseling, when nested within structures of poverty governance, present a troubling fusion of care with control and mistrust. Chapter 3 focuses on a mother and her five-year old son's experiences with counseling services and psychiatric treatment. Chapter 4

investigates an incipient development in social service delivery: the rise of "trauma-informed care". This chapter introduces a new set of data, collected during eight months of visits to a social service agency. In both case studies, being labeled as mentally disordered brought benefits, e.g. disability income or the chance to escape incarceration. The wages of mental illness, however, were problematic in two ways: Offered against the backdrop of punishing alternatives, they could be considered coercive. Second, they came at significant costs: increased distrust of healthcare providers, exposure to potentially serious side-effects, and a loss of credibility.

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DEDICATION

For my mother, who taught me about unconditional support, strength and vulnerability, self-reflection and empathy, and most of all, the importance of fighting the good fight;

For my father, who taught me that past suffering doesn't preclude trying anew, and that thinking can be pure joy;

For my siblings, who first taught me about love and companionship among equals, and keep teaching me about resilience, from up close and from afar;

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LIST OF TABLES

INTRODUCTION: THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY

This dissertation comes to a close at a time when concerns over the consequences of economic insecurity are surging again in the United States. Ten years ago, the financial and housing crisis of 2008 propelled into unemployment, deprivation, and sometimes homelessness Americans who did not think of themselves as poor, or even as particularly vulnerable to sudden changes in fortune. Even among those who were already on the lower end of the income and wealth spectrum before the crisis, many believed that homeownership and better tomorrows were within their grasp, right until the moment when loss of job and home came to shatter the illusion. This destabilization of the economy has spurred new research on the causes and consequences of economic insecurity for families all along the class spectrum (e.g., Cooper 2014, Pugh 2015, Grusky, Western, and Wimer 2011). These studies reveal that widespread financial insecurity results not merely from the tsunami of the Great Recession, but also from a tide long in the making, risen from the tectonic movements of deindustrialization, globalization of capital without globalization of labor rights, and policy reforms that shifted risks from institutions to the individual (Western et al. 2012). This sea change has resulted in greater economic inequality (Piketty and Saez 2003, 2014), lower social mobility (Chetty et al. 2014), a pervasive sense of anxiety, even among the upper-middle class (Cooper 2014), higher rates of violence within families (Schneider D. et al. 2016, Schneider W. et al. 2017) and possibly more deaths: the white working- and middle-class have seen a steep increase in suicides and alcohol and drug poisonings since the late 1990s, which have been convincingly argued to represent “deaths of despair”, triggered by impoverishment and disappearing opportunities (Case and Deaton 2015).

In view of these concerns, this dissertation may seem to lag behind the curve. Indeed, it focuses on a population that has attracted much ethnographic attention for decades: people of color who live poor in poor neighborhoods, a segment of society baptized "the truly disadvantaged" more than thirty years ago (Wilson 1987). Their plight, unlike that of a more recently destabilized working- and middle-class, isn't news – though the depth of deprivation to which some are exposed may still be, as demonstrated by Luke Shaefer and Kathryn Edin's recent investigations into $2-a-day poverty in the United States (Shaefer, Edin, and Talbert 2015, Edin and Shaefer 2015). But while the concentration of disadvantage in postindustrial urban settings isn't a new phenomenon, it is an evolving one, and there is still much to learn from those who live it, as well as a pressing need to keep searching for solutions (Desmond 2015). In particular, this dissertation investigates a little-explored dimension of urban poverty: its affective underside, where the strains of adversity reach into the most intimate regions of people's lives and relationships. There, at the junction of poverty and intimacy, lies one of the most revealing and consequential intersections of "personal troubles and public issues" (Mills 1959), one that matters in its own right – for difficult lives are as worthy of consideration as easy ones – but that also bears on the more widespread malaise of our current moment.[1]

In order to map that intersection, I began my exploration with a set of sensitizing questions: How do severely deprived people cope with repeated adversity? How much

[1] Arguably, what makes the downwardly mobile working- and middle-class increasingly inclined towards exclusionary politics and vulnerable to illnesses and deaths of despair, is existential fear of joining the ranks of the "truly disadvantaged," or perhaps the bitter conviction that they already have (Cherlin 2017, Lamont et al. 2017).

help can they get from others around them, if hardship is the fabric of daily life? What do their personal relationships look like under the strain of chronic scarcity? And what roles do state institutions play, both in providing resources directly, and in influencing personal networks of support? Investigating these questions required conducting intimate fieldwork, at the ground level where hardship is felt, support sought, and resources withheld or provided. Accordingly, I embedded myself in the flow of a low-income family's everyday life. For more than three years, I followed the evolving relationships between a young woman, her three children, the children's father, other lovers, extended family members, and friends with varying degrees of closeness. I recorded both everyday troubles and life-altering events, and sought to trace their sources as well as their downstream consequences. Understanding the context of participants' actions required paying attention to the many institutions framing their lives: the complex and rigid bureaucracy of the county welfare office; the mandatory employment programs devolved to nonprofit agencies; the homelessness prevention programs which were almost as strapped for funds as the individuals they intended to help; the public schools, which fed children lunch and promised them better futures, but which parents experienced as inquisitive and eager to call child protection; and the criminal justice system, which, like death for everyone and taxes for the middle class, could be counted on to appear sooner or later in the life of a struggling family.

As I gathered observations and analyses, my research questions became more pointed, until they took the following form:

1) How can we make sociological sense of intimate relationships among the poor that are only partially supportive, frequently painful, and yet durable? (Chapter 2)

2) Is mental health treatment a helpful institutional response to the sorrows of compounded hardship? (Chapter 3)

3) What does the rise of a fledgling "trauma-informed" approach in social service agencies portend for the material and symbolic resources made available to the poor? (Chapter 4)

Before outlining the answers this dissertation brings, I provide the theoretical and empirical background that motivates these questions.

Theoretical Framework

Severe Deprivation, Cumulative Stress, and Social Suffering

Poor people lead difficult lives. The key question, for many U.S. poverty scholars and practitioners, is: *how* difficult? We may answer this question along several lines: first, by documenting the *depth* and *persistence* of material deprivation in the United States; second, by investigating *correlations* between economic hardship and other forms of difficulty; and third, by examining the *concentration* of different forms of disadvantage in certain sectors of society, be they defined geographically (disadvantaged neighborhoods), socially (disadvantaged networks), or demographically (disadvantaged categories of people, such as racial or sexual minorities). This threefold concern underlies what has recently been termed "the severe deprivation perspective" (Desmond 2015), which serves as a broad framework for this dissertation and its arguments.

Across those three dimensions, the news isn't good for poor people in the United States. While scholars such as Sharkey and Elwert (2011) document strong patterns of lifetime and intergenerational disadvantage (see also Sharkey 2013), Shaefer and Edin (2015) sound the alarm regarding the rise of deep poverty in the United States – poverty that means surviving on $2 a day or less. Furthermore, a rich body of research in urban sociology and public health indicates that where poverty is concentrated, so are a host of adverse experiences, such as exposure to violence, illness, addiction, and early death (Blane 1995, Burke et al. 2011, Sampson et al. 2008, Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). These measures of concentrated disadvantage point both to correlations among different types of adversity and to their spatial clustering in specific cities and neighborhoods. A further upshot of that research is that concentration itself (living poor in a poor neighborhood) increases correlations between material and other forms of hardship.

Research on stress and health offers useful concepts for grasping certain aspects of compounded hardship and its consequences. Stress researchers see adversity in terms of "stressors" but recognize that there are different types of stressors, with different consequences for those who experience them: These stressors can usefully be subdivided into chronic strains (poverty being the quintessential example), life events (death of a loved one, loss of housing or employment), and traumas (in this model, trauma is restricted to extreme threats to the self, such as rape or near-death experiences, but in a broader definition, the work could also apply to particularly distressing life events) (Thoits 1995, 2010). When considered together, the three types of stressors constitute cumulative adversity, which has been shown to be extremely detrimental to both physical and mental health (Turner 2003). Disadvantaged people and networks are at greater risks

of cumulative adversity, through stress proliferation (one stressor rendering other stressors more likely) and stress propagation (one person's hardship exposing another person to difficulty). These two mechanisms will be at the core of the story told in Chapter 1, while Chapter 2 investigates the affective consequences of stress propagation.

Despite stress research (and much urban sociology) focusing on the physical outcomes of morbidity and mortality, this literature shouldn't be construed as an inquiry into passive bodies internalizing insults as well as injuries and metabolizing them into toxic levels of cortisol. Essential components of the stress response reside in the cognitive, emotional, and relational resources available to make sense of setbacks and what they mean for a person's place in the world. Suffering, to be recognized as such, depends on a certain set of meanings.

Indeed, suffering "involves experiencing yourself on the other side of life *as it should be*" (Frank 2001:355, emphasis added). Any study of social suffering must therefore not only account for how social structures distribute the concrete injuries of illness, economic insecurity, or violence, but also examine how these adverse conditions violate socially situated expectations for how life should unfold (Auyero and Swistun 2009, Wilkinson 2005). The experience of adversity is informed by local understandings— depending on the harshness of context, the same event may be felt as a cruel departure from normalcy or as a usual, to-be-expected happening. These situated meanings in turn influence people's self-identification as subjects of suffering (Francis and Harvey 2015), the acknowledgement of their plight by others, and the kinds of support they do or do not receive (Biehl 2005, Morris 2015, Scheper-Hughes 1992). Thus, social suffering is an intersubjective phenomenon that involves not only affliction,

but also interpretation and recognition. It is inextricably tied to the social conditions and the cultural idioms that shape people's expectations and understanding of their circumstances.

Intimate Ties: From Material to Emotional Support

On the flip side of social suffering, there is social support. Research on stress and coping has identified two components of social support flowing from personal networks: *emotional sustenance*, which centers on expressing affection, care, and empathy, and generally demonstrating to a person that she is cared for and valued, and on the other hand *active coping assistance*, which involves sharing useful information, performing tasks for or instead of someone, and providing them with material resources (Thoits 1995, 2011). The two are likely to be intertwined in practice, with instrumental assistance often meant and interpreted as an expression of care. But they need not be: practical help can be supplied in a way that emotionally undermines the recipient, and conversely, someone can provide emotional support without being able to offer informational or logistical assistance. Furthermore, both forms of support have been found to buffer stress and its negative consequences, but through different mechanisms: while emotional sustenance improves people's feelings about their situation, often by increasing their sense of belonging and self-worth, coping assistance facilitates problem-solving and tends to improve the situation itself. The latter, however, shouldn't necessarily be seen as superior to the former: many human predicaments cannot be solved (e.g., death and grief), or at least not entirely through the efforts of individuals and their close ones. In those cases, emotional sustenance may be just as essential a form of interpersonal support as practical assistance is (Pearlin 1999). Poverty, especially of the persistent kind, is

arguably just such a situation, in which both practical and emotional support are likely to be paramount.

Yet, much sociological research on social support among the poor has focused only on active coping assistance, at the expense of emotional sustenance. Accordingly, we still tend to have a partial view of deprived people's networks, one that privileges their instrumental functions and material consequences. Scholars have prominently debated whether being raised by a single parent increases children's risk of current and future poverty (Moynihan 1965, McLanahan and Sandefur 1994); how the composition and quality of network ties affects an individual's chances or eagerness to find employment (Kasinitz & Rosenberg 1996, Smith 2007, Wilson 2010); how different parenting styles influence children's ability to take advantage of school and other mainstream institutions (Lareau 2005); or who among extended kin, friends, and fleeting acquaintances provides resources to get by when the nuclear family cannot (Desmond 2012, Miller-Cribbs 2008, Stack 1974). Yet, thick descriptions of social life under scarcity reveal complex relationships where affection and intimacy are interwoven with, but not reducible to, material assistance and dependence.

Carol Stack's (1974) landmark ethnography *All Our Kin* might be the paradigmatic study of personal networks' material functions: by systematically mapping exchange flows among kin relations in "The Flats", a poor urban neighborhood in the Midwest, Stack illuminates the importance of social ties for the urban poor's economic survival and resilience. The book documents intimate dealings such as sharing food, clothes, and childrearing, but does so primarily in the language of investments and returns, or of rights and duties. Kin and friends who have been obligated by prior services

are described as "a fund" to "be drawn upon" in times of need (Stack 1974: 106). When participants in Stack's research fell in love, their budding relationship had to contend with the pull of obligations to the larger domestic network, who saw a romantic union with "a non-economically productive man" as a liability on the resources of the network as a whole (Stack 1974:115). Thus, in Stack's account, sentiments of loyalty, love, friendship, or betrayal are implicitly treated as epiphenomenal, or as submerged and displaced by the logic of material exchange.

All Our Kin's chapter "On Women and Men", however, introduces more complex emotional dynamics by tracing several women's histories of romantic and domestic relationships with men. Of particular note for our discussion is the following process of transformation of intimate relationships: when women in the Flats became disappointed in, or humiliated by, their partners (due to sexual infidelity or lack of involvement with the children), they told Stack that they recovered their dignity by transforming the relationship into one of economic exploitation of the man, and they taught their children to do the same with their occasionally visiting fathers (Stack 1974:108-120). In these narratives, material dealings no longer appear as the primary factor structuring relationships, but as strategies of reparation for a lack of emotional sustenance.

Further counter-stories can be found in other accounts that focus on the material dimensions of social ties. In an article exploring strategies of resilience among dispossessed populations, anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes theorizes poor Brazilians' manufacturing of fictive kin relationships as "purely instrumental" (Scheper-Hughes 2008:47). Yet, she includes the following example: "Lourdes took up with an old man, Seu Djalmer, a widower, not for love (she said) but for access to his pension. 'But

she still has some affection for me, anyway', Djalmer would insist. And she did." (Scheper-Hughes 2008:30). Similarly, Desmond's (2012) study of "disposable ties" among the urban poor in Milwaukee focuses on fleeting relationships struck up to further economic survival, but also gives glimpses of their affective dimensions. In one scene, two women, in the course of an argument, revealed to one another that they had both been sexually abused as children. "Although it is impossible to know precisely how Crystal and Arleen felt at that moment, it is reasonable to suggest that, through this exchange, both women experienced a kind of shared comprehension: the consoling recognition of an affinity, the seeing of oneself (and one's past) in another. When disposable ties merged one life history of suffering with another, as they often did, newly formed relationships could be relied on to produce a sense of belonging and, if not comfort, then at least something close to the opposite of estrangement." (Desmond 2012:1316)

These counter-stories within the story call for further investigation of the entanglements of material and emotional support in contexts of chronic poverty. Answering the call requires us to direct our attention to the affective life of the truly disadvantaged, to no longer ask "What in the intimate relations of the poor explains their poverty (or their getting by amidst poverty)?" but "What do intimate relations look like under the strain of chronic scarcity?" This move lets us examine emotional experience as a crucial dimension of inequality in its own right (Illouz 2007, Threadcraft 2014), which is the subject of Chapter 2.

The Institutional Framing of Intimacy

Intimate experience is not solely shaped at the level of interpersonal networks. Indeed, welfare policy is deeply implicated in the regulation of family relations and the affective and economic obligations they carry (Abramovitz 2006, Connell 1990, Fraser and Gordon 1994, Orloff 1993, 1996, Roberts 1998, 2002). Programs such as unemployment insurance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF or "welfare"), and tax credits for married couples with children create financial incentives that are intended to reshape networks of family ties in low-income neighborhoods and are certain to affect the distribution of material resources along the lines of gender and age (Moffitt 2015).

Other social policies seek to exert a cultural influence on state subjects' intimate relationships, by explicitly regulating the affective dimensions of family life: "responsible fatherhood" education attached to child support enforcement is meant to promote men's emotional involvement with their children (Curran and Abrams 2000), while sentences for domestic violence generally include court-mandated therapy sessions on "healthy relationships" (Feder and Wilson 2005). Child protection is perhaps the domain in which the intimate reach of the state is greatest. While child protective services are meant to pursue the paramount goal of securing children from harm, their enforcement practices have been found to rely on fuzzy definitions of abuse and neglect, to universalize ways of disciplining and caring for children that rely on material resources, and to remove poor black children from their mothers' care at disproportionate rates (Fernández-Kelly 2015; Roberts 2002, 2014; Threadcraft 2014).[2]

[2] For example, the Baltimore Child Safe program classifies as "Confusing Touch" "tickling *too long*, a hug that is *too tight*, a kiss that is *inappropriate*", and spanking (a practice that is not legally prohibited) as "Touch we don't like" (cited in Fernández-Kelly 2015, emphasis added). Assessments of neglect often rely

State by state, the enforcement of these policies is more or less decentralized and devolved to "hybrid organizations" (Haney 2010), such as secular nonprofits and faith-based charities (Van Slyke 2003). Because of these various and evolving dimensions of institutional involvement in family life, studying social responses to poverty-related distress requires investigating both intimate and institutional sources of meaning and support, as well as their interrelation (Biehl 2005, Desmond 2014).

The Institutions of Poverty: Poverty Governance and the Medicalization of Social Suffering

American institutions have prominently been described both as having *abandoned* the poor (see Seefeldt 2017 on the increasing dysfunction of educational, homeownership, and welfare programs) and as exercising *intrusion*, *surveillance*, and *repression* upon them (e.g., Roberts 2002 about child protection, Smith 2007 about the welfare state and child support enforcement system, and Wacquant 2001 about the "deadly symbiosis" of hyperincarceration for men and punitive "workfare" for women).

Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, in *The Hero's Fight* (2015), offers a way to reconcile these seemingly opposite perspectives. She argues that mainstream institutions have powerfully, but invisibly shaped the prosperity of white middle-class America through developmental policies (Evans 1995) that regulated and strengthened private markets. Markets being naturalized as the normal source of income, state programs that take the form of tax breaks are taken-for-granted rather than seen as assistance (e.g., mortgage-

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on insufficient nutrition and healthcare as well as children's time spent alone, predicaments that can stem directly from poverty and long commuting times to work (a problem which affects disproportionately ghetto residents segregated away from job hubs and provided with inadequate public transportation) (Threadcraft 2014). These "signs of neglect" undoubtedly cause harm to children but removing them from their parents' home is only a solution in a system that has failed to equip all families with the material resources to make ends meet and secure adequate childcare.

interest deductions). Accordingly, mainstream institutions tend to treat citizens as self-sufficient agents, within the paradigm of consumer choice and customer service. By contrast, institutions targeted at low-income publics, either through their explicit function (e.g., welfare agencies, food pantries) or their location in areas of concentrated disadvantage (e.g., certain public schools), tend to follow a model of suspicion, in which assistance is seen as a supererogatory gift rather than an entitlement or a contract, and would-be service recipients have to go through an elaborate process of applying for help and documenting their need in detail. Fernández-Kelly calls this model "distorted engagement," because it disfigures the interaction rules and rituals that are normative in contemporary civic society (Goffman 1959).

Fernández-Kelly (2015:116) further characterizes the tenor of this distortion by calling organizations of poverty governance "liminal institutions," as they occupy a shadow zone between explicit commitments to benefiting vulnerable populations and latent functions of repression, surveillance, and control. Political scientists Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011) capture a similar idea with their concept of "neo-paternalistic state," and in the following pages I will use liminal institutions, poverty governance, and neo-paternalism as near synonyms. This vocabulary of organizational ambivalence (liminality, distortion, neo-paternalism) will allow us to capture the ways in which important institutions can be both absent and ineffective on the one hand, as well as intrusive and constraining on the other hand.

The manifestations of this institutional ambivalence can be seen throughout the history of social provision in the United States, albeit in different guises, from the origins of the U.S. welfare state in the early twentieth-century to its current form. The parameters

of institutional liminality have roughly evolved from a moral division between deserving and undeserving poor (Katz 1990) to an increasing medicalization of poverty's problems (Schram 2000, Amundson et al. 2014).

The history of social provision can be read as a series of negotiations over which types of suffering are worthy of civic obligation and institutional remedy. Welfare institutions do not recognize all hardship equally. Skocpol (1992), for example, traces the origins of the U.S. welfare state to the political construction of "soldiers and [widowed] mothers" as categories of citizens in need of protection and morally entitled to financial support from the state. At the opposite end of the worthiness spectrum, notions of undeservingness and dependency have been applied to poor unmarried mothers of color, whose financial hardship has been construed as a result of individual failure or deviance rather than as a kind of social suffering (Fraser and Gordon 1994, Katz 1990/2013, Steensland 2006).

Bureaucratic categories and practices not only determine whose suffering is a state matter, but also what kind of palliation is offered – sometimes imposed – by welfare institutions. In this respect, a significant development has been the *medicalization of social services*, which has operated in three related but distinct ways. Metaphorically, welfare dependency has increasingly been likened to drug addiction, and welfare enforcement has in turn shifted toward a paternalistic model in which recipients must be told what to do (Schram 2000, Amundson et al. 2014). Performatively, the rise in disability income, concurrently with the decrease in TANF benefits (Moffitt 2015), has created incentives for the durably jobless to present themselves as physically or mentally ill when interacting with welfare institutions (Pulkingham and Fuller 2012).

Operationally, behavioral and mental health services have been included in social programs promoting goals as diverse as education, good parenting, job readiness, or prison re-entry (Kitchenman 2015, Raskin 2014). Most notably, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a division of the U.S. department of Health and Human Services, has recently issued federal guidelines promoting "trauma sensitivity" in healthcare and social service delivery (SAMHSA 2014), a theme picked up in grant requirements from the Administration of Children and Families (see, e.g., NJDCF 2015).

Together, these trends reveal a new institutional common sense, in which the repair of presumably broken selves is one of the core objectives of welfare institutions. Examining the deployment of the medical frame in institutional practice is therefore essential to understanding the contemporary role that structures of poverty governance play in the management of social suffering.

The medicalization of social services doesn't preclude the persistence of other bureaucratic frames and practices. Indeed, many evolutions in the management of social problems take the form of a layering of multiple institutional logics (Medina and McCranie 2011). Scholars of the welfare state have highlighted dimensions of bureaucratic action in social services that variously criminalize clients' problems (Wacquant 2009, 2010), seek to morally reform them (Haney 1996, 2010), but also shore up their dignity and self-esteem (Roy and Dyson 2010).

How do these different institutional frames conflict or combine in practice? Does their coexistence lock clients between proliferating constraints or open up spaces of possibility where they can play one bureaucratic injunction against another? Chapter 3

and 4 will seek to answer these questions in the case of mental health services offered by multivocal institutions of poverty governance.

The Study: An Intimate Ethnography in Geographic and Institutional Context

Trenton, New Jersey: Concentrated Disadvantage in a Land of Plenty

Like many cities marked by deindustrialization, Trenton, the capital of New Jersey, has a prosperous past and a difficult present. The monument commemorating the Battle of Trenton, George Washington's first military victory of the Revolutionary War, towers over the Five Points crossroad, from which each of the five avenues leads to neighborhoods with poverty rates over 30% (Trenton Division of Planning 2014). Signs, plaques, and local history websites like to remind visitors of Trenton's glory in the early days of the United States. But the core of the city's nostalgia is attached to its industrial past, as proclaimed by the slogan "Trenton Makes, the World Takes", whose red neon letters spread across the lower Delaware River bridge and announce themselves to anyone who takes the next bridge over into the city. The slogan, first adopted in 1911, comes from a time when Trenton was home to numerous manufactures: for ceramics, rubber, leather, watches, cigars, and most famously, the steel rope used by Roebling and Sons, the engineers of the Brooklyn Bridge, whose manufacturing complex kept expanding until 1929 (Blackwell 1998). The last of the Roebling shops closed in 1973, the same year that the global oil crisis reduced Americans' access to energy and ushered in a period of stagflation. The "Trenton Makes" sign was switched off for several months and started deteriorating for lack of maintenance. When it was turned back on, the Chamber of Commerce, depleted like the rest of the Trentonian economy, couldn't afford

to repair it properly, and its fitful lights inspired the ironic variation "Trenton Flickers, The World Snickers" (Blackwell 1998). The sign was entirely rebuilt in 1980 and has been shining steadily since then, but the city itself has not recovered from the downturn of the 1960s and 1970s.

The U.S. Census shows that Trenton's demographic profile has mirrored its economic fortunes, with the population increasing during the first half of the twentieth century to a peak of 129,000 inhabitants in the 1950 census, and then declining ever since as Trenton's hallmark industries disappeared or relocated. Since the 1990 census, the population has maintained itself at around 85,000.

Trenton, today, is the 21st poorest place in New Jersey, out of 702 municipalities. Its poverty rate is 27.6% for the entire population and 39.5% for minors, compared to statewide rates of 10.9% overall and 15.7% for children (American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2016). Within Mercer County, Trenton is by far the poorest of thirteen municipalities, with a median annual household income estimated at $37,219, while that of the next lowest municipality (Hightstown, NJ) is estimated at $69,196 (Trenton Division of Planning 2014).

There is wealth all around Trenton: Bristol-Myers Squibb, Johnson & Johnson, and Educational Testing Services – to name only some of the largest companies – each have several locations within Mercer county. Many of the positions they advertise, however, require high levels of specialized education, and in Trenton, only 15.7% of the population holds an Associate's degree or higher. Some companies, however, also hire at the other end of the spectrum: restaurants and retailers, clustered in the malls that line Route 1, the old highway that links Philadelphia to New York via Trenton. There is also,

in nearby Robbinsville, an Amazon "fulfillment center", which hires temp workers but also full-time employees with the holy grail of comprehensive benefits, including in warehousing positions. For these latter employment opportunities, the obstacle isn't qualification, but transportation: both the Route 1 malls and the Amazon warehouse are a 20-minute car ride from downtown Trenton, but one to two hours by public transportation.

Meanwhile, in the city itself, only 14.5% of the available jobs are filled by residents. The largest private employers are two healthcare providers (Capital Health Systems and St. Francis Hospital), and the largest overall employer is the state of New Jersey, with the total public sector (federal, state, county, city, and nonprofits) accounting for two-thirds of all jobs (Trenton Division of Planning 2014). The city's unemployment rate was estimated at 16.0% for the period 2012-2016, versus 7.9% for the state of New Jersey (American Community Survey 2016). Trenton epitomizes poverty in a land of plenty.

This divide between Trenton and its wealthy suburbs, like much of U.S. inequality, is ethnically and racially inflected. Most of the population lost from the 1950s to the 1980s was white. Today, 54% of residents identify as non-Hispanic Black, 27% as non-Hispanic White, 3% as Asian, Native American, or mixed-race, and the remaining 16% as of another race. 29.4% of the residents report Spanish as their primary language (Trenton Division of Planning 2014).[3] The changes are visible in the urban landscape. For

[3] This number might be surprising given the 83% who identify as non-Hispanic, but census scholars have long noted that language – or geographical origin – do not fully predict self-identification as Hispanic. These estimates of Trenton's racial and ethnic make-up are one-year estimates from the 2011 American Community Survey, as reported in the Trenton Division of Planning's *City Profile Report* (2014).

example, Chambersburg, home to the first Roebling machine shop and to the Italian People's Bakery (one of the oldest still-running business in the city), used to be a predominantly Italian-American neighborhood, with a Slavic enclave a little more to the south, of which remains the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity. Some Italian-Americans, mostly homeowners, remain, and have been joined by African-American renters and homeowners.[4] But the neighborhood is now also home to recent immigrants from Central and South America. Bodegas and restaurants advertising Ecuadoran, Guatemalan, and Mexican food have popped up. One block from the Italian bakery, the Roman Hall, formerly an Italian-American society with a restaurant and a reception hall, has been transformed by its Ecuadorean owners into a bar and nightclub. The building still boasts Doric columns on the outside and frescoes of Roman legionnaires, complete with etched shields and red plumed helmets, on the inside. But the establishment now offers menus in Spanish as well as English, advertises Ecuadoran beer on signs hung outside, and at night, the crystal chandeliers reflect the strobe lights of the club. On one of my very first visits, a friend and I met an older white woman outside the Roman Hall, who stopped to chat when she saw us taking pictures of the façade. She promptly declared the transformation to be "disgusting, a real shame." When asked why, she elaborated that it used to be "a classy place," where "we used to have our weddings, and now…" Her opinion of the new Mexican restaurant a block away was not much better. As with much of American nostalgia, the one to be found in Trenton is not exempt from racism.

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[4] One of the first interviewees I met, in the fall of 2014, was an African-American homeowner in her late forties, who told me that when she first came to live in Trenton, at age 17, black people couldn't walk in Chambersburg without fearing for their safety, and wouldn't have dreamt of owning a house on her street.

Trenton, in sum, is a majority-minority city with a high rate of poverty. The distribution of households living under the federal poverty line varies across neighborhoods, but poverty is present and visible throughout the city: only one census tract has a poverty rate under 12%, similar to the New Jersey average; four more have rates between 12 and 20%; and the 19 remaining census tracts have poverty rates above 20%, with three of them, including the downtown area, above 40%. Trenton's history illustrates the larger phenomenon that has transformed American inner cities in the second part of the twentieth-century: white and middle-class flight (Wilson 1987), capital retrogression (Fernández-Kelly 2015), and hyperghettoization (Wacquant 2008)[5].

Like similarly gutted and segregated urban settings, Trenton clusters forms of disadvantage that are distinct from, but strongly correlated with, low levels of income. In 2013, a "community health needs assessment" report funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that the six zip codes within the city of Trenton were the most at risk of Mercer County, based on a composite indicator which included the following measures: percentage of households below the poverty line, percentage of workforce

[5] Trenton's misfortunes might have been limited by its status as state capital, which has channeled some investments into its downtown area, but it isn't entirely clear who is benefiting from these investments. As mentioned above, most state and county employees commute from outside the city, and most positions require education levels that the local schools do not deliver. Some redevelopment efforts aim to revitalize the city's core by building on the architectural remnants of its past glory. Though a complete political economy of urban redevelopment is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the afterlife of some flagship buildings can be suggestive of the different directions laid out for the city's future: part of the Roebling complex has been transformed into the Roebling market, a plaza linking several buildings that include a bank, a nail and hair salon, a supermarket with a large selection of produce and central American food, an apartment complex of affordable senior housing, the Social Security Administration, and the Children's Home society, one of the county's largest social service agencies. On the other hand, the Roebling machine shop, along with the cigar and watch factories, have been converted into rental lofts which, with rents starting at $900 for a one-bedroom and $1,200 for a two-bedroom, most households cannot afford. See the rental management websites http://www.ajaxmgt.com/properties/ and http://roeblinglofts.com/. In the Roebling memorial park, a monumental staircase of stone, which used to mark the entrance of the now defunct White City amusement park, has been restored and cleaned of its graffiti. But the steps still lead nowhere.

without employment or health insurance, percentage of population who is nonwhite, percentage of the population for whom English is not the primary language, percentage of the population over 25 without a high school diploma, and percentage of households renting their home. Trenton's six zip codes scored close to 5 (the highest "need") on all these measures, which are considered key factors in reduced access to health care and increased ill-health. After these zip codes were singled out for further study, the assessment report identified a high prevalence of obesity, chronic diseases (especially diabetes and heart disease), substance abuse and behavioral health problems, and violent victimization (Gervasio and McAloon 2013). Thus, in 2011, approximately 39% of Trenton inhabitants were obese, compared to a rate of 19.7% in Mercer County as a whole. The statistics for children are even more alarming: Close to half of Trenton's children were overweight or obese, including 49% of 3-5 year-olds. This contrasts with a national average of 21% for ages 2-5. Given the strong correlation between obesity and chronic conditions like diabetes and cardiovascular disease, it is unsurprising that the prevalence of these chronic conditions is also markedly higher in Trenton than at the national level. While the total percentage of adults diagnosed with diabetes in 2010 was a little over 6% in the U.S. and a little over 8% in New Jersey, 16% of Trenton residents were diabetic in 2009. Furthermore, while only roughly 22% of Mercer County's population lives in Trenton, 55% of the county's substance abuse treatment admissions in 2012 were cases from Trenton. Finally, Trenton's crime index of 3,169 offenses known to law enforcement per 100,000 people is almost three times higher than the New Jersey average, and ten times higher than in every neighboring municipality in Mercer County.

Trenton's rate of violent crime in 2010 was 4.5 times higher than in New Jersey as a whole.

These multiple measures of hardship, together with the density of state and nonprofit institutions characterizing Trenton, make it an ideal site to study "the clustering of different kinds of disadvantage across multiple dimensions and institutions" (Desmond 2015). This is what I endeavored to do by conducting fieldwork in institutional settings and in the daily life of a low-income family.

Fieldwork in Institutions

Starting in late 2014, I conducted observations in a variety of institutional settings intended to provide services to impoverished populations, with a focus on organizations offering family or personal development services. I observed and audiorecorded one-time events sponsored by a mix of government and nongovernment organizations, including weekend workshops on responsible fatherhood and healthy conjugal relationships organized by a government-contracted, faith-based counseling center, a symposium on "The Culture of Poverty" intended as continued education for nonprofit and social workers, a training workshop on trauma and mental health issues in disadvantaged urban settings, and a meeting of the Trenton Youth Violence Prevention Initiative during which members of local and federal law enforcement agencies exhorted parolees to sign up for social service and training programs as a way of "staying out of trouble". Attending these meetings allowed me to observe how, in settings ostensibly geared toward consensus and cooperation (but also undergirded by competition for grants and legitimacy), poverty workers define the problems facing their client population and the solutions they bring. I also witnessed the performances of client success and rehabilitation they narrate or stage

(with graduation ceremonies for their program participants, for example) on these occasions. Finally, through these public events I encountered many of the agencies that form Trenton's decentralized safety net, and got a rough cartography of this field for which no publicly available map or organizational chart exists.

In addition, to understand the day-to-day workings of the frontline worker-client relationship, I conducted weekly observations at a government-contracted agency, "Fathers and Workers"[6], for two periods of four months. Fathers and Workers (FW hereafter) operates a welfare-to-work program for TANF and general assistance recipients, as well as a responsible fatherhood program which provides low-income fathers with skills-acquisition, job search, parenting education, and group counseling services. I attended parenting education, job-readiness classes, guest-speaker workshops, and trauma counseling groups. I took notes during educational classes, but not during counseling groups. I reconstructed the conversations happening in those groups immediately after I left.

As I made progress with my fieldwork, I decided to shift my perspective from that of the social workers within specific organizational settings to that of the disadvantaged people who have to navigate multiple institutions as part of their daily management of chronic adversity. I do, however, use data from Fathers & Workers and other agencies' events in the last chapter of this dissertation, where I discuss the promises and pitfalls of approaching social suffering through the lens of mental health.

[6] This is a pseudonym, as are the names of the individuals I mention later in the text. To the best of my ability, I chose pseudonyms with the same connotations as the original names, including for nicknames containing puns or intended to capture a character trait of their bearer's.

Intimate Ethnography: Fieldwork in a Network of Close Relationships

In February 2015, I met Victoria Ruiz, then 23, at a welfare-to-work program where I conducted a few weeks of observation (not FW, which only serves men). I soon began to see her outside of the program, and within a month of our acquaintance I met her three children (then 2, 3, and 7) and Jaydore Clayton, the biological father of the two youngest and the social father of the oldest since her first year of existence. I also came to know Victoria's mother for a few months before her death in August 2015, Jay's mother, stepfather, uncle and aunts, as well as several friends and acquaintances with variable degrees of closeness. Over the next year and a half, I sat in Victoria and Jay's living room, went grocery shopping with them, played with the kids on their bedroom floor, attended dinners with extended family members, occasionally slept over, and spent hours driving them around town to the board of social services, the emergency room, the board of education, the courthouse, and other places. By being there with (and sometimes for) my research participants, I was able to observe both daily stresses and acute crises - such as Jay's brief incarceration from April to June 2015 or the family's eviction in February 2016. During this "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998, Wogan 2004), I rarely used a recorder or took extended notes in the open, to avoid disrupting the flow of talk or action. Instead I took quick jots in the moment, recorded spoken notes and memorable quotes from the day on my phone when I returned to the privacy of my car, and once home I wrote detailed notes on my computer.

This immersion in my interlocutors' daily lives forced me to contend with a wider array of institutional forces than those impelled by workforce-development or parenting programs. I came to see these nonprofit agencies as one institutional scene in a greater configuration of bureaucratic influences on poor people's lives and relationships. In many

cases, both the meaning and the material impact of these programs' services depended on the set of opportunities and constraints created by other institutions (such as the state departments funding the programs, but also the criminal justice system, the legal provisions surrounding debt and credit, or child protective services).

I therefore sought to capture the emotional imprint of state and parastate bureaucracies not by locating myself within bounded organizational settings, but by closely following my research participants into their daily activities and tracking the institutions that were most consequential for their affective lives. Over and above institutional *projects*, I have investigated institutional *reverberations*, with a view to mapping the field of relevant constraints and resources. Because the intimate reach of bureaucracies manifests not in isolated disruptions of inner-city residents' routines, but rather in concatenations of events affecting related people (Auyero and Berti 2015), reconstructing these complex configurations required that I focus my time and energy on *one* network of relationships. It is the ties binding research participants to one another that bring into view how social forces ripple through their lives, shaping their constraints, resources, dilemmas, and decisions (Beaud and Weber 2003).

Consequently, I devoted most of my fieldwork to embedding myself in Victoria's life and that of her friends and relatives. I conducted intensive observation with them from February 2015 to October of 2016, visiting them several days a week as well as communicating by phone, text, and Facebook messages. In October of 2016, for reasons I sketch in the next section and develop in later chapters, Victoria surrendered custody of her children and moved to the state of Virginia, at which point the family split up across different geographic locations. After that, I conducted visits with the family members and

friends who remained in the Trenton area, but for several months I stayed in touch mainly via phone and digital communications, especially with Victoria. My involvement intensified again as new crises emerged, such as Victoria's own incarceration in the spring of 2017, her assault by an ex-boyfriend the following September, and her subsequent move back from Virginia in late 2017. After each of these calamities broke out, I conducted retrospective interviews with those involved to investigate the crisis' antecedents, and then kept abreast of its developments. Today, I am still in touch with Victoria and her people, as she navigates noncustodial parenthood, the constraints of probation, and the construction of a common life with her new partner Lito.

Outline of the Dissertation

Like Doc in William F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943), Tally in Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner* (1967), or Hakim in Mitchell Duneier's *Sidewalk* (1999), Victoria was the participant who made the research possible, and my constant guide in the field. She will remain our guide in the first three chapters of this dissertation, and our main window into the social processes linking poverty, intimate dilemmas, and institutional contradictions. Accordingly, Chapter 1 presents her story and her network of close social ties. Victoria's trajectory provides the narrative arc, and other research participants are introduced as they enter her life and weave their own threads into the overall tapestry. This first chapter is intended to serve as a chronological touchstone for the materials discussed in chapters 2 and 3, but it is also guided by its own concerns: first, to outline a picture of unique lives intertwined in intricate ways, before I split their components into distinct theoretical problems. Second, the arc of Victoria's story illustrates the multifaceted nature of

poverty's trials, as one form of trouble leads to another and combines with it. This compounded hardship is the context informing subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 traces some emotional and relational consequences of chronic and cumulative adversity by focusing on the on-again, off-again quality of several intimate bonds in my participants' network – a type of relationship that is underexplored in the sociological literature on the social ties of the poor and which leads to different substantive conclusions regarding the provision of private social support in the context of a weak institutional safety net. Neither unconditionally supportive, nor entirely uncooperative, nor temporarily useful then discarded, these difficult but enduring relationships are best characterized as ambivalent bonds. While the occasional experience of psychological ambivalence is a feature of the human condition, the acute turmoil I witnessed in the intimate dealings of severely deprived people rather reveals a dire form of *sociological ambivalence* combining structural constraints and cultural contradictions: lofty ideals of care, support, sacrifice, and unflinching loyalty held strong currency among my research participants, and were periodically reactivated by threats to freedom and livelihood that made a rhetoric of 'us against the world' highly relevant and meaningful. Yet, predictably, loved ones often failed to meet these high expectations, especially in the medium-long run, as troubles went from sudden shocks to ongoing difficulties, and most everyone in the network was facing some kind of adversity. Disappointment, resentment and sometimes violence ensued, but given the local affective opportunity structure, people who had left to explore other fish in the sea often ended up washing back on the shores of earlier relationships. These relationships resumed, but with additional layers of doubt and distrust submerged more or less deeply. Although this

analysis privileges the *emotional* experience of social ties, the policy changes it points to are resolutely *material* and *structural*: I argue that a stronger institutional safety net – one characterized by generous individual entitlements independent of family structure – would free poor people from having to negotiate the complexities of attachment and emotional fulfillment under the unbearable pressures of uncertain economic survival. Instead of marriage being a way out of poverty, it is rather that economic security is a precondition for the achievement of more peaceful intimacies.

Finally, chapter 3 and 4 examine different uses of mental health services as institutional responses to social suffering. In both chapters I argue that mental health approaches as different as psychiatric treatment and trauma counseling, when they are nested within structures of poverty governance, present a troubling fusion of care with control, mistrust, and even violence. Chapter 3 documents this process by focusing on Victoria and her son Swing's experiences with counseling services and psychiatric treatment. In Victoria's case, the ambiguity in institutional missions appeared to be counterproductive and to reinforce her tendency to avoid treatment. In Swing's case, psychiatric treatment via an antipsychotic drug seemed effective in some respects, but it occurred at the cost of side effects which may still mount in the coming years. The little boy's situation raises the question of whose interests are served when a five-year old is medicated for being too difficult to handle, and of what other forms of intervention psychiatric treatment is substituting for. Chapter 4 takes the view of the institution in order to document the early stages of the turn toward "trauma-informed care" within a social service agency. This incipient development has yet to touch the lives of Victoria and her social network in a visible way, so I use a different set of data than in previous

chapters, which I collected during eight months of weekly visits to a social service agency for low-income men. The official guidelines for trauma-informed care offer an inclusionary narrative to make sense of 'problem behaviors' associated with poverty and as such represent a progressive alternative to the long-standing narrative of the undeserving poor. Nevertheless, when put in practice in the context of an institution with an ambivalent mandate and insufficient resources, trauma-informed services functioned as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, the trauma narrative entitled clients to symbolic and material resources earmarked for people with mental health issues. On the other hand, it could reduce their access to other resources, as the mental illness label primed service providers to doubt the accuracy of their clients' difficulties or concerns.

CHAPTER 1: THE STORY

Pain. The word adorns Victoria Ruiz's neck, tattooed in dark blue ink and set between two small stars, as if it were the name of a constellation on a celestial map. Pain is part of a triad, inscribed across her body in the same font and ink, with the same signature stars framing each word: Love on the back of her right hand, Lies on the back of her left. Pain, love, lies. Between those three points, more tattooed landmarks inscribe Victoria's past on her body. In particular, the name of her firstborn child, Mina, spreads across her right shoulder.

Much about Victoria's physical appearance is arresting: her large, black doe eyes, which can sparkle with banter or coldly retreat into morose introspection; her smooth olive skin, taut over her high cheekbones and delicate features; the full lips she sometimes paints dark red for glamour shots to be posted on Facebook; the dark, flowing mane she sometimes dyes with blond highlights and sometimes with pink tips. In the summer, the low-cut tank tops that hug her skinny frame reveal full breasts, each tattooed with a tiger's paw.

But Pain, Love, and Lies are the three words that first meet the eye, the ones that she chose to make visible in all seasons and all contexts, even when she wears a hoodie in winter. Pain, love, lies. Those three themes have marked Victoria since she was a child and will loom large in the pages that follow.

Victoria Ruiz's Past

This story necessarily begins before Victoria and I met, one chilly Tuesday morning in February 2015. To reconstruct the main events and relationships of her prior life, I rely primarily on the many conversations about the past I had with her, her partner Jaydore,

and some of their relatives over the three years of my fieldwork. Some of these exchanges started simply with requests to hear more about events that research participants mentioned in passing. Others were more directed and took the form of life history interviews conducted separately with Victoria, Jaydore, and Jaydore's mother Barbara. To cross-reference my information, I also had briefer conversations with Victoria's sister Cecilia and with Teri, the paternal aunt of Victoria's oldest daughter. Finally, in a few places, I use Victoria and Jaydore's Facebook timelines (their past posts on the social media platform, which they gave me access to) as a way of dating some events more precisely and of complicating their interpretation. Because Victoria was my main informant throughout my fieldwork, her voice is the dominant one. Accordingly, the verbatim quotes, unless otherwise attributed, are hers.

Childhood

Victoria was born in the Bronx in November 1991. Her mother, Emily Ruiz, named the baby after her own mother, Victoria Luna Ruiz. Emily herself had been born in the Bronx, after her parents left Puerto Rico for New York City in search of a better life. The Ruizes have a Spanish name, but also memories of German ancestors passed down from one generation to the next. While Emily and her daughters are fair-skinned, the range of skin tones among Emily's aunts and sisters (the darkest of her sisters was nicknamed La Negra) bear traces of both the European colonists and the Africans who replaced the decimated Taínos as slave labor on the archipelago. Victoria's father was also a New Yorker from Puerto Rico, with rumors of a distant Egyptian descent. Unlike that of her older sister Cecilia Mercado, Victoria's father did not give her his name, and so she was born, and has remained, a Ruiz. Victoria knew her father, and has memories of him,

though he and Emily broke up before Victoria's third birthday. He stayed in touch with his daughter for a while, occasionally bringing her to his boxing gym. She dates his disappearance from her life to her eighth year of existence. In the three years since I have known her, she has mentioned him in passing, but never once told me his name.

Victoria says she raised herself from the age of thirteen. For the care she received before that, she credits her sister Cecilia more than her mother. Cecilia (whom everyone calls Ceci) is older by five years. In Victoria's recollection, for as long as Ceci lived at home, it was Ceci who ran to the store, cooked, and cleaned. Emily had rules for the household, but when Victoria broke them, Emily made Ceci punish her, including when it came to administering a beating. Ceci's role, however, was not limited to housework and discipline. To Victoria, she was also the main purveyor of comfort and affection. While Emily showed her daughters "cold love, cold-hearted love," Ceci gave Victoria her baths, brushed her hair, and when Victoria was scared or upset, she gently stroke her cheeks and shoulders, telling the younger girl everything would be okay. But Ceci had her own struggles, and from her teenage years, her presence at home became more episodic.

To make matters worse, when Victoria was five and Ceci ten years old, Emily was diagnosed with HIV. In addition to threatening her life, the virus made Emily fear that she would no longer be able to find a romantic partner. After that, she became "so focused on her men that she didn't give a fuck about her daughters," in Victoria' words. But Emily's fears did not materialize, and over the years she met boyfriends, some of who ended up moving in.

Victoria says that two of these men raped her. The first time, she was "about six or seven." While Emily worked, the boyfriend was supposed to be watching her.

Suddenly “he went in. He just covered my mouth and he… he just went in.” The second time, Victoria was about eight years old. This particular boyfriend was on drugs and prone to flights of rage, but Emily “tried to do the whole ‘change his life’ thing because she fell in love, you know?” One early evening, after Victoria had taken a shower, he followed her into her bedroom. The man grabbed Victoria, slapped her, threw her on the ground and raped her, all the while telling her to “shut the fuck up”. After a noise in the hallway caused the man to flee, Victoria curled up in a fetal position on her bedroom floor, where she remained until Emily finally returned home. Yet when Victoria tried to tell her mother what had happened, Emily dismissed it. Emily explained Victoria’s bleeding as a symptom of Victoria’s early development: that Victoria had “just caught [her] period.” The man never returned.

Unfortunately, the departure of Emily’s boyfriend did not make the Ruiz home safe for Victoria, and the churn of men into and out of the Ruiz household continued. When Victoria was twelve, Ceci moved back home in a more permanent capacity, accompanied by her boyfriend Marvin, freshly out of jail. According to Victoria, Marvin was “a pimp” and resumed his business activities immediately upon release. Due to her past assaults, Victoria tried never to be alone at home with Marvin, or with any other man for that matter. For a while, she succeeded. Instead of going straight to her apartment, Victoria would hang out with other kids on the Grand Concourse or in her building’s hallways. But Victoria had to be home by 8pm at the latest, or she’d get a beating. Even on evenings when Emily and Ceci themselves came back late, someone in the building could tell on Victoria. Knowing this, she observed her curfew religiously.

One evening, Victoria was the first to return to the apartment, with Marvin coming in second. That night, Marvin cornered Victoria in the kitchen and raped her at gunpoint. He threatened to kill her, her mother, and her sister, if she told anyone. Victoria kept quiet, but as Marvin's sexual abuse became "an ongoing thing," she stopped eating and started cutting herself. (She still has scars on her wrists and forearms, including one in the shape of a small cross. When she showed them to me, she seemed almost embarrassed that they were not larger and explained: "I was little, I didn't know how to kill myself.")

Alarmed by Victoria's new behavior, Emily took her to the nearest hospital, which resulted in Victoria's first stay on a psychiatric ward. There, she told her counselor about the multiple sexual assaults she had suffered over the years. The counselor asked Emily and Ceci for confirmation of the events, which they denied. (To this day, Victoria is still angry at the counselor. She believes his disclosure marks the moment when Ceci formed a grudge and began to see her as a sexual competitor.) The psychiatric staff also alerted the New York City Administration for Children's Services, which conducted an investigation. According to Victoria, that investigation came to nothing because in the meantime, the psychiatric staff had become convinced that she was imagining her history of sexual abuse: "When I told them I heard voices… I kept telling them 'I hear voices, I hear these men in my head.' (…) The moaning, the… them telling me to shut the fuck up, and when I cried for my mother them telling me that my mother and my sister didn't give a fuck about me anyway. (…) They [the psychiatric evaluators] basically took that and ran with it. You hear what I'm saying? They made it seem like it was just a part of my mental… my mental imagination."

After that, Victoria never lived with Emily again for any length of time: "She gave up on me, left me in psychiatric. I went from psychiatric to group homes, from group homes to foster care, and from foster care back to psychiatric!" Victoria says Emily "emancipated her" because she no longer wanted to raise her. Her use of the term "emancipated," in that context, is a clear mark of contact with state institutions and their vocabulary. Technically, however, in the state of New York a child under 21 is considered emancipated if the child is *not* in the child welfare system, but has rather set up an independent household (by getting married, joining the military, or leaving home "for no good reason," according to the NY courts' website).[7] It is possible that ACS, despite Victoria's perception that they "couldn't do nothing," did remove her from Emily's care, especially since it is around that time that Emily received her own psychiatric diagnosis: paranoid schizophrenia. Later, Victoria may have been considered "emancipated" because, by her own account, she kept running away from both group homes and foster families.

"Emancipation"

From the age of thirteen, then, Victoria considered that she "had to be [her] own adult." By fourteen, she had joined the G-Shine Bloods, the same gang her long-gone father had belonged to. She took the gang name "Pain," not only because she had experienced so much of it, but also because she promised it to anyone who would again betray her love by telling lies. Love, Lies, Pain. Soon the three words spread across her body, tattooed in blue ink and framed by stars.

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[7] See https://www.nycourts.gov/courthelp/family/emancipatedChild.shtml.

Victoria says she was an asset to the gang because she could fight and she was good at selling drugs. These skills saved her from having to purchase her membership through sex, as other girls had to. In those years, she started taking ownership of her sexuality. She discovered she liked girls, perhaps even more than she liked boys, who scared her a little. Despite these misgivings about male sexual partners, she got into a serious relationship with a boy named Paul Maldonado. Paul was one of the kids from the building on the Grand Concourse where she used to live with Emily and Ceci. Victoria doesn't remember when she met Paul exactly. They were the same age, born precisely three weeks apart in November 1991. In our biographical interviews, she once said she'd known him "since we were young," and another time "forever, more or less." Paul had been her refuge during those years when she was trying to avoid her mother's apartment until the last possible minute of her curfew. He lived two floors above, and when his mother wouldn't let them hang out in her apartment, they stayed together in the hallways. Paul, Victoria thought, was the one for her. He was her new family. She had his name tattooed on her left shoulder.

When Victoria was fifteen, she became pregnant with twins. She and Paul moved in with his sister Teri, who was in her early thirties and had two children of her own. Though Teri was supportive of the young couple, things started souring between the two teenagers. Paul drank and complained all the time. Victoria started losing respect for him. In our conversations, she portrayed fifteen-year old Paul as short and scrawny, a violent boy too cowardly to achieve respect on the streets, but eager to blow off steam at the expanse of someone weaker. Over the course of Victoria's pregnancy, he became more and more aggressive, until one day he hit her. She fell to the ground and he kicked her in

the stomach. Teri managed to pull him off Victoria. Once Victoria was able to get to her feet, she pushed the nearby TV on Paul, who lost his balance and fell. Victoria kicked him in the head, then dragged him down the stairs and onto the sidewalk, where she continued to kick him. With the fight now occurring in public view, someone called the police and Victoria was arrested. Teri told the police that Victoria was acting in self-defense, and Victoria was released after a couple of days. Though Teri had taken her side and kicked Paul out, Victoria didn't want to go back to Teri's apartment. Alone again and about to become a mother, Victoria attempted to reconcile with Emily.

By then, Emily had moved from the Bronx to Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn. Her psychiatric diagnosis allowed her to qualify for supportive housing and she opened the doors of her one-bedroom to Victoria. As Victoria was settling in, a medical follow-up revealed that one of the twins had died in utero and the pregnancy would have to be closely watched. Emily supported Victoria through the end of the pregnancy. Redemption and reconciliation seemed within reach.

On March 1, 2008, the baby was born. Victoria named her Mina, with the middle name Belle in tribute to Ceci's five-year old daughter, Kara Belle. Around the time of Mina's birth, Paul tried to make amends and Victoria briefly relented. Paul was recognized on the birth certificate and Mina Belle was given his last name, Maldonado. But Victoria quickly found that she couldn't forgive Paul after all and she kicked him out. Victoria had Mina's name tattooed across her right shoulder. On the left she asked the artist to cover Paul's name with a portrait of her, one that would do justice to her rage at the man. The resulting image shows the head and neck of a woman drawn in sharp, dynamic, tightly packed lines. Her red mane, dark eyes, and scarified neck and face (a

tattoo within the tattoo) make her look like a mythical warrior figure. Thus Victoria entered motherhood.

Enter Jaydore

After Mina was born, Emily intended to keep helping and attempted to lay down some rules, which included returning Victoria to high school the following fall. But before that time came, their household fell apart again. Victoria stayed out too late and too often for Emily's taste. Emily was not a reliable enough source of childcare, and Victoria felt betrayed by her mother again. Victoria started spending more time at Ceci's. By then, Ceci had moved in with a man fourteen-year her senior, whom everyone called Clay.[8] When I met Clay in 2015, he looked shy and constantly tired. He was working temp jobs in New York and New Jersey, and sleeping on the couches of relatives until they grew weary, at which point he moved to other couches and other kin. But back in 2008, before the law caught up to him, he was still "hood rich," and he could afford to be generous to Ceci and her daughter Kara, as well as to host his favorite nephew, Jaydore, on weekends and for the duration of the summer vacation. Jaydore would become Victoria's longest-lasting romantic involvement.

In 2008, Jaydore (most frequently called Jay) was living in Northern New Jersey most of the time. His mother Barbara and her new husband Damon had moved there to give both their respective sons a new life, away from the temptations of New York City. Jay, who had grown up in the Bronx until then, took rather well to his new high school. A fast runner, he became a local football star. He earned decent grades, too. But he missed

[8] His full name was Desmond Clayton, but he went by Clay because his older sister Desdemona had long appropriated the nickname "Des."

his New York friends, his old haunts, and the freedom to roam the streets while his mother was working two jobs in the city. So, on some weekends and in the summer, Jay went back to the Bronx, staying with his uncle Clay or, less frequently, with his aunt Des (full name Desdemona), another sibling of his mother's. In the summer of 2008, he fell in love with Victoria – and with baby Mina, too, he says. In our later conversations, when Victoria and Jay were inclined to emphasize the continuity of their partnership, they dated the beginning of their couple, and of Jay's involvement as Mina's social father, to that summer of 2008.

Their relationship, however, did not unfold continuously. Over the following ten years, they came apart and back together many times: they were separated by Jay's short but repeated incarcerations; they broke up over betrayals and disappointments; they reunited to try once more to be a family. Several of these separations and reunions occurred during the time I conducted observations with them and will form much of the material discussed in Chapter 2. But the pattern had started much before – from the very beginning, in fact.

On that period of their lives, Victoria and Jaydore give fragmented and inconsistent accounts. Although I tried to reconstruct a timeline by interviewing them separately several times (and to a lesser extent through conversations with Barbara), the chronology of events remains fuzzy – unsurprisingly obscured by the time elapsed since then, but perhaps also by embarrassment, mutual accusations, and things best left forgotten. With Victoria and Jaydore's permission, I used their Facebook timelines (the history of their posts on the social media network) to gain additional insight. Facebook posts are famously edited and curated to project a certain public image and to negotiate

ongoing relationships in relatively intentional ways. Past Facebook postings are snapshots of users' self-presentations at given moments in time, and even then capture only those images that survived later deletions and editing of the record. Even so, they contain useful information – especially given that Facebook writers frequently forget the breadcrumbs they left online, or no longer care enough to delete them. These digital vestiges provide a window into the topics and happenings their authors deserved worthy of discussing online at the time, and sometimes shed a different light on events that the protagonists have since recast and reframed (boyd 2014).[9] The following paragraphs, up to the moment when I met Victoria and Jaydore in early 2015, represent what I was able to reconstruct in part from Facebook data and mainly through the many retrospective conversations I had with my research participants over the three years of my fieldwork.

In the fall of 2008, Jay had to go back to New Jersey for his senior year of high school. During that year, he and his mother often visited relatives back in the Bronx, which allowed him to keep seeing Victoria and Mina. The three of them kept growing closer. At the same time, both Victoria and Jay maintained other relationships – Victoria in New York and Jay in New Jersey. In words they both used to characterize those beginnings, they were "messing with each other" more than they were together in earnest. In the winter, Jay was offered a football scholarship and seemed college-bound. As planned, he graduated in June 2009. (In 2017, the diploma still hung in his former bedroom at Barbara's house.) During that summer, however, his life took another turn.

[9] By "breadcrumbs" and "digital vestiges" I mean only the explicit data posted by Victoria and Jay on their Facebook walls (i.e., Facebook status, pictures with captions and comments), not the tracking data which Facebook sells to analytics companies and which have garnered so much attention since the 2016 presidential election.

Elated to have finished high school and determined to enjoy the company of his friends "from the hood" before going to college, Jay partied with abandon. He might have been hustling, too, as he reconnected with old contacts and old habits. Before the summer was over, he was caught and charged with possession of cocaine. He was released within a few months, but by then he had already lost his scholarship, and his college career was over before it started. His mother Barbara, who is trained as a social worker, once told me that this tragically missed opportunity was a prime example of Jaydore's "tendency to self-sabotage." But she didn't put all the blame on her son's psychology. She also condemned the old neighborhood's friends and bad influences – and saw Victoria as one of them.

Victoria was indeed using cocaine and other drugs at the time, though she sneers at the idea that Jay may have discovered any drug through her. According to her, "he knew all about it" well before they met. Victoria says that she liked the drugs but also that she needed them in order to "do what [she] had to do" to feed Mina. She never had to "sell [her] ass" but she worked as a stripper, on-and-off, throughout the end of her teens. To get onto that podium and dance, she needed to dull her awareness of the present moment, "otherwise [she] couldn't do it." Jay, on his part, estimates that he was "on the streets" since the age of eight. His mother was always working hard, sometimes in licit pursuits, and sometimes in illicit ones: Jay told me that Barbara, despite her current displays of respectability, had been running drugs together with her brother Clay in their youth, before being caught and serving four years in federal prison, when Jay was between the ages of eight and twelve.[10] Even before Barbara's alleged incarceration, Jay

[10] I wasn't able to access court or criminal records to verify Jay's assertions. Neither did I get a very

was raised primarily by his grandmother. She was, in his words, "[his] best friend." But as much as Jay loved his grandma, she couldn't keep him entirely off the streets, and he started "making moves" in his early teens, working sometimes with Clay, and sometimes with other dealers. Whether Victoria influenced Jay or vice versa, they both recall hustling together in their late teens: selling, stealing, and defrauding. Dixit Victoria: "Me and Jaydore was always on the scams together! We only stopped when we had children. Can't pick up and run [laughs]!"

Their partnership wasn't permanent or exclusive, however, until they had Aleida and Benji together. Between 2010 and 2011, Jay's Facebook posts reveal other relationships, including two that, at different times, were official enough that they received public support from common friends and that Jay briefly changed his relationship status to "married." Jay's timeline also bears the traces of legal troubles, of stays in jail and in rehabilitative programs – both through the absence of the posts for months at a time and through Jay's explicit mentions of his situation, such as when, in June 2011, he bemoaned: "Another 6 month program dam jclay [himself] stop fucking up..dats dats mean street of the bronx smh [shaking my head]!"

During a furlough from one of these "programs," in February 2011, Jay and Victoria conceived Aleida, and thus started a new stage of their relationship.

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detailed confirmation from Barbara herself, beyond the vague declaration that she had had enough contact with the court system for a lifetime. But Victoria confirmed that she heard the same story from Jay and other relatives, including her own mother Emily, who had shared a gang affiliation with Barbara in the past.

Children by Another Name

Released during the following summer, Jay tried to "go straight" and found a legit job at Uno's, the restaurant chain. He also committed to Victoria and to his role as Mina's father. On Father's Day in June 2011, he posted a picture of himself with Mina in his arms. When Aleida was born, on November 12, 2011, he posted a slew of newborn pictures to his Facebook wall and publically promised his "baby gurl [sic]" that she would always be able "to count on [him]." He ended up being arrested again a few weeks later. Victoria, who didn't wish to be a single mother of two, secretly started rekindling a relationship with an old flame, Benjamin "Ben" Quintana, who stepped up and promised to take care of Mina and Aleida as his own. At Christmas, however, when Jay was on furlough again, he and Victoria were drawn back together, and they conceived the little boy who would end up being called Benjamin Quintana, Jr., and nicknamed "Swing," for his energetic manner and perhaps to erase the origins of his name.

Before going back to jail in January 2012, Jay threatened Ben, but Ben knew the competition was going away, and he had decided to commit to Victoria anyway. He put his name on Aleida's birth certificate, and when Victoria started showing signs of another pregnancy, he assumed the baby was his. When Jay was released again, in March, he arranged to see Aleida and Mina regularly, but he established a relationship with another woman. Sometime that summer, Victoria told him that the baby she was carrying was his. A complex dance ensued, with Jay torn between Victoria and his new girlfriend, and Victoria torn between Ben and Jay. Swing's date of birth, on September 28, 2012, confirmed his Christmastime conception. The next day, Jay posted pictures of the baby on the maternity ward, with the caption "My baby boy." Four days later, however, he posted the following status: "I must be a sucka [sucker]. It might be time to lay down and

stay down. How u like dat [that]?" Victoria had chosen Ben and named the baby boy after him.

Over the next months, however, Victoria started feeling that, as nice as Ben was, he was "too emotional": he drank a lot and when he was drunk, he wanted to talk about his feelings. He wasn't much fun, whereas Jay had always been "silly as hell," a friend and lover who was always down for a good time. Meanwhile, Jay had been plotting to claim his family back and show the world he could take care of his own. He showed up at Ben and Victoria's apartment and declared his love for, and commitment to, Victoria and the kids. He kicked Ben out and even stabbed him in the arm to drive the point home that Ben had better not attempt a come-back. Ben, who had his own legal troubles, decamped and didn't press charges. Victoria felt sorry for "doing Ben like that," but she did prefer Jay over him. Years later, alone with me in a park, she would muse that her troubles with Jay might be karma for the way she treated Ben.

New Jersey: New State, New Life

In the spring of 2013, Victoria and Jay decided that the best way to stabilize their family would be to move to New Jersey, in a lower-middleclass suburb of Trenton we will call Carson Township.[11] There, it seemed like a convergence of network and institutional supports could give them a new start: Barbara and her husband Damon had recently bought a three-bedroom house and they offered to host Victoria and Jay's family of five

[11] I am using a pseudonym for this particular town to maintain the confidentiality of my research participants' data. Some of the suburbs around Trenton are small enough that a town's name may do much to identify a child through their school enrollment.

while the young parents were looking for stable, legal employment and independent housing.

Barbara could also help pave the path toward these two goals. A social worker by training, she worked part-time in a nonprofit housing program and knew that wait times to access affordable housing were shorter in Central New Jersey than in New York City. She could not get Victoria and Jay accepted into any particular housing program, but she knew which ones existed in the Greater Trenton area and could help the young couple prepare applications. In addition, Barbara and Damon lived next door to a moving company whose owner remembered Jay from his previous visits in town. He hired only off the books, but he paid $16 an hour and at least the content of the work itself wasn't illegal. Furthermore, there were large tips to be made.

Victoria applied for jobs, but also for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families as a single mother of three. (Jay was paid off the books, and in any case, Ben's administrative legacy was that there was no paperwork to trace Jay to the children and subject him to the obligation of child support.) In February 2014, Victoria obtained a spot in transitional housing for herself and the children. Then, she was deemed eligible for rental assistance for up to two years and her housing caseworker approved the rent on a private apartment, in the Trenton neighborhood called the Island. Victoria was elated.

> Im dead in tears. I finally fucking did it.my own apt..lol look sis [Ceci's name is tagged]
>
> *Victoria's Facebook status, May 28, 2014*

Jay, Victoria, and the children all moved into the two-bedroom on the Island. They were going to "do the family thing."

Three Years in a Life

When I first met Victoria, in February 2015, she didn't say that she and Jay were together as a couple; she rather referred to him as her babyfather. This might have been because we first started hanging out as a triad with a man nicknamed BM (short for Boss Man), who went to the same welfare-to-work program as Victoria, was clearly flirtatious with her, and was generous with sharing the weed he sold on the side. On one of the first lunch breaks I spent with Victoria and BM, she explained that the relationship had been on-and-off for a long time, and when it was in an off phase he stayed with his mother, who lived in nearby Carson. But even in those moments he would come to her apartment in the morning to help prepare the kids before she had to go to the job program and they had to go to school and daycare. "They see him every day," she said with pride.

When I first went to her place, and all the times after that, it became clear that Jay, a stocky African-American man with a handsome face, was living there full-time. The two-bedroom apartment was in Victoria's name and her rental assistance benefits paid for its $900 monthly rent, but Jay was treating it like home too. And though he was home every day, he didn't take care of the children every morning, only when his job as a mover with frequent 6am calls allowed it. His prioritizing his work every time a scheduling conflict arose made him a reliable worker, prized by an employer who was known to give second chances to former convicts and addicts. Jay's steady employment, together with the tips and in-kind gifts that came with working moves in the wealthy suburbs of the New York-Philadelphia corridor, presented some clear material advantages for Victoria and the kids: an elegant sectional couch ran along two walls of their large living-room; it could easily sit eight people and sleep two adults, and it came

with a plush, outsized ottoman which the children used as both springboard and safety mat for their improvised acrobatics. But Jay's work commitment, and his unquestioned assumption that it came before Victoria's own work obligations, also created an imbalance that would devolve into a series of crises, which we will explore in chapter 2. Furthermore, as I came to understand over the first year of our acquaintance, Jay's off-the-book income did little to increase his family's bottom line because it went to feeding something else: his addiction.

Domestic Violence and Incarceration

The organization of work and child-related duties was not the only bone of contention in Victoria and Jay's relationship. Soon after I met them, in late March 2015, they had a brutal fight over two-sided suspicions of infidelity. Victoria described it as a fight, while Monique, a friend who witnessed the scene, described it as battery, or Jay "putting his hands on" Victoria. The incident resulted in two broken doors and a shattered dining table in Victoria and Jay's apartment, and in Victoria suffering a recurring pain in the right side of her back, which ended up being diagnosed as a ripped kidney the following May.

Because the fight was broken up by Monique calling 911, it resulted in new charges against Jay, who already had warrants against him for traffic violations and missed court dates, and who was furthermore violating his probation in the state of New York by the simple fact of living in New Jersey. Jay had an understanding with his probation officer in New York, who agreed to check in by phone rather than in person because he thought it was good for Jay to be with his family and stably employed in New Jersey. But the understanding was conditional on Jay not getting into any more trouble. In

fact, Jay had been refusing to appear in court for his New Jersey traffic case because he was afraid of being arrested on the spot and remanded to New York.

The night of the fight, therefore, Jay ran away as soon as Monique announced she'd called 911, and he went into hiding. When the police arrived, Victoria filed a restraining order and a domestic violence complaint. She told me that she hadn't wanted to – she wanted Jay gone from her apartment, not locked up. But given the state of her apartment and her body (the broken doors, the shattered glass top of the dining table, the bruise at the base of her neck), the officers informed her that they would file a criminal complaint anyway. In that interaction, she became afraid that if she didn't file, the police would turn against her, investigate her for the disturbance, and given the presence of children, report her to child protection. Later, Victoria refused to appear at any court hearing regarding the domestic violence case, and the charges against Jay were dropped. But in the meantime, there was another warrant out of for his arrest. After almost four weeks of a subcontracted "fugitive recovery unit" visiting Victoria's and Barbara and Damon's addresses every few days, Jay decided to surrender. He did so on April 24, 2015.

Welfare Sanctions and the Family Violence Option

Even though Jay contributed to the household in a rather discretionary fashion, his incarceration meant a loss of income. And it came at a time when Victoria's own TANF income was threatened. In February and early March 2015, Victoria had been attending the mandatory employment program where I met her. She had done so without enthusiasm and that showed in her attendance and activity records. She found the training activities so boring that she snuck out to smoke marijuana during breaks. It took her three

days to complete the Servsafe online certification (a safety and hygiene training for professional food handling), where other participants completed it in one. Though she wanted to train as a home health aide and would have needed guidance on the steps to take, she didn't think the program would help her get there, because its standardized job-training-and-search packages tended to direct participants toward food service or warehousing. Disinvested as she was, she regarded the strict attendance rules (seven and a half hours a day, with a half-hour break for lunch) as petty and controlling. One afternoon when she had to go across town to the Board of Social Services to renew her bus pass (an authorized activity), she announced point blank that she wouldn't return afterwards. She could have been back by 3 for the last afternoon hour of the program, but she didn't see the point. The program manager shook her head in disbelief and turned to me: "[imitating Victoria:] 'We not coming back.' Who does that?"

In that same period, Victoria's dominant concern was her twelve-year old niece Kara, who, four months prior, had accused her mother Ceci of trying to strangle her. Now Kara lived in a group home but kept running away from it, saying that a group of older girls had been threatening to "cut her." Victoria herself had experienced violence in the group homes of her adolescence and she didn't want the same for her niece. So, twice that month, Victoria ran to the Trenton station when Kara let her know she was coming to visit. She hosted Kara and the friends she traveled with (girls from the group home, one the first time, and two the second time) for a few days, before pleading with Kara to return to the residential hall while Victoria figured out how to obtain a transfer to another home, or even how to be granted custody of her niece. In the end, months later, Kara admitted that she had invented the threat from the gang of girls; she just hated group

home life. She also withdrew her accusation against Ceci: her mother had grabbed her by the neck to prevent her from going out at night, and she had done so brutally enough that it left marks, but she hadn't meant to strangle her daughter. Kara and her brother were returned to Ceci's custody the following summer, though Kara continued to run away over the following years.

But in March 2015, efforts to care for Kara had led Victoria to miss several days at her mandatory employment program. These absences were for reasons that the program manager often recognized as valid, but given Victoria's already poor record, she had little credit with her. In the sixth week of the program, the program manager dismissed Victoria and referred her to be sanctioned by the welfare office for failure to meet the TANF work requirements.

By April 2nd, Victoria's cash assistance had been reduced by a third, from $565 to $424. But in the meantime, the fight with Jaydore had happened. Monique informed her that she could try to "claim" the fight to have her sanctions lifted. That is, she could use the domestic violence claim filed with the police to avail herself of the Family Violence Option of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, which allows for the relaxing of work and reporting requirements when the TANF recipient or someone in their household is under duress due to violence within the family (New Jersey Department of Human Services 2014). Jay didn't see the incident as one of battery – in his account, he was defending himself, trying to gain physical control over Victoria because she had threatened to call the police on him the very moment she'd seen a flirtatious message on his phone. Yet, he knew he had gone too far, and looked chastened every time someone remarked on the missing top of what had been a beautiful dining

table in glass and stone. Furthermore, his fugitive status stopped him from going to work and, with the threat of incarceration approaching, he knew he wouldn't be able to make up for Victoria's loss of cash benefits. So, he gave his blessing to Victoria using the Family Violence Option (FVO) to have her benefits reinstated. He texted her: "Do w[h]at u gotta do. Just put it all on me." Months later, when Victoria was sanctioned again and her loss of rental assistance led to the family's eviction, he would call the FVO "the easy way out" and describe it as part of a pattern in which Victoria had been mishandling her affairs since late 2014. But for now, he felt magnanimous.

"You Caused Your Own Imminent Homelessness": Bureaucratic Deadlines and Budget Cuts

In January 2016, one week before she was due to appear in eviction court, Victoria stopped returning my calls and Facebook messages. We'd spent the previous two weeks together day in and day out, attempting last-ditch efforts to avert her eviction by touring homeless prevention programs, as well as trying to comply with the prescriptions of a child protection officer by gathering paperwork to enroll the two youngest children in a Head-Start program. After Victoria had fallen out with her neighbor and bosom friend of five months Izzie, I was her main friend in need – one with a car and whom she could rely on for company during the long hours of waiting in the bureaucratic maze. But after two weeks of constant efforts, Victoria needed a break from the stress, and therefore from me and my eagerness to help. She kept forgetting the opening hours of the one homelessness prevention program we still had to visit and I kept reminding her. Then she stopped getting back to me. I don't know what she did that week, except that on Wednesday she updated her Facebook status with a picture of

herself playing in the snow with her children, with the comment: “I had a great day full of laughter. I so needed that”.

That Friday she missed her 9am court appointment by a few minutes, during which the judge issued a default eviction judgment. She didn’t meet the judge but saw her landlord’s lawyer, a woman who notified her that the landlord wasn’t considering the possibility of a payment plan for the back rent and that Victoria had to leave the apartment in a few days, kids or no kids. Victoria, in conversation with Jay and their neighbors, had persuaded herself that, given the consideration of three young children in the dead of winter, the judge would force the landlord to accept installments. Shocked by the opposite news, she became so upset at the lawyer’s apparent detachment that she tried to slap her. The lawyer protected her face with her arms and called for security. The police officers on duty ordered Victoria to leave if she didn’t want to be arrested or forcibly removed. At 9:20, she texted me to come because she was “lost and needed a friend.” Ten days later, she, Jay, and their three children were evicted.

As understandable as her need to put oppressive problems on pause was, it backfired in a punishing way. Before that, the very rent debt that led to eviction also emerged from timing problems: in late September she was informed that she had been sanctioned for missing an appointment with her TANF case manager, but she protested that she had let the case manager know and rescheduled (it turned out she had spoken to the wrong case manager – the one in charge of her housing assistance instead of the one in charge of her return to employment). When the next month she received her full cash benefits and food stamps, she believed that she’d been heard and that her sanction had been lifted. Unbeknownst to her, it was the rental assistance attached to her TANF case

that had been cut following sanctions. (Victoria says she never received any written notification from the Board of Social Services – the limited possibilities for adequate record-keeping in her crowded apartment would have made it easy to overlook it if had indeed arrived.) Rental assistance went directly to the landlord, and according to Victoria, he only let her know in December, when she had accumulated three months of back rent and it was too late. December was also too late for the Board of Social Services, which closed her TANF case, as its handbook promises it will when benefits recipients fail to attend a "compliance class" within three months of their sanction. When Victoria took the measure of her situation in late December, she hurriedly reapplied for TANF, attended a two-week compliance program, and waited the 30 business days for her case to be reopened. When it was, in early February, things went from bad to hopeless: TANF payments resumed, but the renewal of her rental assistance was denied on the grounds that:

> "YOU CAUSED YOUR OWN IMMINENT HOMELESSNESS AS YOU DID NOT COMPLY WITH WORK FIRST NEW JERSEY (WFNJ) AND YOUR EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE (EA) PLAN; THEREFORE YOU LET YOUR TANF AND EA TERMINATE. YOUR CASE WAS REFERRED TO BE SANCTIONED IN SEPTEMBER 2015 BUT YOU DID NOT COMPLY UNTIL JANUARY 2016. (…) THIS CAUSED YOUR LACK OF ELIGIBILITY FOR EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE. RECEIPT OF EA IS CONTINGENT UPON RECIPIENT'S TAKING REASONABLE STEPS TOWARD RESOLVING THE EMERGENT SITUATION." *(Notice of denial, 2/4/2016, all caps in the original.)*

As many mistakes as Victoria may have made in the lead-up to her eviction, this accusatory denial of assistance must be put in the context of the previous two years' budget cuts to the state's program of Emergency Assistance (EA). Based on interviews with the main nonprofits that provide emergency shelters and rehousing services in

Trenton, a local news article published in June 2016 summarized the New Jersey Department of Human Services' practices thusly: "The Christie administration has used what shelter providers say is a narrow interpretation of the rules to cut back on emergency-assistance payments. EA applicants can be denied aid if they are deemed to have caused their own homelessness or have failed to plan adequately to prevent potential homelessness. If someone loses a job, lacks transportation making access to work difficult or has a problem with a landlord, they can be deemed responsible for their lack of housing, advocates say. And if they lack savings or have not planned for an emergency, they can be denied, as well" (Kalet 2016).

Without emergency rental assistance, Victoria was not only facing eviction, but found herself unable to qualify for transitional housing in a state shelter or to pay the security deposit and first month's rent on a new apartment. The family left their apartment on February 11, 2016.

After Eviction: Staying with Whoever Will Have You

In the lead-up to the family's eviction, Barbara and Damon had let Jaydore know that he and the children could move back into their house, but that they wouldn't open their door to Victoria again. She and them hadn't been on speaking terms since Thanksgiving, when they had had words over dinner. Barbara had complained that that she wasn't seeing enough of her grandchildren and blamed it on Victoria and Jay's privileging spending time with their own friends, and on their reluctance to make plans for the sake of the children (for example, there hadn't been any family celebration organized for Swing or Aleida's birthdays, in September and November). Victoria felt that it was an unfair accusation, given that she and Jay had much fewer resources than Barbara and Damon to

organize family visits (including no car to bring the kids to Barbara and Damon's), and that furthermore, Barbara and Damon's own schedule was the main obstacle to seeing more of them. (Barbara and Damon both held two jobs, which had them work on Saturdays and get home at 11pm most weeknights.) In Victoria's words, she had "cursed out" Barbara, and she believed that was the reason why she was persona non grata. In fact, Damon's phone had disappeared right after the argument, and he and Barbara thought that Victoria had stolen it to get back at them. According to Jaydore, it was the theft that motivated Barbara and Damon's inflexible ban on Victoria, and that made him powerless to negotiate with them on her behalf. (Victoria heard that accusation only months later, and then she protested that Jay had stolen and resold the phone to buy drugs, but Barbara didn't believe her.) In any case, Victoria couldn't stay with Barbara and Damon. Jay and the kids would have the guarantee of a roof overhead, but she would have to fend for herself.

So, after the eviction, Victoria turned to friends. She first stayed with Monique, whose living room was also occupied by her godmother Stacy and by Stacy's teenage daughter. On nights when the overcrowding was too stifling, Victoria started staying with Kurt, a tall, handsome blond man she'd met in the new welfare-to-work program she was attending. Kurt, a young single father of four, fell for Victoria fast and hard. After a few weeks of Victoria staying on the couch of his two-bedroom apartment and being evasive regarding the status of her relationship with Jaydore, Kurt declared himself. Victoria moved into his bed, which was more comfortable than the living-room's tiny loveseat, let alone Monique's floor. She reasoned, too, that Jay had failed to deliver on his promise to use some of his income to rent a room for Victoria, and that he gave no sign to be saving

toward an apartment for the family either. If, after over a year of living in an apartment funded by her welfare benefits, Jay couldn't take his turn finding housing for the family, perhaps she was justified in exploring other possibilities.

But Victoria didn't manage to fall in love with Kurt. She took an immediate liking to (two of) his children and enjoyed playing family with them, like on Easter weekend, at the end of March, when Kurt spent $105 on perfect little Easter baskets for all seven of their combined children. Kurt's earnest declarations of everlasting love, however, struck Victoria as premature and too insistent. They'd started sleeping together in early March, and already he talked about moving in together in a more permanent capacity, saying a friend of his had given him a lead on a large house (one that could accommodate their family of nine) that would be free April 1. The house didn't materialize on April 1: Kurt didn't have the deposit money; his friend didn't give him as much of a break as he'd hoped; and the house was anyway in dire need of urgent repairs. May 1 became the new date on the horizon. Meanwhile, Kurt's enthusiastic gifts to Victoria and her children had depleted his food stamps, his TANF cash assistance, and his small off-the-books income. (When his children were with their mother or their grandmother on the weekend, he, too, occasionally worked as a stripper.) Victoria started contributing to the household where she had so far been a guest, and her own TANF cash quickly plummeted.[12] When Kurt described the bright future ahead, Victoria was both annoyed – because she thought he wouldn't deliver – and afraid – because she feared he might deliver, and then she'd find

[12] Victoria's food stamps were spent almost in full at the beginning of each month, when Jay borrowed Victoria's EBT card and Barbara's car to buy groceries in bulk for the children. Then, when the children ended up spending the night or the weekend with Victoria at Monique's or Kurt's, they generally came with some instant dishes and leftovers from Barbara's freezer.

herself shacked up with a man she had met a scant three months before. Victoria found it harder and harder to give a convincing performance for the part of the damsel in distress enamored with her prince charming. She grew moody and withdrawn; she smoked her cigarettes in silence at Kurt's kitchen table and barely reacted to his jokes and anecdotes. On the early morning of Sunday, April 17, as they were both lying in bed, Kurt asked her point blank: "Do you love me?" Victoria didn't manage to answer in the affirmative. She explained that it was too early for her to use those words, that she was grateful for everything he'd done for her, that she was open to seeing "how things would go," but that she needed more time before she could say for sure. Kurt fell silent for a while. Then he asked her to leave.[13]

Victoria asked Monique to take her back, but Monique wasn't keen: Stacy and her daughter had left a few days before, and Monique felt she could finally breathe in her compact two-bedroom, now that it was only her, her boyfriend Caleb, and her two sons. Also, Monique hadn't liked the way Victoria had handled things since the beginning of the year. In late January, a few days before receiving her eviction judgment, Victoria had found out that she was pregnant. Jay, then sure of his ability to find a new housing solution for his family within a couple of months, wanted to keep the baby. Victoria, who remarked that she would be the one without a roof overhead, was skeptical. She asked Monique for advice. Monique, who generally wore her Christian faith rather lightly, drew a clear line at abortion: you couldn't refuse a baby that was sent to you. Victoria, whose

[13] Eight-year old Mina wasn't there when Kurt broke up with Victoria. But she cried bitter tears when she understood that she wouldn't see Kurt again. Between mid-February and mid-April, the little girl had grown to consider gentle, sweet, dreamy Kurt as her own "best friend." She was devastated to lose him. But she had lost other people before, and her sadness lifted, at least to the naked eye, within a couple of weeks.

relationship with God was even more distant, wasn't entirely convinced by the argument. After the court issued her with a judgment of eviction and the Board of Social Services with a denial of further rental assistance, Victoria made up her mind: she didn't want to be homeless *and* pregnant. She asked me to take her to Planned Parenthood where, after the abortion was completed and the doctor assessed no further risks, she decided to have an IUD inserted. Victoria was planning to lie to Monique and pretend she'd had a miscarriage but somehow, she let the truth escape.

The abortion wasn't Monique's only ground for disapproving of her friend. She'd never been in favor of Kurt, a white man too eager to cast himself as a savior not to be suspicious. She'd approved even less of Victoria's sleeping with him while maintaining a relationship with Jay. Once, Victoria had asked Monique to cover for her by telling Kurt that they were spending the evening together when in fact, Victoria had borrowed Kurt's car to take Jay "on a date." Monique did as she was asked, but she felt used and compromised. In her eyes, Victoria was trading loyalty (to Jay and even to Monique herself) for the convenience of no longer sleeping on a living-room floor.

Monique didn't tell Victoria all this – she only said that she and Caleb needed a bit of privacy, after three months (half the length of their entire involvement) in the constant company of Stacy and her daughter. Victoria thought that excuse was a selfish one. She suspected the rest, the layers of moral judgment left unsaid, and she didn't care much for it either. In her hour of need, Monique was letting her down. She decided to give Monique a wide berth from now own. They didn't fall out, but Victoria stopped answering her phone when she saw Monique's name flash on her screen.

Victoria found someone else to stay with: Melanie, whom she'd met in the summer of 2014, when she, Melanie, and Monique all worked in inventory at a discount clothing store, moving around entire racks of clothes in 90-degree heat without A/C. But Melanie could only host Victoria for a few days. Then, help came from an unexpected corner: Smooth, the perpetually down and out drug dealer and drug user who'd spent weeks on end on Victoria and Jay's couch, ran into Jay and announced that his luck had turned. He had just moved, alone, into his own two-bedroom house, and would be happy to host "his sister" Victoria and her children in the second bedroom. There was no furniture in the house, but it was spacious, and compared to the previous months' arrangement, it felt luxurious to both Victoria and the kids. Because Jay, Barbara and Damon all had jobs that started early in the morning and ended late at night (Barbara and Damon each worked two jobs; Jay did as many hours as he could at the moving company) it had been a challenge to get the children to and from school and daycare. Often, the children had been spending weeknights in Kurt's overcrowded two-bedroom, because Kurt had a car that Victoria could use to ferry the children across town, to the school and daycare center of their old neighborhood. Now, with Smooth extending his hospitality for an indefinite period of time, the children could resume living with Victoria in a more stable way. No car was available, but Smooth lived just around the corner from an elementary school, and Victoria could watch the twins at home as she had done in the past, while Jay continued to live at Barbara's (next door to his work) and to save money for their future apartment, when they would be reunited again as a family. There were only two months left in the school year and Victoria hated further destabilizing Mina's schooling, but logistical considerations had to prevail. Mina moved schools. Jay bought

two airbeds for his family: a twin-size for Victoria and a queen-size for the three children, so both mattresses would fit into Smooth's spare room.

Then, a mere two weeks later, the family became homeless again. Barbara had taken a day off during the week and was watching Aleida and Swing while Mina was at school. After an afternoon spent outside with friends, Victoria went to pick up Mina from school and walked her back to Smooth's place. When the two arrived at the door, they noticed it had been closed with a padlock, and a new "For Rent" sign was hanging in the living-room window. Panicked, Victoria called Smooth. He didn't pick up but sent texts warning her to stay away from the house, because "undercover cops" were about to raid the place. Victoria texted back, asking whether there was a way she could at least retrieve her belongings. Smooth gave her the same warning to stay away. Victoria suspected that Smooth was lying, and she decided to get into the house anyway. She needed her stuff. While she was looking for a way to pick or break the padlock, a man in a suit showed up at the door. He owned the townhouse. Victoria explained her situation and the man understood what had been going on. He had let a friend of his stay in the house for a few weeks, while he was finishing paperwork and looking for a paying tenant. That friend had in turn let Smooth use the house and given him a set of keys, warning him that the arrangement could come to an end at any time. Smooth, a converted Muslim who ended every text message, however short, with "Allah Akbar", seems to have wanted to believe that "any time" could just as well mean "indefinitely," God willing. But, eager to repay Victoria and Jay for their past hospitality, to be the one who gave rather than the one who received, he had omitted to tell them about the precariousness of the arrangement. The landlord let Victoria in to retrieve her belongings but he refused to let her and Mina stay

the night. Victoria packed everything she could into the duffel bag she'd been ferrying between three places in as many months. Furious, she also raided Smooth's bedroom and took part of his stash of weed, as well as $200 she'd found in an envelope, in a corner of his unfurnished room.

Victoria was homeless again. The children could go back to staying at Barbara and Damon's, but Victoria was still persona non grata there. Victoria called again on Melanie, her former co-worker. Melanie still felt unable to offer Victoria a durable solution, but she had kept in touch with another of the women who worked at that clothing store in 2014, a fifty-year old woman everyone called Ms. Jones. Melanie knew that Ms. Jones lived in public housing but that, having stopped working some time ago, she had trouble making rent and feared losing her prized spot on the Trenton Housing Authority's roster. Victoria got in touch with Ms. Jones with only Smooth's weed and $200 to her name. Two days later, she moved into Ms. Jones one-bedroom apartment.

There, she shared the living room with Ms. Jones's adult son Rob. Rob slept on the couch and Victoria on the recliner. Often the children stayed with her, the three of them arrayed top-to-tail on the floor between the couch and the recliner. Rob worked as a security guard at a local community college. When he worked nights, they didn't need the room to sleep in at the same time. But he also had some day shifts, and those nights found him and Victoria sharing the space of the narrow living room. Ms. Jones kept asking Victoria whether she wanted to have her name added to the lease. But Victoria, as nice and deferential as she acted toward Ms. Jones, hated the situation. She slept very little at night and then dozed off during the day, missing job interviews and administrative appointments. She pined for her own place, where she and her children would have a

proper bedroom again, and she could once more enjoy the simple pleasure of "tak[ing] a shit with a cigarette in my mouth and the door open!"

Having lost hope in Jay's ability to return the family to independent housing, Victoria decided to go it alone. She applied to a local Housing First program as a single mother of three with a history of mental health problems and started gathering paperwork to document her situation. The caseworker who had seen her was confident that Victoria, given her state of need, would be approved pretty quickly. But before the process could come to fruition, even before Victoria had finished assembling all the documents necessary to complete her application, disaster struck again.

One early morning in the third week of June, while she was asleep in her recliner at Ms. Jones's, Victoria felt a hand going up her thigh. It shocked her awake, and straight into the memories of the previous sexual assaults she had experienced. Rob, who had previously seemed so gentle, quiet, and shy that she suspected he might be developmentally challenged, was trying his luck without asking permission. Victoria told me she "fucked him up": she kicked him away from her and slammed the nearby table lamp on his head. Then she grabbed her duffel bag and ran straight out of the door.

Escape to New York

Barbara and Damon finally relented and agreed to take Victoria in. But she had to demonstrate respect and deference for Barbara, and she didn't like that. Also, Jaydore was cheating on her, she was sure. On the first Sunday of July, while Barbara and Damon were out with the kids, Victoria took Jay's phone while he was napping – as he often did to recover from his workweek. She found text conversations between him and several escorts. Some were answers to ads and requests for price, abruptly abandoned after the

woman named a price of $180 or more for a date. One conversation indicated a recurring relationship: the woman scolded him for coming to her place drunk, unshowered, and without condoms the last time they had an appointment. She insisted that he take care of his hygiene if he wanted to see her again. He apologized, promised to do better ("you got it"), called her "baby', and asked whether he could bring any treat from the store for her, in addition to "the Benjamin" (i.e., $100) necessary for the encounter to happen. The woman said "just the Benjamin". Victoria took some screen shots. Then, she shook Jay awake and confronted him about the texts. When the argument escalated, Jay ran from the house into the backyard, closing the glass door behind him. Victoria, immediately on his heels, punched through the door in an attempt to grab him, hurt him, not let him get away with it. When I visited her two days later, she bore red marks on her knuckles, and Barbara was not happy about the door. She had little sympathy for Victoria's claims because she thought (not incorrectly) that Victoria had been cheating on Jay too. She thought they both needed to get their act together, stop cheating, stop fighting, or break up for good. Victoria wanted to leave but didn't know where to go. She kept calling the Housing First program and being told to wait a little longer.

On July 15, she texted me at 6am to ask that I drive her to New York that very day – or she would lose it. Her text message read: "Hit me [call me] when you can please. I need to get outta here." And then, a little later: "I need to get outta here I can't take it any longer. IMA wind up getting locked up."

In New York, she dropped Aleida and Swing off at Desdemona's and went on a tour of her friends. (Mina was already in Yonkers, where she often spent the summer with her favorite aunt, her "Titi Teri.") There, Victoria reconnected with Kareem, a man

twelve-years her senior she'd had an affair with while she was in her teens. Kareem, seduced anew, invited Victoria to stay in his Brooklyn apartment for as long as she wanted. Rekindling old feelings and old habits, perhaps they could be partners in life as well as in "business." Kareem suggested that Swing might even be his biological son. (The dates of his past involvement with Victoria overlapped with those of Jay's and Ben's, and no paternity test had ever been conducted.) Victoria started selling drugs again, happy to be making her own money. But another business partner of Kareem's, a young woman just as invested as Victoria in her tough girl's reputation (and perhaps also interested in Kareem's affections), took issue with Victoria's sudden prominence in Kareem's work and life. At first the two women had words. Then they escalated to threats and shoves. Then, one afternoon in mid-August, the woman ambushed Victoria. Kareem had lent Victoria his car, and she was driving back to his place, with Swing in the back seat. (Aleida had already gone back to Barbara's, together with Desdemona's.) As Victoria pulled into the street where Kareem lived, the woman shot at the car. Victoria crashed into one of the trees lining the street, fortunately at low speed. Then, Victoria grabbed the gun she knew Kareem kept in the car and returned fire, touching the woman in the arm. The woman drove away. Victoria stepped out, grabbed Swing from the backseat, and made a beeline for the nearby subway stop, abandoning the crashed car in the street. She rushed to New York Penn Station, where she hopped onto a New Jersey Transit train to Trenton. In her precipitation, she hadn't taken any money or belongings and only had her phone in the back pocket of her jeans. Before the conductor came to her car to check tickets, she stole one from an unsuspecting traveler who, after wedging his ticket on the front seat's hook at the conductor's attention, had promptly fallen asleep.

I couldn't verify the epic details of Victoria's Brooklyn adventure, beyond the fact that two retrospective interviews conducted more than a year apart yielded the same story. I didn't find any mention of it in the local press and I couldn't interview other parties to the dispute. I had met Kareem briefly when I'd dropped Victoria off at his place on July 15, and I had his phone number, but I didn't have anything resembling a relationship with him. Victoria asked me no to contact him because she felt it might be dangerous to her safety. What is sure, however, is that Victoria's attempts to find new hopes in fledgling romantic involvements had failed again. Shaken and penniless, she was back in Trenton, with no option but to make amends with Jay and his family.

Victoria didn't tell the Claytons about Kareem (she'd only been staying with 'friends' in the official version of the story), but she did tell them that New York was no good for her. She was coming back to New Jersey ready to start again on the project of being an honest and hard-working family. Jay abjured escorts (and any other women) and promised to do better. Barbara and Damon gave the young couple another chance to stabilize at their place.

Setting Everything Ablaze

Less than a month later, around 4 in the morning on a warm and humid August night, Victoria set fire to a truck at the moving company where Jay worked. Earlier that night he had called her to say that, just in from a daylong job near Philadelphia, he would drop off the truck, grab a late dinner with his fellow movers, and then get onto another truck to leave for the next job, which was awaiting them in Connecticut early the next morning. Since Barbara's house was literally next door to the moving company, Jay could have easily stopped by to say hi upon switching trucks. But he may not have wanted to,

because he and Victoria, despite their latest recommitment to each other, had been arguing often since her return from New York. Victoria, on her side, couldn't stop wondering whether Jay's apparent work schedule still contained hidden gaps he reserved for clandestine pleasures. If so, she was sure that his co-workers would cover for him.

Unlike her, Jay had work, real work: the kind that gives a regular income and fosters steady relationships within a crew that spends hours driving the roads of the tri-state area and carrying heavy loads together. While Victoria was home (or even homeless) with the children, trying to muster the energy to apply for jobs and assistance while keeping a constant eye on two kids under five, while she was losing temp jobs because she left in the middle of a shift when Swing "freaked out" on the babysitter, work called Jay early in the morning and kept him late at night. Work took him out of state. Work, after a big period of activity, treated him to a guys' dinner at a fancy steakhouse on the boss's dime. Work was always a convenient excuse not be around.

That fateful night, when Jay and his crew pulled in, Victoria was smoking her usual Newports in the parking lot, waiting for them. She and Jay argued about his having to leave again immediately, until she went back into Barbara's house. She tried to sleep but couldn't. She tried to call Jay but he wouldn't pick up. After several missed calls, her phone finally rang back. But it wasn't Jay. It was Shantelle, an ex-girlfriend of Jay's from New York. Shantelle, inebriated, boasted that she was spending the night with Jay and told Victoria to back off, if she didn't want any harm to come to her children. Victoria gathered that Shantelle was in New Jersey, and that she and Jay were hanging out at the apartment of a friend nicknamed King, who had been Victoria and Jay's neighbor when they still lived in their apartment on the Island.

Enraged, Victoria left the house, and again she walked over to the adjacent lot where the moving company, together with its warehouse and its truck garage, was located. Nobody was in sight. A lone truck was standing in the empty parking lot. A can of gasoline was lying outside the office building. Victoria felt the lighter in her pocket, the one she'd been using to light one cigarette after another until she ran out. She stopped there, between the dark office building and the unattended truck, for a few minutes. She felt her chest tighten. The rage accumulated over the past months was pulsing at her temples, in her delicate hands, everywhere in her body. She grabbed the can of gasoline, half thinking that its providential appearance in the empty lot was a sign from fate and therefore mitigated her responsibility for the decision she was about to make. Then she doused the truck cabin in gasoline and set it on fire. After that, she just walked back to Barbara's house. She didn't see the surveillance camera jutting out of the office building, directed at the lot, taping her. Perhaps she wouldn't have cared anyway.

Lee, the owner of the moving company, employed men who were down on their luck, men who could work a backbreaking job from early in the morning to late at night but who otherwise had few options. Some had criminal records, some struggled with a drug habit. Some were homeless. One of these men was sleeping in the warehouse that Sunday night and smelled the fire. He called Jay on the phone for help extinguishing the fire, and this time Jay picked up. They put out the fire before any strong damage occurred, before the engine could explode, before the fire could propagate to the nearby buildings, before the fire squad had to be called. Jay phoned Victoria and called her stupid, blaming her for forgetting a lit cigarette in the truck and accidentally setting it on

fire. Victoria corrected that misunderstanding: the fire was intentional. Intended to hurt him.

She claimed the deed because she wanted him and everyone else to know this was done out of revenge for his betrayals and failures as a romantic and domestic partner. By then, it was early morning, and Victoria had called her friend Melanie to come pick her up. She had roused the three children from their sleep and stepped out with them onto the street to wait for her ride. When she and Jay spotted each other, the fight began again. He called her crazy and stupid; she started to punch him and kick him. Not wanting to punch back in front of the children and his crew, Jay got into the partially burnt cabin of the truck. Victoria climbed after him and reached into the open window to continue hitting him. The crew pulled her back down and separated her from Jay. Meanwhile, Barbara had stepped out of the house on her way to work. She saw the commotion and decided to miss work. She took both the children and Victoria inside, while Jay stayed in the company's office with his crew, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the boss, who had been alerted. When he arrived, Lee was beside himself with anger. He told Jay he held both him and Victoria responsible for the night's events. Afraid, Jay left before the police arrived. Police came to examine the scene and pick up the security footage. They also knocked on Barbara's door. Victoria hid and Barbara didn't give her up. But the time of reckoning had come anyway.

With Jay and Victoria both threatened with immediate incarceration, someone needed to take over the custody of the children before they went "into the system." Victoria realized that, given her flamboyant ownership of the arson in front of the moving crew (and of the neighbors who had stepped out to see what the mess was about), she

would have to turn herself in. Having grown up in foster and group homes, she understood it was better to organize custody for the children than to leave it up to Child Protection and Permanency. Two days before, Mina had just come back from Yonkers, NY, where she had been spending the summer with her beloved aunt Teri. Victoria knew that, while Barbara would take care of the grandkids who were truly "hers," the best person to foster Mina was Teri. Barbara called Teri and explained the situation. The next day, Teri took the day off from work drove down to Carson. The three women went to the Trenton courthouse for an emergency appointment with one of the judges in the family division. Victoria transferred her legal guardianship to Teri for Mina and to Barbara for Aleida and Benjamin. Then she and Jay both turned themselves in. Barbara and Teri accompanied them to the Carson Township police station, while the children stayed home under Damon's watch. The police heard Jaydore first. Late that night, as Victoria was waiting for her turn to be processed, the women saw Jay come out instead. Lee's accusations notwithstanding, the Carson police had dropped all charges against him. They had even agreed not to process any paperwork on him so it wouldn't affect his probation in the state of New York. With Barbara there to vouch for Victoria's willingness to turn herself in, the two officers in charge of the case told Victoria to go home and spend the night with her children. They would come pick her up in the morning, after she'd dropped the children off to daycare.

Once home, the adults ate together, much as they had done, a year-and-a-half before, when it had been Jay's turn to surrender. The children were allowed to play until midnight, after which Aleida and Swing went to bed while Mina, trying to suppress her

tears but not fully understanding why she wasn't allowed to stay with her siblings, went back to Yonkers with Teri.

On Wednesday morning, I drove Victoria and Jay to daycare, where she wished Aleida and Swing a good day, as if she were sure to see them in the evening. Half an hour later, the two officers came to pick her up in their black SUV. She gave me a hug, then kissed Jay on the lips. She started toward the SUV, then quickly turned around toward Barbara: "Oh, sorry, Ma." She hugged Barbara and said: "Thank you for everything." Then she climbed into the police car while the three of us watched her go. Jay distracted himself from his anguish by making fun of my teary eyes.

To everyone's surprise, Victoria was released on her own recognizance that same afternoon. She had benefited from an early implementation of the 2017 New Jersey Criminal Justice Reform, which eliminated pre-trial detention for first offenders who weren't deemed at immediate risk of fleeing or repeating their offense. Because Victoria expressed remorse and had three children at stake, the judge released her without bail. Barbara had gone to work in the meantime, so I gave Victoria a ride from the police station. She picked up the children from daycare as if nothing had happened during the day.

Everyone interpreted this lucky break as both a new lease on life and a wake-up call. Victoria and Jay reconciled once more. Barbara and Damon agreed to continue hosting them under the condition that they turn their lives around within the next couple of months. A few weeks later, however, after Victoria and Jay had invited friends of theirs over without Barbara's permission, she kicked them out. Jay went to cool his heels in New York for a few days. Victoria, put off by what she saw as Barbara's

authoritarianism and disappointed again in Jay, decided to move to Northern Virginia, where her sister Ceci, newly clean, employed, and eager to reconnect, promised her emotional and material support. This was in October 2016.

A New Start in Northern Virginia

Months passed without the New Jersey court summoning Victoria for her pending case. Victoria found a job at Sam's Club, saved up some money for the first time in years if not her entire life, and started financing a car so she could visit her children in New Jersey and New York.

In January, however, the other shoe dropped. Victoria had a "pre-indictment conference" scheduled in New Jersey for February 2nd. Her public defender encouraged her to appear and request enrollment in Pre-Trial Intervention (PTI), a diversionary program intended to spare first-time offenders jail time as well as cut court costs. PTI would require her to live in NJ, to check in regularly with a supervisor, to be assessed for restitution and fines, to submit to random urine tests, and to demonstrate "rehabilitative activities". It could also mandate her to give up her driver's license, to receive substance abuse or psychological counseling, and to participate in community service. If she fulfilled the requirements, her charges would be dismissed before trial and no conviction would appear on her record. This sounded better than jail and would allow Victoria to see her children more often, if only she could figure out where to live in New Jersey, the fourth-most expensive state in the country, and one where she'd burned or drained all her supportive ties. There was also the option of having her case transferred to Virginia, but it required rhetorical and procedural finesse so she wouldn't be sanctioned for having already left NJ without authorization. Furthermore, while the cost of living was lower in

Virginia, the court supervision fees were higher, and Victoria's minimum-wage budget was already stretched thin by her car and insurance payments ($677/month) and her rent ($250/month since her sister, too, had given her the boot). On either side she saw dead ends, and even if she could find a job in New Jersey, the wage levels she could expect made the holy grail of being reunited with her three children, in an apartment of her own, as elusive as ever.

Victoria Incarcerated

A few days before she was summoned to appear in New Jersey, Victoria accepted to "keep" $400 for one of her co-workers at Sam's Club, knowing full well that the co-worker had taken the money from the cash register. She did so in exchange for being allowed to keep half for herself. Once again, security cameras caught the entire thing and Victoria was arrested the next day, this time on a charge of grand larceny. The state of Virginia didn't show the same leniency as the New Jersey judge, and Victoria was immediately incarcerated pending indictment.

In Virginia, Victoria had met a new boyfriend, Marshall, and begun to spend more and more time with his family: his mother, his sister, his son, and his niece. Victoria had even moved in with the five of them, about a month before her arrest. Marshall's mother, whom Victoria had already begun to call Mommy, agreed to pay restitution for Victoria's share of the stolen money. Meanwhile, the security footage had confirmed that Victoria hadn't been the one to take the money out of the register. Those two elements allowed Victoria's public defender to plead her charges down to a misdemeanor, and Victoria was given two years of probation. She was immediately remanded to New Jersey where, a few days later, she was again released on her own recognizance, under the condition that

she would immediately enroll into PTI and transfer the judicial supervision component of PTI to her probation office in Virginia.

On May 1, 2017, Victoria was released. She had spent three months in jail and was looking ahead at three years of judicial supervision and $10,000 in restitution for the damaged truck cabin.

Break up and punitive rape

"I guess shit happens. (…) He fucked my life up. Well, more. My shit was already bad. But now it's more hate and anger."
(Victoria, on Marshall, the ex-boyfriend who assaulted her)

In late May, Victoria broke up with Marshall, after he demanded access to her Facebook account and the entire history of her text messages. If she truly wanted to turn over a new leaf and become family with him, why wouldn't she let him control her communications and keep her on the right path? Victoria moved out of "Mommy"'s house, back to Ceci's place. She tried to keep a relationship with Marshall's son and niece and sometimes invited them to spend time at Ceci's. On the 4th of July, Marshall came by Ceci's place, where his son and niece were playing with Ceci's children as well as Aleida and Swing, who were visiting from New Jersey. Feeling angry and left out, he pulled out a gun and aimed it at Ceci. Victoria talked him out of shooting and let him go with his son and niece. She called the police and Marshall, who was himself on probation, went on the run. Victoria's children returned to New Jersey and Victoria moved into a domestic violence shelter.

But Marshall wasn't hiding far. Most importantly, he blamed Victoria for ruining his life. Two months later, hearing that she had become involved with a new man, Marshall followed Ceci to Victoria's shelter, and then Victoria from her shelter to her

new job. On the 4th of September 2017, while Victoria was walking to work, Marshall pulled over to the side of the road and forced her into his car. He hit her face with his pistol's grip, held her down and raped her. He then grabbed her phone and looked for the number of her new boyfriend, Lito. While he was doing that, Victoria managed to run out of the car. By chance, an off-duty police officer had just pulled into the same parking lot and saw her. When Marshall started chasing her, the officer identified himself as police and ordered Marshall to stay back, or else. (Victoria says the officer didn't have his service gun and was bluffing, but Marshall didn't know that.) Marshall got back into his car and the officer drove Victoria to the nearest station. That night, Lito and Ceci's boyfriend KC went on a hunt for Marshall. They found him and beat him up. The next day, the police picked Marshall up from the hospital and arrested him. He's been incarcerated ever since.

Return to New York

In a tragic confluence of events, Lito's sister died of cancer on September 5, 2017, the very next day after Victoria's assault. Lito, like Victoria, was from the Bronx, and the funeral services would take place there. Lito and Victoria immediately left for New York and stayed there for three weeks, until Victoria worried that, if she didn't report soon to her probation office in Northern Virginia, a warrant would be issued for her arrest.

In those three weeks, she had lost her job (she didn't want to tell anyone what had happened and had just disappeared on them). She had also lost her place in the shelter where she had been staying. The shelter housed victims of intimate-partner violence, but once an assailant (and possibly, his friends), knew about the shelter's location, the staff estimated that their duty was to protect other residents from retaliation, even if it meant

putting one person out for the sake of others. Even more crucially, after her assault, Victoria wanted nothing more to do with Northern Virginia. On every street of Manassas, Woodbridge, or Triangle, she expected Marshall to pull up and attack her again. It didn't matter that she knew he was in jail. Lito, on his end, pined to be with his family – his mother, his widowed brother-in-law, his nephew and niece, and his two surviving sisters.

Victoria put in an application to transfer her probation from Prince Williams County to New York City. In late November, the transfer was approved. On November 30, 2017, the day of her twenty-sixth birthday, Victoria took a bus to New York and left Virginia for good.

Appendix to Chapter 1: Summary of Victoria's Network and Timeline of Main Events

Table 1: Victoria's Network

Name	Age in 2015	Relationship to Victoria and her children
Victoria Ruiz	23	
FAMILY OF ORIGIN		
Emily Ruiz	48	Victoria's mother. Died in August 2015.
Cecilia Mercado, aka Ceci	29	Emily's oldest daughter, Victoria's only sister. Victoria lived with Ceci (in Northern Viriginia) from October 2016 to January 2017.
CHILDREN		
Mina Belle Maldonado	7	Victoria's oldest daughter.
Aleida Quintana	3.5	Victoria's second daughter.
Benjamin Quintana, Jr aka Bop aka Benji	2.5	Victoria's youngest child (son).
Kara Belle Mercado	12	Ceci's daughter, Victoria's niece. In the spring of 2015, Kara began running away from her group home; Victoria hosted her several times and considered being her guardian. (Ultimately, she testified in family court in favor of Ceci regaining custody of Kara.)
BABYFATHERS		
Jaydore Clayton	24	Biological father of Aleida and Swing, social father to Mina. On-and-off romantic and domestic relationship with Victoria from 2008 to 2016.
Paul Maldonado	23	Childhood friend and first serious boyfriend of Victoria's. Mina's biological father. Infrequent presence in Mina's life (according to Victoria). Has seen more of Mina since his sister Teri became Mina's legal guardian and main caregiver.
Benjamin Quintana	Mid-20s	Former boyfriend of Victoria's, and social father to her children. Gave his name to Aleida and Benji. Still occasionally sends money (and amorous messages) to

		Victoria.

Table 1 (continued)

RELATIVES		
Teri Betancourt	38	Mina's aunt (sister to Paul, Mina's biological father). Has been fostering Mina since September 2016.
Barbara Clayton-Wallace	46	Jaydore's mother; grandmother of Victoria's children. Has been fostering Aleida and Benji (her biological grandchildren) since October 2016.
Desdemona Clayton, aka Des	40s	Barbara's younger sister, Jaydore's aunt. Has often hosted Victoria, Jay, and their children in the Bronx. Has also stayed at Barbara's place on extended visits, during which she often watched the children.
Desmond Clayton, aka Clay	40s	Barbara's younger brother, Jaydore's uncle. Victoria and Jay met through him. He stayed with them in Trenton for five weeks in the fall of 2015.
Damon Wallace	48	Barbara's husband and Jaydore's stepfather since 2007. Barbara and Damon are separated, and in the process of getting divorced, since April 2018.
Clarissa	40s	Ex-partner to one of Victoria's maternal aunts. Victoria considers Clarissa a full-fledged aunt. Clarissa let Victoria and Lito stay with her in NYC, on and off, from November 2017 to April 2018.
LOVERS		
Kareem Bell	37	Friend and lover from Brooklyn. Victoria met him when she was a teenager and kept in touch off and on. As a man thirteen-year her senior, he had a place of his own and welcomed her when she needed to get away. Their relationship was briefly rekindled in July-August 2016, when Victoria sought alternatives to living with Jaydore and his parents.
Kurt Doyle	25	Victoria met Kurt at a welfare-to-work program in January 2016. Kurt hosted her, and often the children, after the family's eviction in February 2016. They began a relationship with ended in April of the same year, when Victoria didn't reciprocate Kurt's declaration of love. Kurt's hospitality also ended at that point.
Marshall Gerry	28	Victoria met Marshall in Virginia, in the fall of 2016, and moved in with him and his family in January 2017. Marshall's family supported her through her incarceration in February to May 2017. But Marshall proved controlling and Victoria left him soon after her release. In September 2017, he physically and sexually assaulted her.
Joseph Robinson, aka Joe, aka	27	Lito has been involved with Victoria since the summer of 2017. After they met through Facebook, he moved from NYC to Virginia to be with her. They then moved back to NYC together in November 2017. Despite ups and downs, at the

Lito Corleone		time of writing, they are still together and are discussing marriage.

Table 1 (continued)

FRIENDS		
Monique Adler	27	Victoria's friend. They met in a women's empowerment/shelter program in 2014. On-and-off friendship since then. When on good terms, the two women say they are godmothers to each other's children.
Izzie Brentano	24	Used to live in the same apartment complex as Victoria and Jay, on the Island. Intense friendship July-December 2015. Also held the title of godmother (to Swing) for a few months.
Smooth	Early 30s	Friend of Jaydore's. Stayed with Victoria and Jay a few times before the beginning of my fieldwork, and again for three weeks in the fall of 2015. Hosted Victoria and the children for two weeks in April 2016, until he lost his own housing.

Table 2: Timeline of Main Events

February 2015	Beginning of fieldwork; Victoria in welfare-to-work program
March 2015	Victoria expelled from welfare-to-work program.
	Violent fight between Victoria and Jay; Jay on the run
April– June 2015	Jay is incarcerated. Victoria and the children briefly move in with Monique for moral and material support, but the move affects Mina's ability to attend school and the family moves back into their apartment.
August 21, 2015	Victoria's mother, Emily, dies in the hospital.
September 2015	Victoria is sanctioned for missing an appointment with her TANF case manager.
February 11, 2016	Victoria, Jay, and their three children are evicted from their apartment.
Feb-June 2016	Jay and the children live with Barbara and Damon; Victoria stays with various friends and acquaintances until one assaults her and she runs out of options.
June-August 2016	Victoria, Jay, and the children live with Barbara and Damon. Victoria attempts to find independent alternatives, unsuccessfully.
August 29, 2016	Victoria sets fire to a truck at the moving company where Jay works.
September 2016	Victoria transfers custody of Mina to her aunt Teri; Mina moves to Yonkers, NY. Victoria transfers custody of Aleida and Benji to Barbara. When Victoria is released on her own recognizance, she and Jay attempt to reconcile and continue

to live at Barbara and Damon's with Aleida and Benji.

Table 2 (continued)

October 2016	Victoria and Jay both kicked out of Barbara and Damon's house. Jay moves to a rooming house in Trenton; Victoria moves to Virginia to join her sister Ceci. Aleida stays at Barbara and Damon's. Benji goes with Victoria to Virginia.
January 2017	Victoria and Ceci fall out. Benji comes back to live in New Jersey, first in Jay's room, then at Barbara's place with Aleida. Victoria stays in Virginia and moves in with new boyfriend Marshall and his family of origin.
Feb-May 2017	Victoria incarcerated in Virginia for stealing money from her work, released with a two-year term of probation. Upon her release, Victoria is also enrolled in pre-trial intervention for her arson case in New Jersey (administered by her probation officer in Virginia).
May-Aug 2017	Victoria leaves Marshall and gets together with Lito, who moves to Virginia to be with her.
September 4, 2017	Marshall physically and sexually assaults Victoria. He's arrested the next day.
Sep-Nov 2017	Victoria loses her job and her place in the shelter where she was living. She and Lito stay with Ceci and other acquaintances, and make plans to return to NYC, where they both have family. Victoria applies to have her probation and her pre-trial cases transferred to New York.
Nov 30, 2017	Victoria and Lito move back to New York.

CHAPTER 2: PAINFUL YET ESSENTIAL: AMBIVALENT BONDS AND THE 'FAMILY SAFETY NET'

Even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you.
Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning.
Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun,
So shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth.
Khalil Gibran, "On Love", *The Prophet* (1923)

Introduction

For much of my acquaintance with Victoria, her romantic and family life centered on her relationship with Jaydore and the parenting of their children. The patch of road I observed in their shared history was bumpy to say the least. As I confided in friends and family about what I was observing unfold between Victoria and Jay, two questions kept coming back, often in the mouth of the same people: first, "if things are so difficult between them, why do they stay together?" And then, after a bout of separation and its attendant increase in material deprivation: "given how much they need each other to get by, why can't they work it out and stay together?"

Why do they, why can't they? These two questions, asked by friends who are educated, progressively minded, and generally compassionate, illustrate the way in which impossible life conditions are hard to fathom for luckier, distant onlookers, and tend to be attributed to deficiencies in those who suffer them. In this way, these questions are anti-sociological: they obscure the social processes by which two people who objectively need each other, and subjectively love each other, can live in circumstances that are radically hostile to both a stable domestic partnership and a clean separation. But at the same time these twinned, inconsistent questions, summarize exactly the conflicting pushes and pulls

that frame the negotiation of intimacy and interdependence in the context of compounded hardship.

Victoria and Jay's relationship could be summarized with the expression "on again, off again". But this is only a label, not an explanation. More significantly, Victoria and Jay stand in an on-off relationship not just with each other, but also with other people, notably friends (Monique), lovers (Ben, Kareem), and relatives (Emily, Ceci, and to some extent Barbara).

Curiously, the abundant sociological literature on poverty, family life, and social networks doesn't say much about these difficult but long-lasting relationships, even less about their underlying emotional dynamics. The main strands of that research program have emphasized either (a) the supportive, durable ties described by Carol Stack (1974), or (b) the lack of cooperation and feelings of isolation among the (black) poor highlighted by Sandra Smith (2007) and Orlando Patterson (1998), or (c) the difficult but short-lived ties documented by Matthew Desmond (2012, 2016). Let us set aside, for now, the question of who is right in their assessment of poor people's networks and whether there are ways of reconciling these seemingly incompatible findings. Let us note instead that these three types of ties are defined, in part by their temporal extension – for (a) and (c) – but mainly by their *instrumental function*: getting by, finding jobs, and maintaining or increasing one's social position.

Long-lasting but fraught relationships, because they make little sense from a purely instrumental point of view, force us to restore an emotional dimension to the analysis of intimate bonds amid severe deprivation. Why do these relationships endure despite being recognized as painful by the very people they bind together? Or in other

words: how do people come to regard some of their intimate bonds as toxic yet essential? I address these questions by drawing on the narrative of Victoria's life and that of her social network, presented in the previous chapter. The answer I offer, in a nutshell, resides in the lived experience of chronic scarcity and repeated setbacks, against the backdrop of a limited government safety net: dispossession increases poor people's reliance on each other, not only for help getting by, but also for emotional nurturance, meaning, and a sense of place. At the same time, the same harsh circumstances make it more likely that they will let each other down. Under these conditions, it is only to be expected that people will fight or break up over feelings of disappointment and betrayal, before rekindling their relationships for lack of a better alternative.

This chapter, overall, seeks to demonstrate that taking emotional dynamics seriously recasts the so-called behavioral problems and pathologies of the poor as the tip of the iceberg, as outcrops of normal human dilemmas exacerbated by impossible social conditions.

Literature Review

Intimate Ties in the Poverty Literature, Revisited

Reexamining the poverty literature with a focus on the emotional experience of relationships effects a shift in perspective, in which ambiguity and contradictions loom large.

Carol Stack, in her landmark ethnography *All Our Kin* (1974), depicts in great detail the networks of exchange that bind kin together in a neighborhood she calls The Flats. In the Flats, both blood relatives and close friends who function as kin step up when someone is in need – and someone always is. Overall, in Stack's analysis, the

extended family functions as a safety net, where resources are pooled for economies of scale, but also exchanged from one part of the network to another, depending on who is suffering a setback. Thus, the overarching picture of family life delivered by *All Our Kin* is that of a strong domestic group providing regular and effective instrumental support. The detail of Stack's ethnographic descriptions, however, reveals that even supportive ties are not unequivocally experienced as positive. Her chapter on child-keeping brings this into focus with several vignettes depicting how the rights and duties that are clustered in the white middle-class definition of "motherhood" were often shared by several close kinswomen in the Flats. Across several individual cases, the rearing of children emerges as a joint endeavor of the domestic group, characterized by intricate exchanges of services and constant collaboration. Yet, each vignette centers on conflicts regarding the sharing of rights and duties in relation to children, and these conflicts reveal tensions nested within relationships of interdependence. In one case, a custodial grandmother, Bessie, disagrees with her daughter on the extent to which the daughter's children should see their father. The disagreement become so bitter that it fractures the relationship between the two women and the young mother takes back custody of her children. In another case, a young mother feels humiliated by the aunt who has raised her and is now helping raise her own children, because the aunt discounts the mother's parental authority in public and asserts her own instead. In both cases the same relative who provides you with the existential resource of childcare also diminishes you and becomes an object of resentment (Stack [1974] 1997: 73-89).

Patterson (1998) has criticized Stack's (and others') depiction of the black extended family as a strong and supportive domestic group, going as far as calling it a

"myth" (Patterson 1998:1952). Based on analyses of the General Social Survey and other survey data, he has instead argued that African Americans, especially those who are poor, are isolated from each other because they have smaller core discussion networks[14] than other demographic groups, and their romantic relationships are conflict-ridden. Reportedly small core-discussion networks, however, do not preclude other forms of solidarity and support, especially since ethnographers have long noted that self-reports and observation tend to yield different pictures of close ties (e.g., Liebow 1967). Furthermore, as we will see below, conflict and isolation are not the same thing. Rampant conflict with loved ones may make one *feel* lonely, but it is a sign that there *is* a relationship to struggle with.

Finally, while Desmond's (2012) "disposable ties" argument focuses on evicted tenants' distance from kin and reliance on fleeting acquaintances to meet basic needs, a more expansive presentation of his data in book form (Desmond 2016) reveals that some disposable ties actually last for years and can involve emotional devotion: Scott, a 39-year old man who had lost his nursing license to addiction, met 52-year old Teddy at an emergency shelter and, in disposable tie fashion, they soon moved in together into a trailer park. There, Scott nursed half-paralyzed Teddy over the following months, until Teddy's sister came to pick him up and move him to her place. Furthermore, both the cases of Teddy and that of Doreen (another tenant in the eleven households closely followed by Desmond) suggest that distended kin relationships can be rekindled and

[14] The "core discussion network" is the construct derived from answers to the survey question: "Looking back over the past six months, who are the people with whom you discussed matters important to you?" Since then, research by Mario Small and co-authors suggests that the core discussion network measure may not do a good job of tracking strong ties, durable relationships, or everyday sociability (Small 2013, Small, Pamphile, and McMahan 2015, Small 2017).

come through in times of crisis, since both ended up finding somewhat durable housing solutions in moving with out-of-state relatives.

In sum, behind arguments emphasizing support, isolation, or disposability, are hidden mentions of ties that are long-lasting yet ambivalent (neither fully supportive nor the opposite). These ties came clearly into view during my three-year, in-depth fieldwork with a small network of low-income people. There I found tumultuous, fraught but long-lasting relationships among friends, lovers, and kin. Declarations of hate alternated with declarations of love. Intense support was followed by distance and avoidance. People left a relationship and then recommitted to it. I also saw circumstantial acquaintances, perfect candidates for disposability, be discarded – and then be taken up again.

The complexity in these relationships deserves analytic attention, not only because emotional experience matters to social actors and so should matter to social analysts, but also because focusing on ambivalent ties leads to different arguments regarding the links between poverty and intimacy. To begin to make sense of these complex relationships, we can enlist the help of the sociology of family and coupling, which has conceptualized ambivalence in close ties.

Ambivalence conceptualized: cultural and family sociology

Sociological accounts of ambivalence vary in the scope of their argument and the analytic level they privilege. Some emphasize macro-cultural contradictions that affect everyone in contemporary Western societies. Others look at the micro-level of family interactions and trace ambivalence to gender, family role and life stage. In both cases, however, little attention is given to class and in particular to the interplay of material conditions and emotional experience.

Borrowed from the vocabulary of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, the concept of ambivalence was given its seminal sociological treatment by Merton and Barber, whose essay "Sociological Ambivalence" (1963) starts from the premise that social structures organize concrete relations and the associated psychological or affective experiences. They define the "core-type of sociological ambivalence" as "conflicting normative expectations socially defined for a particular social role associated with a single social status". For our purposes – and in much of the subsequent literature on sociological ambivalence – the relevant contradictions live within close relationships, or in Merton's vocabulary, within each of the roles of friend, sibling, lover, and parent.

Macro-cultural studies of romantic love, though they do not always center on the concept of ambivalence, illuminate some of these relevant contradictions. Swidler's *Talk of Love* (2001) uses interviews with middle-class men and women in long-term relationships to show that the same people use different, sometimes mutually incompatible discourses to make sense of their romantic bonds. In particular, they go back-and-forth between a "mythical" view of love as spontaneous, all-consuming and life-altering on the one hand, and a "realistic, mature" view of love as requiring daily effort and pragmatic compromise. Swidler gives an optimistic picture of the way her interviews navigate different discourses. In her account, contradictions are not so much painful as they are productive sources of justification and understanding for middle-class people who live within the institution of marriage. In contrast, Illouz's *Why Love Hurts* (2012) offers a much more pessimistic account of contemporary romantic relationships. Illouz emphasizes gender inequality in sexual fields, arguing that (upper-middle-class) men are in a position of emotional domination over women because they have a broader

choice of socially acceptable partners; their sexual and romantic capital increases with career progress until relatively later ages; and their social worth is less culturally bound to marriage and parenthood.

This literature, though it documents important cultural factors in the production of intimate ambivalence, says little about their varying effect across the social structure, because it tends to focus on a reified middle-class. Social class (in my case concentrated poverty) intersects with gender dynamics to create a different sexual and romantic field than the one described by Illouz, especially considering the different interplay of economic and romantic-domestic trajectories in circumstances of persistent poverty and low social mobility.

Living in poverty, a condition that in the U.S. is often vilified as a sign of failure or deviance, also changes the parameters of the cultural labor involved in making sense of one's choices, actions, and relationships. Qualitative scholars of poverty have noted the peculiar burdens of justification associated with social marginalization and stigmatization (Bourgois 1998, Duneier 1999, Edin and Kefalas 2005, Edin and Nelson 2013, Wacquant 1998). Opportunities to use cultural contradictions to one's advantage might thus be more restricted at the bottom of the class ladder than they are for Swidler's middle-class interviewees.

Kathryn Edin and colleagues, in their studies of unwed motherhood and fatherhood among low-income people (Edin and Kefalas 2005, Edin and Nelson 2013), describe how poor men and women find meaning and status in becoming parents and how they discursively circumscribe the role of parent to emotional duties they can fulfill ("being there for my kids" for mothers, "being a friend" for fathers) as opposed to

material ones they cannot. However, justifying oneself during an interview with an outsider is not the same as negotiating the meaning of a relationship with all parties concerned. There, rather than working to the speaker's advantage as she tries to craft a self-narrative for the benefit of the interviewer, contradictions can open multiple battle lines at the same time, and result in reproaches made, and resentment felt, on multiple fronts.

In contrast to macro-cultural studies of love and romance, family research on sociological ambivalence is closer to the social-structuralist spirit underpinning Merton and Barber's concept, but has also largely ignored social class as a variable, and poor families as a population. Instead, that literature has focused on gender and life stage as sociological sources of ambivalence, especially in the discussion of evolving relationships between older parents and their adult children (Connidis and colleagues 2002, 2015, Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips 2011, Lüscher and Pillemer 1998). One of its key findings, however, is highly relevant to an investigation of poverty and ambivalence: that ambivalence and even abuse (especially elder abuse by adult children), seems more prevalent and more intense in relationships of strong mutual dependency (see Lüscher and Pillemer's 1998 review of own findings and other studies). In other words, families who exhibit closeness, solidarity, and mutual support can also exhibit distrust, conflict, and even violence, especially when closeness, solidarity, and support take the form of *interdependence* in daily life. This point was recently bolstered by Offer and Fisher (2017) in their quantitative analysis of people who are assessed as "difficult" by members of their personal networks: "the felt burden of providing support was not attenuated by receiving assistance, suggesting that alters involved in reciprocated

exchanges were not less often labeled difficult than were those in unreciprocated ones." In other words, it is not necessarily lack of reciprocity and fear of exploitation that lead bonds to fray (Mazelis 2008). Even under conditions of reciprocity, interdependence can be felt as a burden and a threat to autonomy.

The American Welfare State and the Fear of Dependency

Heightened interdependence is precisely what poverty means for people, especially in the context of an institutional safety net that refuses to be relied upon. Indeed, fear of poor women's so-called dependency on the welfare state has led to a massively retrenched safety net following the 1996 welfare reform. The very text of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 states that one of the purposes of the reformed program is to "end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage" (H.R. 3734, 1996:9). But as political theorists Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon assert: "All programs of public provision, whether they are called welfare or not, shore up some dependencies and discourage others. Social security subverted adults' sense of responsibility for their parents, for example. Public assistance programs, by contrast, aimed to buttress the dependence of the poor on low-wage labor, of wives on husbands, of children on their parents." (Fraser and Gordon 1994: 322).

With scant opportunities to attain economic self-reliance at the bottom of the job market, poor people thus have to rely on informal support to get by (Miller-Cribbs and Farber 2008). Abandonment by the state and the market (Seefeldt 2017) paves the way for dependency on other, often equally distressed individuals (Pittman 2015).

The analysis that follows examines the repercussions of this lack of institutional support, and of the highly constrained forms of personal interdependency it creates, on the emotional lives of poor people.

Overview of the Argument

Lofty ideals of care, support, sacrifice, and unflinching loyalty held strong currency among my research participants, and were periodically reactivated by threats from 'the system' (such as incarceration or eviction) that made a rhetoric of 'us against the world' highly relevant and meaningful. Yet, predictably, loved ones often failed to meet these high expectations, especially in the medium to long run, as troubles went from sudden shocks to ongoing difficulties, and almost everyone in the network was facing some kind of adversity. Disappointment, anger and sadness ensued, sometimes breaking up the relationship for a while. But then a secondary set of expectations came in, that defined not what is *ideal*, but what is *common* in relationships. This set of expectations provided justifications when people failed or betrayed each other, and emphasized the lack of outside options for more fulfilling relationships. In this way, dissatisfaction and "drama" were normalized as the horizon of most intimate bonds, and so the relationships endured or were taken up again, albeit with some measure of mistrust, resentment or doubt buried more or less deeply. This process constitutes a case of *sociological ambivalence* because social conditions open a persistent gap between what is valued and what is realistic, even inescapable. In other words, great needs, contradictory expectations, and scarce resources create a perfect storm in which friends and family are likely to experience their closeness as both essential and smothering; give each other support at great cost but feel they receive it in an irregular and unpredictable fashion; and live with a generalized

uncertainty that can easily mutate into pointed disappointment at those who have most recently let them down.

These findings explain how a sense of loneliness and isolation (Patterson 1998) can prevail at the same time as relationships persist and support is actively given and received. They also call for the strengthening of the *institutional* safety net, which can command more resources than the family safety net to reliably meet poor people's everyday needs, and at the same time would alleviate the massive burden of material obligation weighing on their intimate relationships.

The Ideal: Love and Family in the Time of Social Abandonment

On a June afternoon in 2018, I was catching up with Victoria at the laundromat in Brooklyn where she had recently begun to work. It was a slow day and the two of us were alone for most of the afternoon. At some point in the conversation, Victoria mentioned that Barbara and Damon, Jaydore's mother and stepfather, were getting a divorce. Barbara and Damon had represented stability for the young couple. They were officially married. They had moved together to three different cities in New Jersey, looking for a place where they could work and raise their then teenage sons. Then they had bought a house and decided to put down roots in Carson Township. When Victoria and Jay needed a place to get back on their feet, they stayed with Barbara and Damon. This help didn't come without friction or conditions, and in trying to serve as an example, Barbara could be judgmental of the young couple's relationship. Victoria reminded me: "You know how Barbara would be about Jaydore and me: 'Oh, all of y'all got fake love. You not keeping it together, you not doing this, you not doing that…'" But in the end

Barbara herself got a divorce, and to Victoria that meant a brutal revision of the meaning of Damon and Barbara's marriage: "It was all a pretty lie."

Later the same day, I asked Victoria, then separated from Jaydore for over a year, why she had stayed with him for so many years, despite frequent conflicts and multiple break ups. She answered:

> I think it was because of the family thing. Like, trying to actually be one of them… perfect people that do the whole… that do the whole 'oh I had a kid and we gonna get married and stay together' and actually, like, have a family type thing… That's what I thought it was gonna be.
>
> *(06/04/2018; "…" transcribes hesitations or unfinished sentences.)*

The "pretty lie" and the "perfect people" are two sides of the same ideal, one coined in hope and the other in disappointment. They both reveal the same yearning for a family bound by love and commitment, held together by a home of their own, and stable over time.

The story told in chapter 1 shows how little of this stability there has been in Victoria's life. With Victoria exploring domestic life with two sets of relatives and five different men in less than three years, that story may seem to speak of fickleness, calculation, and lack of commitment. Instead, I propose, it can only be truly understood in light of Victoria's longing for attachment and security, and its interplay with the existential crises of repeatedly losing her ability to meet basic material needs.

Though her striving for a stable family is most apparent in her recurring bond with Jay, and to some extent his mother Barbara (both of which will be explored later in this chapter), we can discern a surprisingly strong motif of attachment and hope for commitment even in the string of short-lived domestic arrangements Victoria struck up between 2016 and 2017.

Victoria's moves from one home and one relationship to the next were often precipitated by legal and material catastrophes: in February 2016, it was the eviction from her apartment; the following October, the consequences of the arson she'd committed; and in January 2017, the strife with her sister Ceci, with whom she'd been living. In all these cases, however, the material crisis was accompanied by an emotional one: the breakdown of the housing and economic arrangements binding Victoria with a loved one (Jaydore in the first two cases, Ceci in the last one) cast doubt on the family project she had shared with them. With more readily available institutional resources, Victoria may have weathered the storm on her own and only then attempted to (re)build domestic relationships with others: after her eviction, she sought immediate relief from three different homelessness prevention programs and applied for long-term housing with a Housing First nonprofit. But none of these underfunded programs were able to rescue her from her imminent homelessness. *People* were the only available salvation.

Thus, every time she lost a household, Victoria found that she needed a new one. And everywhere she went, she hoped that her new home would bring her both a material reprieve and a new chance at love and family. The hope was two-sided, since her hosts, from her sister Ceci to her successive love interests, also promised her emotional support and commitment.

In the period of "house-hopping" following Victoria's eviction, both Kurt (who hosted her from February to April 2016) and Kareem (July-August 2016) started imagining themselves as partners to Victoria and surrogate fathers to her children. Kurt, a few weeks into his relationship with Victoria, announced that he had found a house large enough for their seven combined children, and that it would soon be ready to move into.

He also cast himself as a parenting partner and tried to prevail upon her to be less severe with her children. Despite misgivings about Kurt, his parenting advice, and the reality of the life he promised her, Victoria had also been bonding with his oldest and youngest son. (The middle one proved more resistant to her efforts.) In the end, Kurt broke up with her when she couldn't bring herself to say "I love you" back to him, despite her protestations that she wanted to stay in the relationship and see where it might go. Weeks later, Kurt's oldest son, aged 14, still called her phone occasionally, jokingly but affectionately referring to her as "Step-mommy."

The following summer, Kareem, who was an old flame, appeared to quickly fall back in love with Victoria, and to include her son Swing (who stayed with them) in his affections. At least, he started claiming ownership over them. When Victoria came back to Trenton for a weekend in late July 2016 and he couldn't immediately get a hold of her, he texted me (whom he'd seen only once): "U talk to my wife?" That same weekend, Victoria told me that Kareem had begun to see traces of himself in the face and attitude of four-year old Swing, and that he declared himself convinced that the boy was his biological son. He promised her marriage and happiness. Scalded by her experience with Kurt, Victoria didn't want to bet on that promise. During those few days back in Trenton, she actually tried to push forward an application for independent housing that had been pending since the spring: she obtained from Mina's school an attestation that she was the main contact listed on the school roster (Jaydore wasn't) and used it to strengthen her application for a Housing First program as a single parent. Still, before the end of the week, she and the children returned to Kareem in Brooklyn, until a violent fight with a female rival prompted them to leave Brooklyn in haste.

Two months later, after Victoria had burned a truck in anger at Jaydore, it is also in the language of family that Ceci couched her argument for Victoria joining her in Virginia. Victoria had just come back from her pre-indictment interview at the Mercer County Courthouse, and Ceci called for an update. Victoria put her phone on speaker and explained her situation: the next step in her case would be for the court to summon her for her indictment, which could take two to three months according to the criminal case officer she'd seen that morning. Meanwhile, she was out on her own recognizance, but she had already surrendered custody of the three children when she feared being jailed immediately. Barbara was letting her and Jay stay in her house, and had given them sixty days to "get their shit together" (securing a job, perhaps a community college inscription, and independent housing). Victoria had been grateful that Barbara had taken her back, but now the atmosphere in the house was becoming tense again, and she didn't feel supported enough. Just the week before, she had missed an interview for a housekeeping job ten miles away for lack of the $5 return bus fare, which Barbara had refused to give her. According to Victoria, Barbara had justified her refusal by saying 'I'm not your mother, I don't have to give you anything.' At this, Ceci snapped and declared, almost reproachfully: "That's what I been saying! Come stay with me out here! These people ain't your family! At the end of the day, they not gonna have your back." Ceci, whom Victoria had accused of abandoning her when she left for Virginia the year before, was now attempting to redeem herself by offering to share her newfound stability with her sister. She would house Victoria in the two-bedroom apartment she shared with her boyfriend and her son, she would help her find a job, she would mentor her to take the

USPS employee exam like she had herself – because that's what true family, the kind who "had your back," did.

Finally, Victoria's relationship with Marshall Gerry and his kin might be the most striking – and tragic – example of her quest for family and belonging, and her pursuit of it in the uncertain waters of newly formed ties. For before Marshall became Victoria's rapist and the subject of her nightmares, he had been her hope and her point of entry into a new family. With Marshall, Victoria shed her nickname "Vic" (the one Jaydore had used) and reinvented herself as "Vita." When Victoria became disenchanted with life at Ceci's, she confided in Marshall, who, after hearing of Victoria's childhood woes, promised he would care for her and protect her better than Ceci ever had. When the two sisters finally fell out in early January 2017, Victoria moved into Marshall's mother's house, which was also home to Marshall's son, his sister, his niece, and "Philly," a childhood friend[15] of Marshall's who slept on the basement couch. Victoria quickly took to calling Marshall's mother Mommy, like all the other young adults in the household did.

Mommy paid for Victoria's restitution when she was incarcerated for "holding" the money her coworker had stolen from the cash register at Sam's Club. This payment was pivotal in allowing Victoria to plead her charge down from grand larceny to a misdemeanor, and in securing her release on probation. When Victoria came out of jail in New Jersey (from Virginia she had been remanded to New Jersey, where the judge in the arson case released her again on her own recognizance), she first called Barbara to

[15] That friend happened to be named Marshall as well, so everyone called him Philly, in reference to the few years he and his family spent in Philadelphia when he was in middle school, before they returned to Northern Virginia.

arrange to visit Aleida and Swing the same night, then she called Marshall, telling him I would drive her to Virginia the very next day. But the next morning, it is Mommy she called to discuss the details of her Virginia and New Jersey cases, and Mommy who promised that she would help Victoria meet the terms of her release step by step, starting with putting her probation appointments in the family calendar and making sure she wouldn't miss any.

In the evening, when Victoria arrived at Mommy's house, Marshall and his family were waiting for her, ready to celebrate. While the children were eating an early dinner and I was getting acquainted with the rest of the family, Marshall took Victoria aside. He gave her the last envelope he had been planning to send to her jail, which contained a drawing from his son and a letter which started "Dear Vita Gerry." In the letter, Marshall was proposing. When we next found ourselves alone for a few minutes, Victoria excitedly showed me the letter. A look of wonderment and elation on her face, she said: "I didn't know he was feeling that way…" When I asked what she had answered, her expression sobered. She explained she had answered with a qualified yes. She wanted to marry Marshall, but only once she "was good." She first needed him to stick with her while she was working on finding a job, getting an apartment, and regaining custody of her three children. "If we make it to that point, then we can get married." Marshall had apparently understood her caution and promised to stand by her through the challenges ahead.

As the night wore on, Mommy and the children went to bed; then Marshall and Philly had to step out to "make a move." I found myself alone with Victoria and Marshall's sister, Jessie, talking and drinking in the laundry room. Giddy with the elation

of her recovered freedom, of Marshall's proposal, and of being returned to the fold of Mommy's house, Victoria kept interrupting Jessie, who, drunk and teary, was trying to explain the rift that had deepened between herself and Marshall while Victoria was in jail: Marshall wasn't pulling his weight at home and Jessie was buckling under the combined burdens of her job, of parenting both her daughter and Marshall's son, and of taking care of their mother, who suffered both from vascular problems and from acute back pain, and frequently needed to be ferried to various doctors' offices. Throughout Jessie's lament, Victoria kept her excited tone of voice, attempting to console her "sister-in-law" while preserving her own enthusiasm at the infinite possibilities opened by her return home.

In about an hour, Victoria interrupted Jessie four times to review the morning arrangements for getting the children to school: "My bad… so we said 6 for tomorrow, right? Imma put my alarm on so I can get up and get them ready." She may have been trying to send us all to bed in preparation for an early start, but at the same time she became voluble again as soon as the conversation turned to her relationship with the children. When Jessie went to the bathroom, Victoria turned to me and explained that the kids loved it when she took them to school, adding in a confidential tone that once she even stopped at the corner store to buy them candy, making them promise not to tell their parents or their grandmother. Victoria's interjections, therefore, rather seemed like reminders of her commitment to becoming a pillar of the Gerry household again, as well as attempts to present herself as a source of hope for Jessie.

As Jessie continued to enumerate her worries, she revealed that she was afraid of being pregnant and didn't see how she could manage another child. She broke into tears.

Victoria tried to appease Jessie by saying that it was still too early to tell, but also by promising that she was going to help, as well as nudge Marshall to come more fully into his own as a father and a son. Jessie expressed skepticism regarding Marshall's ability to change, and Victoria replied: "You tell it like it is and I love you for that but what I'm trying to say is… I'm here now." Turning to me, Victoria explained: "I love being a part of this family, but what I love is… when I'm here they also more like a family."

In the end, the dream of making family with the Gerrys collapsed rapidly. Less than a month later, Marshall decided that, if Victoria was serious about starting a new life, she shouldn't mind handing him control over her phone and communications, just so he could make sure that no bad influences from the past would come to disturb their future. Victoria left, and went to knock on Ceci's door again.

This brief exploration of the motif of love and commitment in Victoria's various short-lived relationships serves to show that, like Swidler's (2001) middle-class interviewees, poor people in Victoria's network yearn both for the utopia of romance (Illouz 1997) and for a solid partnership in daily life.[16] The key difference is that the poor long for love and partnership amid the constant crisis of insecure livelihoods, which makes the need for support more pressing and its fulfillment more arduous. For Victoria,

[16] Elijah Anderson, in his influential *Code of the Street*, describes "the mating game" between young men and women as one in which the two parties pursue different goals: "The girls have a dream, the boys a desire. The girls dream of being carried off by a Prince Charming who will love them, provide for them, and give them a family. The boys often desire either sex without commitment or babies without responsibility for them" (Anderson 1999: 149). In contrast to this picture, the men in Victoria's life seemed invested in the dream of being "a Prince Charming" and showed it by opening their homes to her as well as encouraging her bonding with their kin. Perhaps because they were older than the young men Anderson describes, and in the case of Kurt and Marshall, already had a responsibility for children, they seem less interested in playing a game of sexual prowess than in securing an image of themselves as head of a patriarchal household under their control, despite their lack of financial resources for fulfilling the role along traditional lines.

this meant throwing herself repeatedly into new family projects, which either turned short, or, in the case of Marshall, turned against her with tragic consequences.

In Victoria's longer-lived relationships with Jaydore and with Barbara, this resulted in a back and forth between moments of hope and solidarity on the one hand, and moments of disappointment, discord and perceived abandonment on the other hand. Each return of the pendulum carried with it the weight of past grievances and failed attempts at something better.

Trapped in Circles

Doing the family thing: Victoria and Jaydore

Victoria and Jay's relationship, with which we opened this chapter, offers the best illustration of these recurring cycles, where declarations of commitment stoke hope, failure to live up to the ideal breeds disappointment, the relationship breaks down, but continued material pressures and emotional needs bring people back together. In the couple's relationship, these cycles had a highly constrained quality, as material hardship kept returning Victoria to her relationship with Jaydore and his extended family. But they also had a romantic and epic flavor, in which commitment was reactivated by external harms or by extreme gestures, which made a mythology of "us against the world" highly relevant.

A romantic mythology

On January 20, 2016, Victoria and I returned, defeated, from visiting a homelessness prevention program. Four months prior, Victoria had been "sanctioned" by Work First New Jersey, the state welfare program, for missing an appointment with her case worker. She had protested the decision, explaining that she had attempted to

reschedule her appointment. When the next month she received her full cash benefits and food stamps, she believed that she'd been heard and that her sanction had been lifted. Unbeknownst to her, it was the rental assistance attached to her TANF case that had been cut following sanctions. Rental assistance went directly to the landlord, and according to Victoria, he only let her know in December, when she had accumulated three months of back rent. Homelessness prevention programs specialized in covering back rent, but none had a budget that would allow them to cover $2,700 for a single client. Unless the landlord agreed to a payment plan, the family would be evicted. Furthermore, the program employee had told Victoria that they wouldn't be able to help with putting down a deposit on a new rental, because they only did so for clients who stood a chance of stabilizing in their new place, that is, of shouldering the subsequent rent on their own. Victoria's only official income being the $565 of her TANF assistance (once it would be reinstated), she was not in that category of clients.

In that moment of despair, Jay shone with unabated hope and reassurance. Perhaps he was encouraged by the recent positive outcome of their investigation by the office of child protection and permanency (CPP). In early January, the home visitor had concluded that the household provided adequately for the three children. She had ordered urine testing for both Victoria and Jay, and they had both come back clean (Jay with the help of Niacin, a vitamin supposed to "flush" one's system, when taken in a high enough dosage.) Jay believed they were protected and credited Emily, Victoria's mother, who had passed away in August.

While Victoria was nervously smoking cigarette upon cigarette at the dining room window, he offered to make pastelitos, his only culinary specialty, so she wouldn't have

to take care of dinner. While preparing his dough in the adjacent kitchen, Jay exhorted Victoria, almost reproachfully: "Stop worrying! Everything gonna be ok!" "How?" retorted Victoria. "How is shit gonna be okay, Jaydore?" In tears, she reminded him that he and the children could fall back on his mother's house, whereas Barbara had made it clear that Victoria was no longer welcome at her place. Jay replied that he would take care of everything: if the landlord agreed to a payment plan, he would cover the monthly installments. If they were evicted and Victoria couldn't find somewhere to stay, he would rent a room for her. More importantly, he would start saving, and they would soon be able to rent another apartment for their whole family.

Jay's promises were intermingled with some reproach, as he reminded Victoria, several times during the conversation, that she should have checked on her benefits instead of assuming that the sanction announced by the welfare officer had been lifted, and more generally, she should have not relied on welfare but continued to work regularly like she had when they first moved to New Jersey. But he also admitted to his share of responsibility: lulled by the comfort of Victoria's benefits paying for rent and much of the household's food, he'd been "having [his] fun," by which he meant that he had been spending the paychecks from his off-the-books work as a mover without saving or contributing much to the household. But that was all about to change now. He would be responsible, and he would soon reunite his family under one roof.

The promised change would have represented a dramatic departure from the usual pattern. Previously, Jay had contributed so little that on Aleida's birthday in November, Victoria had only managed to scrape two dollars together, just enough to buy cake mix and frosting at the dollar store. For most of the fall, Swing had had no coat, and when Jay

provided one, it was used and seemed to come from a charitable collection bin. RJ, a friend of of Jay's who stayed with the family for a few weeks, intimated that Jay wasn't always at work when he was supposed to be, and that some of his late night or weekend gigs were actually spent in bars and clubs. But never mind, now that disaster had struck and he was aware of the stakes, Jay would become the provider he was meant to be.

He would also be a better romantic partner. One of Victoria's recurring complaints was Jay's lack of romantic attention for her in their daily life. He spoke of the steakhouse he'd been to dinner with coworkers from the moving company, but he never took her out. In front of me, he bemoaned the constraints of having to come back straight home "to the wife and kids" after work. Victoria complained that they didn't have much sex; he called her a nymphomaniac. In contrast to this picture of general dissatisfaction, both Victoria and Jay boasted of intense erotic play, in those January and February days between the family's CPP investigation and their eviction. On the Saturday after pastelitos night, they put instrumental music on and rapped together, something that had brought them together since they met as teenagers, but which they hadn't done since Victoria's birthday two months prior. Moving to the beat, they let the vibrations of the music drown out their worries for a few hours. In the middle of the storm, Victoria and Jay were finding each other again, body and soul. Solidarity on the cusp of disaster was redeeming months of daily disappointments, at least for the time being.

On January 23, Victoria posted a defiant declaration of love and commitment on Facebook:

> Hey facebook this is jays wife victoria hackin this. Chillin wit my baby j. enjoying rapping killing these beats together. I love u n[and] no matter what happens u all I got left so ima be here fuck all them fake girls n hoes. I got your back baby since we was 16 n I aint going no where. Together

> for ever baby till the end. Yolo. I love u. me n u agains the world. Lets sex this life n make it bust till we hit the top. Only a real queen can handel a real king. Kisses. Let's do this n make our dreams come true and yea we go threw [through] it but who doesn't. we all we know. Lets get it. I bus my gun for my nigga im his only hitter u heard. U don't like it come see me. Real talk. You heard. We go threw it but who perfect huh no one. We gonna shine like we said when we was 16 live our lives like we planned n kill it. Lights camera action. Lmao enough said. Jay n V aka bonnie n clyde. Since we signed that paper on the dotted line.
>
> p.s. thank u for everything. U my nigga n just like u wont allow no one to ever take your place I won't allow no one to take mine. We each other baby n like u said Im your ryder n that ima stay. Lol fuck all the haters. Its just me n my king. Back to spitting these bars wit my babe gn [good night].

Jay responded in the same spirit, though rather more laconically, by posting a picture of himself, shirtless, showing off the tattooed portrait of Victoria which took up the left side of his chest. He captioned it: "us against the world. #realniggashit" (01/27/2016).

These Facebook posts are significant not only because of their timing, but because they explicitly summarize the romantic mythology that Victoria and Jay constructed for themselves. Historian John Gillis (1996) argues that, while all families orient themselves to mythical images of *the* family, each modern family also produces their own specific mythology and identity, from a selective weaving of biography with broadly available cultural materials. Victoria and Jay's mythology, as illustrated here, was organized around the idea of the "ride-or-die" partner, the two dominant faces of which were the husband/wife on the one hand ("since we signed on that dotted line") and the "rider" or "hitter" on the other hand: the person you raise your children with and the one who fights the world with you by any means necessary. Because raising children in poverty is a struggle, the figure of the domestic partner could, on occasion, be translated

into that of the fellow fighter. But by and large, the latter only showed up in times of acute crisis, to sweep under the rug the everyday failings of the former. In the face of eviction, Victoria and Jay reinvented themselves as Bonnie and Clyde, and attempted to forget the discord at the root of their domestic relationship.

An earlier cycle

January 2016 wasn't the first time that a dramatic event had rekindled their relationship. In April of the previous year, Jay's incarceration had seen Victoria recommit to him, despite weeks spent fighting and threatening to break up over suspicions of infidelity, which culminated in a brutal fight and a 911 domestic violence call.

Jay had been on the run because of unpaid traffic fines and missed court dates, fearing that letting himself be arrested in New Jersey would endanger his three-year probation in New York on a gun charge. On the day he finally surrendered to the police, I found Victoria prostrate on their bed. In anticipation of the surrender, the children had been sent to Barbara and Damon's. Since getting up to see Jay off as he walked to the police car, Victoria hadn't moved. "I feel like it was all for nothing. Everything we been through… And now we not even gonna be together." She might have wanted to break up with Jay a couple of weeks earlier, but she didn't want him torn away from her. In that moment, she redefined the trouble of the past weeks and months as part of their trying to make it work. On Facebook, she posted: "When that time comes it hits u the most ...I'm so hurt but at the end its the best decision. reality sat in. till I see u again. I love you." (04/24/2015)

A few days later, strapped for cash as the month stretched to its end, she decided to go to New York for three days, to take a few stripping gigs at the club where she had danced as a teenager. She made $600 and put half on Jaydore's commissary.

But, in April 2015 like in January 2016, these surges of commitment were followed by disappointment. In 2015, after Jay's release, all the tensions of daily life came back: Jay disappeared for entire evenings and sometimes a few days in a row, claiming that he was on moving jobs out of state but showing no money for it. Victoria felt trapped at home, especially since she had lost her childcare subsidy the previous March, when she had been dismissed from a welfare-to-work program for poor attendance. She could get the subsidy back if she found a job, but to go to job interviews she needed to find someone to watch four- and three-year-old Aleida and Swing. Jay, who was giving his own work priority, rarely accepted to do so during the day. At the same time, given his backbreaking job and Victoria's joblessness, he found it normal to do little to no housework. Victoria's daily achievement was to cook for her family of five and to clean after her three children. Jaydore, though he could get access to Barbara's car and her washing machine, dragged his feet to do laundry when he got a day off. (Mina's lack of clean school uniforms, which led her to go to school with stains on a few occasions, and more often in her regular clothes, may have been part of what led a teacher to contact CPP at the end of 2015.)

Victoria found the situation frustrating in the extreme. She was demoralized and had little energy to pursue her job search, which further diminished her standing in Jay's eyes. In between cooking and cleaning, she visited with neighbors or smoked weed at the window of the dining room, while Aleida and Swing played or watched TV in the living

room. One of her recurring expressions, when speaking about her relationship with Jay, was that he was "shitting on her."

She attempted to kick him out a few times, but after a few days spent at his mother's, he kept coming back. And she kept taking him back: some access to him and his resources was better than none. He paid for most of their alcohol and weed consumption; he knew how to do Aleida's tightly curled hair into nice twists; he played with the children, teaching them to do push-ups and shoot hoops; and he occasionally made gifts, like the white and navy pair of AirJordans she cherished. Furthermore, he had family in the Trenton area, whereas she didn't (even less after her mother died in August 2015 and her sister moved from New York to Virginia in September).

Perhaps most importantly, every time she had tried to leave and take up with another man, he had fought for her. Most recently, in June 2015, she had started "messing with" Micah, a friend of a friend. Jay had been released from Rikers and landed at his aunt Des's in New York. Victoria had heard from Sonia, one of Des's teenage twins, that Jay had been to see Shantelle, an ex-girlfriend from New York. After a few days in New York, however, Jay came back to Trenton. When she refused to let him move back in, he came back every night, professing her love and threatening Micah, much like he had threatened Ben Quintana in 2012. Micah left and Victoria took Jay back. She, who had felt thoroughly abandoned by her mother and her sister and had to be "her own adult" from age 13, had found someone who would claim her, again and again. After all, they had come to New Jersey to be a family together.

Ground down by reality

This is the yearning that the family's eviction reactivated in January 2016. Despite Jaydore's lofty promises, however, the same dynamics that had plagued their daily life before the eviction resurfaced afterwards, only exacerbated by Victoria's homelessness.

When the time came to vacate the Island apartment, Victoria had arranged to stay with Monique, which saved Jay the trouble of finding her an affordable room in town. He bought her a twin air mattress so she could sleep on Monique's living-room floor, the couch being already claimed by Monique's godmother Stacy. The floorspace itself was shared with Kay, Stacy's teenage daughter. As we saw in chapter 1, this arrangement proved unstable. To escape the stifling conditions at Monique's, Victoria began to spend some nights at Kurt's, a man she had just met in the employment program she had been assigned to upon reopening her TANF case. Jay was jealous, but she assured him that nothing was going on with Kurt; she just couldn't take sleeping on Monique's overcrowded floor every night. If Jay found a room for her like he had promised, she wouldn't have to stay with either Kurt or Monique. Jaydore kept promising that he was taking care of it, but nothing came. He blamed his lack of disposable income on Barbara demanding that he pay $100/week in rent and that he shoulder children's clothing and school-related expenses. (Food came from Victoria's food stamps.) That didn't quite square with the long hours he worked at $16/hour and the largesse of moving tips he had previously boasted about, but Victoria couldn't check how much cash entered his pocket and how it left.

So, as she sensed Kurt's interest in her, Victoria reasoned that Jay had been failing her first. As usual, she couldn't count on him. Kurt was keeping her company at

the employment program they were both attending, bantering away long afternoons spent filling out high school level math packets she didn't see the use of. Kurt's attention was flattering. And Kurt was providing her with a roof overhead. She referred to Jay as "her babyfather" and didn't correct Kurt when he referred to him as "your ex."

In addition, childcare continued to be an issue between Victoria and Jay. Barbara and Damon's house being in Carson and not Trenton, Mina was off the route for her school bus. Aleida and Swing's daycare center had a more flexible bus itinerary, and was also within walking distance of Barbara and Damon's. But it opened only at 7:00, and Barbara and Damon both left at 6am every morning. On the not infrequent days when Jay had a 6am call as well, there was no-one to watch the children for an hour, or to take Mina to school. Kurt also provided the solution to that quandary: he had a car, and in his desire to please Victoria, he let her use it everyday, provided she was back in time for them to go to the job program. (His own children were on their school bus route.) Victoria also used the car to pick up the children from school and daycare, and she spent the afternoon with them at Kurt's, where they played with Kurt's own children. Soon, it made sense for them to spend the night there as well, on foam mattresses unfolded on the living room floor. This way, no-one had to get up at 5:30 and drive across town to watch them before they went to school. Despite his jealousy, Jay got used to the arrangement with Kurt. Most of the time, Victoria took care of ferrying the children across town. On one occasion, Jay, driven by a friend, came by to drop off a bag of the children's belongings. The weather was mild and Kurt was outside, playing ball with his sons and Victoria's children. When Jay pulled over, Victoria tensed next to me. She told me afterward that she feared Jay would start "talking shit" to Kurt, and perhaps try to start a

fight. Perhaps because Kurt was just as broad and much taller than him, perhaps because the children were present, or perhaps because Jay knew that this arrangement was the only one available, he did nothing of the sort. He gave Kurt a brief nod from afar, and handed the bag of clothes to Victoria, who had walked up to him. Then he left.

After Kurt's unreciprocated declaration of love, and his asking Victoria to leave, the children continued to follow her where she went, in increasingly uncomfortable conditions. Sexual jealousy was no longer at stake, but Victoria's resentment toward Jay kept mounting. At Ms. Jones, Victoria and the three children shared a narrow living-room with Rob, Ms. Jones' adult son. Mina, then in first-grade, stopped doing her homework because Ms. Jones overflowing kitchen table offered little space to write, and because Victoria, overtaxed, didn't find it in her to give Mina much guidance. Also, when Jay failed to bring over clean clothes, Victoria refused to send Mina to school wearing dirty ones.

One afternoon, she and I took Aleida and Swing to their annual medical exam and immunization. The appointment was at 1:30pm and she feared that, if we found ourselves waiting at the health center, we wouldn't be able to pick up Mina from school in time. She called Jay, who had the afternoon off. He protested that he was busy and didn't have transportation to go to Mina's school. She hung up while he was still talking and concluded, her voice hard with rancor: "He's not gonna do shit, as usual."

In that already tense context, the last straw for Victoria, in July 2016, was discovering that Jay had been seeing escorts. After she'd been through the uncertainty of hopping between the houses of friends and near-strangers, after she'd been sexually assaulted by Rob Jones, returning to live with him only gave her proof of his infidelity, in

the form of text messages caught on his phone. He protested that he had started only after he'd become convinced that something was going on between her and Kurt. She refused that excuse, because she blamed him in part for her predicament with Kurt, and because she was persuaded that he'd been unfaithful all along. He'd been too shifty for too long.

She was outraged by the sexual betrayal, because she saw herself as the one intent on maintaining sexual passion between them. Even in those past months of forced separation, she'd been game for furtive encounters when Barbara and Damon were out and the children were in daycare. Furthermore, she was sexually adventurous ("I'll try everything at least once! I'd do cartwheels on his dick if he wanted that") and bisexual ("if he wanted to fuck a bitch, we could have fucked her together and sent her on her way").

She was hurt by the financial betrayal, too: "Everytime I ask him for money for me or the kids, he say no, and now he gonna spend $100, $180 on some ugly bitch?" Victoria had always known that a significant share of Jay's income went to drugs, and though she always denied it in front of me, I suspect she sometimes partook in their consumption. (She was adamant that she never wanted to go back to cocaine, and that was one of the many ways in which he was trying to drag her back into past habits. But Jay also liked "popping pills" and Victoria, on celebratory occasions, had sometimes seemed high on more than weed.) But the escorts were a bridge too far.

The only problem was: Victoria was stuck. Barbara and Damon's place was by far the most stable housing she had experienced since February. She had begun to apply for a Housing First program, but she hadn't yet been able to assemble all the requisite documents. After Monique had refused to host her again in April, she had fallen out with

her. In a texting fight while she was still living at Ms. Jones, Monique had stripped her of the title of godmother of her children, and Victoria had done the same in response.

In those circumstances, she tried to escape to New York, where she still had family and friends. At first she meant it as a vacation, a few days' break to stop her from "losing it." Given the enthusiasm of Kareem, one of her old flames, she began to entertain the idea of returning to New York in earnest, until a fight with a rival hustler led her to leave Brooklyn in haste.

Thus, when Victoria returned to Trenton again, after six months of residential instability and several failed attempts at finding new possibilities in new households, Jaydore appeared once again as her only option for stable housing and some kind of family life with their children. Finding out that Jay maintained a relationship with Shantelle, an ex-girlfriend and rival from their time in the Bronx, proved to be one humiliation too many. After she burned the truck at the moving company where Jay worked, she said that Jay had been "slowly choking the life out of [her]," and so she'd wanted "to take his life away."

A final cycle

While Victoria's arson may have seemed calculated to burn her relationship with Jay to the ground once and for all, it instead had the effect of rekindling it, albeit only briefly. Though a moment of supreme crisis, the attack had a cathartic effect on the couple. Jay was shocked by Victoria's aggression, and immediately felt its repercussions when he was fired on the spot by Lee, his boss at the moving company. He also realized that the legal consequences of Victoria's act would change the fabric of their family. But

at the same time, the attack got his attention. Having himself resorted to violence in the past, when he wanted to reconquer her, he understood its language. He understood that the fire was a measure of the pain he'd inflicted on her with his philandering, and therefore a measure of her love for him. In the following days, he appeared chastened, protesting the extreme nature of the action she'd taken but not his role in bringing it about. He let her say that he'd brought this on himself, and he let her gloat in public about how small and terrified she'd made him feel. He only averted his eyes and shook his head when, in front of me, she told him: "Even the guys [at the moving company] are telling you: V. is a G[angster], you shouldn't have done her like that!"

Moreover, faced with the looming threat of Victoria's arrest for arson, the couple reverted to the mode of "us against the world." While days before their relationship had seemed on life support, ground down by economic hardship, domestic inequality, physical separation, and infidelity, the external threat from an unfeeling penal system reawakened their passion. For Jay, there was fear in that passion, for Victoria, a new kind of power. Jay couldn't imagine raising their children without her, and was terrified of what would happen next. "What did she do to us?" he asked me after the police car took her away. Jay's fear fed Victoria's sense of renewed power: she had shown him where her boundaries were, and now he felt sorry and realized how important she was to his life.

When the judge immediately released Victoria on her own recognizance, Jay was elated, and ready to make family again. This moment of reconciliation and recommitment, however, proved all too fleeting.

First, unsurprisingly, Jay's chastened stance and renewed sense of attachment weren't devoid of anger and humiliation. The week following the arson, after Victoria

had been released on her recognizance and Jay had started breathing again, the three of us were in my car. Victoria, in the front seat was reliving once again the distress she had wrought upon Jay. According to her sister Ceci, Jay had called her immediately after the arson, crying on the phone that Victoria had done something crazy, "with boogers down his face." That last, humiliating detail, amused Victoria more than any other. In the back seat, Jay mumbled pitifully: "How she know there was boogers? It was on the phone!" Victoria replied cheerfully: "She heard it. You was *crying*, my nigga!" Jay gave a tense, ironic chuckle, and put his hand on Victoria's shoulder, as if in peace. Then he increased the pressure in his hand, squeezing her shoulder into the seat until she yelled: "Stop, Jaydore! You really don't know when to stop playin'!"

Furthermore, within two weeks of moving back in together at Barbara and Damon's, Victoria and Jay found themselves trapped in the same arguments over lack of money and childcare, now compounded by the fact that they were both unemployed and that Barbara had issued them an ultimatum upon allowing them back into her house: they had sixty days to turn things around. Victoria applied for jobs, but without transport to nearby towns or any money to her name, she still had difficulty going to interviews. She was summoned to a three-month review by her TANF caseworker and, with her last paystub dating back to April, she knew that she would likely be sanctioned again. Finally, after the immediate relief of her release, the reality set in that she was going to face a potentially lengthy legal process, at the end of which there would be serious consequences. She had succeeded in hurting Jaydore, but she had hurt herself, and her children, in the process. Her moment of power had come and gone, and now she was no longer sure it had been worth it.

Soon, Victoria was back to complaining about a lack of romance on Jaydore's part. One evening, she sat morosely on the couch, pondering whether she should try to create fake paystubs to avert her next loss of cash assistance. On the nearby armchair, a female friend of hers and a male friend of Jay's were nuzzling and kissing. Meanwhile, instead of sitting on the couch with her, Jay was standing, impatient, and asking whether we should go out to get some groceries for dinner. Victoria shook her head and, turning to me but loudly enough for everyone to hear, she complained that her female friend was getting more attention from a casual hook-up she'd met only two days ago, than she was getting from Jay.

Victoria's reconciliation with Barbara and Damon also proved short-lived. In late September 2016, after Barbara and Damon returned earlier than expected from a trip with their grandchildren, and discovered that Victoria and Jay had been hosting friends in their absence (the same two who were kissing with abandon), Barbara decided to kick them both to the curb.

Now jointly homeless, the couple endeavored in vain to find a new accommodation that would allow them to remain together. At first, Victoria and Jay had entertained the hope that they could find shelter housing together in the Trenton area. But the two main emergency shelters in the area were for unaccompanied youth or single adults. A third program (the one Victoria had used in 2014) focused on families with children and operated at full capacity. They went to the Board of Social Services, hoping to have Jay added to Victoria's TANF case and to put in a new request for emergency housing assistance. But, without his name on the children's certificate or a court order of custody, Jay didn't have a demonstrable relationship to Victoria and their children.

Furthermore, Victoria got confirmation that she was about to be sanctioned again, which barred her from reapplying to rental assistance. Discouraged, the young couple took Aleida and Swing to New York, and attempted to regroup at Aunt Des's place. Before ten days had elapsed, however, one of them had robbed Jay's cousins (Aunt Des's adult children) of a TV and a tablet, and they were persona non grata in that part of the family as well. (Victoria says Jay stole the goods to buy drugs; Jay says Victoria did, to prepare her escape to Virginia.).

Eventually, running out of options and emotionally drained by the turmoil of her life with Jay, Victoria accepted her sister Ceci's invitation for her and Swing to come and live with her in Virginia (Aleida would remain in Trenton). In October 2016, she said farewell to Trenton and her life with Jaydore -- on this occasion, presumably, for the final time. Their tumultuous relationship of eight years was at an end.

Barbara and the Burdens of Kinship Care

Following Victoria and Jaydore from 2015 to 2016 has showed how a combination of romantic yearnings and material hardship trapped Victoria in a toxic, yet essential partnership with the father of her children, until it exploded under the weight of accumulated resentments and humiliations. Taking the perspective of Jaydore's mother, Barbara, over the years 2016 to 2018, illustrates a similar kind of trap, born out of slightly different circumstances: there, the burden of caring for grandchildren with insufficient economic and institutional resources slowly impoverishes and isolates the caregiver, until she, too, finds herself longing for the support of family members she had previously seen as a drain.

Resisting Kinscription

Barbara, at least from 2013 when Jay and Victoria moved to New Jersey, had been their back-up support: she regularly took the children overnight or on the weekend, and she sometimes drove them to New York to see their cousins. She and Damon had posted bail for Jaydore, and they had housed the whole family for months, in 2013-2014 and again in 2016. Thus, she had provided Vic and Jay with active and significant assistance. Nevertheless, she had always insisted that they should keep their primary responsibilities toward the children. She was there to help them get on their feet, not to substitute for them. After Victoria and Jay's eviction, she and Damon let Jay and the children stay with them,[17] but they charged Jay rent and they refused to alter their work schedules to help with childcare and transportation. The same rules were repeated after the arson the following fall: "Even if I got custody officially, don't mean I got to do everything," Barbara told the young couple. She was offering a roof, but since it turned out that Victoria and Jay were both free (Jay cleared of all charges and Victoria released on her own recognizance), there was no reason why they shouldn't parent their own children. Furthermore, her hospitality would have limits: they had sixty days to find jobs and independent housing.

Sixty days was a short ultimatum, probably unrealistically so given the constraints of the local job and housing markets, as well as the administrative steps involved in applying for rental assistance. But Barbara's arrangement with Victoria and Jay ended even before that short period elapsed. Three weeks in, Barbara and Damon took their

[17] Recall from chapter 1 that Barbara and Damon weren't on speaking terms with Victoria at the time of the eviction. Victoria initially thought it was because she had had words with Barbara, a few weeks before, when the latter had complained that she wasn't seeing enough of her grandchildren. In fact, Barbara and Damon thought that Victoria had stolen Damon's phone as a reprisal for the argument. When Victoria heard that accusation, she protested that Jay had stolen and resold the phone to buy drugs, but Barbara didn't believe her.

grandchildren Aleida and Swing on a long-planned, long-saved-up-for cruise in the Caribbean. When they returned a week later (but a day earlier than they'd mistakenly announced), they found the young couple sharing the living-room with two friends, all of them asleep on the couch and the floor. To Victoria and Jay, it was nothing wrong, a minor transgression which harmed no-one and all traces of which would have been gone by the next day. To Barbara, it was proof of irresponsibility, and an act of disrespect toward her and the home she had once again welcomed them into. She kicked them out on the spot.

To Victoria and Jay, the conditions for staying with Barbara appeared as both justified and frustrating. Falling back on Barbara and Damon's house gave them some security, and they knew they should feel grateful for it. They also wanted to be recognized as able to take care of their own children, and yearned, too, for the independence Barbara outlined as a goal for them. Still, confronted with Barbara's reminders that childcare and transportation were their issues to solve, and that they were expected to contribute to the household's finances, Victoria and Jay felt constrained and surveilled more than supported. They were not catching a real break.

Then, when Barbara barred them from her house in late September, Victoria felt "pissed off," but Jay felt a betrayal and abandon that dredged up past wounds. After they'd spent a few days with the children in a motel room paid for by cashing out some of Victoria's food stamps, I was driving the four of them back to drop the children off at Barbara's. In the quiet car, Jay was fuming and suddenly burst out: "That bitch!" I asked if he was talking about his mother and he exclaimed: "Yeeeeeah! I mean, how could she do this to us? She knows we don't got no money right now. And it's fucking raining…

She complaining we had company, so what?" He sucked his teeth. "And she wanna tell us about raising our kids and what we gotta do… but she wasn't there for me. At all. She didn't raise me." I asked what he meant, and Victoria replied for him: "His grandmother raised him."

From Barbara's perspective, things looked quite different. She was resisting what Stack and Burton (1993) call "kinscription," or the assignment of certain family members to specific tasks in the multigenerational reproduction of the family – in the case of many grandmothers in poor black families, kinscription means being conscripted to the role of primary caregiver to their grandchildren (Anderson 1999, Furstenberg 2007). Barbara wanted to write another script, in which she was there for her grandchildren, but her primary task was still to finish raising Jaydore, and in some measure Victoria, so they would become responsible, independent parents. She was also trying to preserve the possibility of achieving an almost stable, lower-middle-class existence through her and Damon's hard work. To pay the mortgage on their three-bedroom house with a backyard, and the monthly installments on both their cars, Barbara and Damon each worked two jobs, one full-time and one per diem. Both in their late forties, they rose each weekday at 6am and came back most nights at 11pm. They worked Saturdays, too. In that demanding schedule and with these tight finances, there was little room for adjustment – for missing shifts to pick up the children from school, for four new mouths to feed if Jay didn't contribute cash and Victoria food stamps, or for uninvited guests who sprawled across the living-room on a weekday.

Ousting Victoria and Jay after their transgression, however, may have only accelerated the collapse of Barbara and Damon's tenuous balance, for it propelled Jay

into a bender in New York and Victoria into a more permanent move to Northern Virginia, where her sister Ceci awaited her.

When Victoria left, Barbara thought this might be a chance for Jay to escape a deleterious relationship, and for Aleida to find more stability, even if it came at the cost of loneliness (Victoria had taken Swing with her to Virginia). She spoke of Victoria in those words: "Lie, cheat, steal… People like that… You help, you help, but at some point, you can't no more. I've known Victoria since she was young and I *tried* to help… Uh-uh, I'm done. Lie, cheat, steal… [Sigh] It's just a drain." Although she would later change her assessment of both Victoria and Jaydore, at that time, Barbara was still convinced that Victoria was the one who had stolen her nephew's tablet, like she was the one who kept reintroducing Jay to the pleasures of cocaine and ecstasy. Distance from her was heartbreaking to Aleida, but it might be good for everyone in the longer run.

Victoria's departure, however, also meant that Barbara's finances and work schedule would have to change to accommodate Aleida. Jay was working six days a week as a temp at the local Amazon warehouse and had little control over his schedule. As we saw in the previous section, Victoria had been the one in charge of childcare and transportation, even during the months immediately following her eviction, when she was not welcome to stay at Barbara's with the rest of the family but was instead sleeping on a string of couches and air mattresses in the overcrowded apartments of various acquaintances. When Victoria was with Kurt and he lent her his car, she had gotten up at 5:30 and driven to Barbara's, where she would watch the children from 6am, when Jay, Barbara and Damon would all leave for work, until it was time to take them to school and daycare. When Victoria was staying at Smooth's and then at Ms. Jones', the children

often ended up spending the night with her, arrayed top-to-tail on the living-room floor, and the next day the younger two often spent the day with her, because she couldn't transport them to their day care, across town. Being assigned as the children's primary caregiver, Victoria had regularly been missing job interviews and losing temp gigs, which in turn made her a less reliable breadwinner than Jay and his parents, and reinforced her assignment to the childrearing role. Now that Victoria was gone, someone had to pick up the slack. Barbara had to pay for early-hours childcare for Aleida, and she could take fewer evening shifts at the homeless shelter where she worked on a per-diem basis.

More changes were needed when Victoria's housing situation in Virginia worsened, and five-year old Swing came back to live in New Jersey. At first, Swing stayed with Jaydore in a rooming house, but due to Jaydore's hours and commute to the warehouse, that arrangement quickly became unsustainable. Jay and Swing moved back to Barbara and Damon's. To make matters more complicated, Swing was considered a "difficult child." In fact, he'd soon be diagnosed with ADHD, and when he began school the following fall, labeled as "special-needs" due to his behavioral problems.[18] Swing got kicked out of daycare and after-hours programs. Babysitters quit. Accommodating his needs – constantly finding new and more expensive childcare, racing home after work so as not to overtax the babysitter – became a massive drain on the finances and the energy of Jay, Barbara, and Damon. In the spring of 2017, in reference to Victoria just being released from jail on probation, Jay remarked that he felt he and his parents were in jail,

[18] Chapter 3, which discusses the promises and pitfalls of mental health interventions for the poor, explores the early career of Swing as an impossible child, and its practical consequences on Swing's caregivers.

too – locked up between long work hours and the demands of raising two young children, with no income to spare.

In March 2018, the pressure became unbearable and the household exploded: Jay stole all the cash he could find and left, to resurface only five weeks later, in rehab. In shock, Barbara drove to New York to drop off the children with Victoria, who by then had returned from Virginia and was staying in her aunt Clarissa's living room. Barbara took a week off to recover from what Victoria described as a "mental breakdown." When Barbara came back home, she found out that her husband Damon, who had been increasingly unhappy about the strictures of their responsibility to Jay and the children, had been misspending his paychecks, and endangering their mortgage. With their relationship already frayed, Barbara decided to file for divorce. The house wasn't being repossessed yet, and she left Damon to attempt to keep it, in partnership with his son Junior, who was stably employed as an EMT. Even if they managed to keep the house for a while longer, Barbara didn't expect to see any money from it. She moved into a compact two-bedroom apartment with the children.

Despite her resistance, Barbara had become the primary – practically the only – caregiver to Aleida and Swing. Over the following months, Jay left and returned many times, got kicked out of three rehabs, did one short stint in jail, and was briefly hospitalized after a "breakdown" (Barbara's word) of his own. When he was home, he continued to work hard, sometimes in temping positions at Amazon or with one of its contractors, and sometimes with Lee, his old boss at the moving company, who had forgiven him once he'd been suitably convinced that Jay and Victoria were separated. But Barbara said that she saw nothing of his paychecks, as if the wind immediately blew them

away every other Friday. She let him stay on her couch for free, because it was good for Aleida and Swing to see their father, and because she was hoping that this would help him stabilize. But because, as she said, he was "struggling with his demons," she expected no predictable help from him, financially or logistically. She relabeled herself a mother of three.[19]

On a fall night in 2018, after the children had fallen asleep, Barbara summarized her situation with three words: "I'm totaled." Pulling on one cigarette after the other, she enumerated the dimensions of her ruin: "I'm drained… financially, mentally, spiritually and, now, almost emotionally. (…) I'm supposed to be totally sane [by comparison with Victoria and Jay]. Well, even me, this is driving me nearly *in*sane!" She was taking stock of her situation in the context of a new setback with Swing's childcare arrangements. He had had to change schools again, to one which offered better in-house therapy and management of his medication but had no after-school program. Because of his special-needs label, few independent after-school programs would accept him. Barbara had found one in a nearby town, but because it was outside the school district, the school bus wouldn't take Swing there. She needed to find a babysitter who would pick up Swing every day at 3pm and drive him to the after-school program. In addition, the new program maxed out the childcare allowance she received from the state, which meant a higher copay both on early-hours and after-school childcare. Two untapped institutional resources remained: suing Jaydore for child support, and applying for the New Jersey Kinship Care Subsidy program, which grants up to $250 a month to family members

[19] In June 2018, in the course of commenting on the stress-reducing benefits of divorce, she told me: "I tell myself… I got three kids now. Him [Jay, standing nearby] and the little ones. So I don't need no more stress."

raising children of relatives. But both required subjecting Jaydore to a paternity test, and Barbara feared the consequences. If the test didn't return the expected result, she could always sue Ben Quintana for child support, but… "I would break my own heart in the process."

Black, low-income custodial grandmothers such as Barbara are abundantly portrayed in the sociological literature on poverty and the family. Elijah Anderson, in his famed *Code of the Street* (1999), describes the grandmother as "a hero who was waiting in the wings and has now been activated by the social and economic crises besetting the poor black family" (Anderson 1999:210). Fifteen years later, in *The Tumbleweed Society,* Alison Pugh (2015) portrays similar women as "giving trees" and "commitment heroes," who carry the burden of providing both care and financial support to relatives where the market no longer offers stable work and the state has withdrawn. Against the trope of heroism, Loïc Wacquant (2002) proposes that we recognize the situation of poor custodial grandmothers as one of "*kinship servitude*, thrust upon (sub)proletarian women by the faltering of the social-welfare wing of the state" (Wacquant 2002:1496). Barbara's story shows that heroism and servitude can coexist. In standing firm where the other adults in her domestic group faltered, Barbara has evinced admirable endurance and commitment. In Pugh's terms, she's certainly "scaled great heights of self-sacrifice" (Pugh 2015:132). At the same time, her objective situation can accurately be described as one of kinship servitude, in which all her resources are drained by her obligation to her grandchildren. Her "kinscription" (Stack and Burton 1993) as custodial grandmother bears the obvious traces of the dominant gender ideology that still makes family care optional for men and compulsory for women (Edin and Nelson 2013, Pugh 2015).

Furthermore, the enormous costs she's had to suffer for being the last caregiver standing are a function of institutional failure, the result of social arrangements in which working for pay and raising children remain largely at odds, while low- to moderate-income do not allow parents to hire adequate childcare, even less for a "special-needs" child, without tremendous financial sacrifice.

Hence, Barbara, like the other research participants we've followed, and despite the progress she'd previously made toward economic stability, found herself trapped by "brute necessity and the tragic bankruptcy of public institutions" (Wacquant 2002:1496). After almost two years of raising her grandchildren, after Jay's addiction had reached new heights and made him a drain on her rather than a support for his own children, after her divorce and the loss of any hope at homeownership, after child care costs had drained her meager savings, she stood alone with the servitude of her kinship obligations.

There, she found herself longing for the imperfect people she had left behind at other stages of her life. She pined for New York, not so much for her siblings, but for her childhood friends. She'd left New York in search of a two-job-and-a-mortgage middle-class life with Damon, but now, on the other side of that hope, she felt like she had exiled herself from her true support network, the female friends she described as "people who know you've only been good to them and they there for you."

More surprisingly, Barbara found herself missing Victoria: the young, unstable woman who had broken one of her doors, who had burned down a truck in anger, whom she'd suspected of stealing on more than one occasion, and whom she'd seen as both a lost girl in need of mentoring and a bad influence on her son. Now that Barbara had seen the limits of her son as a father and provider, now that she was alone in rearing two

young children on an insufficient income and with patchy institutional resources, she hoped that, if only Victoria came back to New Jersey, "at least we'd have a partnership." Barbara would retain custody of the children and primary caregiving duties, so as not to overwhelm Victoria, whom she still saw as fragile. But at least there would be "someone to work with:" someone to help find transportation to Benji's after-school program; someone to help meet the ever-increasing costs of childcare; someone to watch the children for free at night or on the weekend while Barbara picked up extra shifts at the neighboring supermarket. So far, however, there was no-one.

Thus, Barbara's story gives another illustration of the cycles of need, hope, commitment, and disappointment that tear intimates apart and bring them back together. In tracing Victoria and Jay's relationship from 2015 to 2016, we followed cycles of passion and discord, and landed at the point where Victoria felt so trapped in her relationship to Jay and his family that she literally set it ablaze. The view from Barbara's contains many of the same elements of ambivalence, of hope and need mixed with grievance, but not quite in the same order.

During the period when Barbara still managed to position herself as a mere back-up to Victoria and Jay, and to limit the extent to which family solidarity could disrupt her exacting work schedule and financial arrangements, she was the mother who didn't give enough. Victoria and Jay felt indebted to her, but also resented her for the help she didn't extend and the control she tried to exert. When she felt disrespected one time too many and gave them the boot, she became the primary caregiver to her grandchildren, which, given her moderate income and the insufficiencies of public institutions, impoverished and isolated her. In the loneliness of her kinship servitude, she missed those she had

previously regarded as burdens, and hoped that, if only the relationship could be rekindled, they might become vital supports this time. In 2016, we left Victoria and Jay at the door of a long separation. In 2018, we are leaving Barbara ready to reconcile with Victoria and to try, once again, to be a family.

Conclusion: The Fruits of Ambivalence

Summary

I have argued that poverty, especially in the context of a limited institutional safety net, increases expectations of support from close ones, and at the same times makes them more arduous to fulfill. Furthermore, the constant pressure of extreme needs leads individuals to rush into family projects with equally distressed others, sometimes with dire consequences, or to circle back to unsatisfactory partnerships in which they feel trapped. This process makes the business of intimacy more fraught for people living in poverty: rifer with intense dilemmas, with moments of extraordinary solidarity and moments of dark abandonment, with mutual reliance and shared support, with cruel disappointment and deep resentment, and sometimes with violence.

Part of the process by which concentrated disadvantage worms its way into the most intimate corners of people's lives can be described as *structural*: American markets and institutions failing to provide sufficient resources for a significant segment of the population, disadvantaged people have to turn to family, friends, and strangers to get by. With poor people – especially poor people of color – often living in poor families and poor neighborhoods, the help they can get from their personal ties and local communities is limited, and costly to those who extend it. Great needs and few resources make entering relationships, as well as staying in them, both risky and necessary.

The other part of the process linking poverty to strained intimacies may more accurately be characterized as *cultural*: the repeated crises and setbacks make myths of unconditional love and support attractive and relevant to people's experience. At the same time, the impossibility to meet these lofty ideals creates a second set of expectations, not for what is valued but for what is typical and inescapable. That intermediate space, where the ordinary horizon of relationships is both tolerated and devalued, is fertile ground for sociological ambivalence.

Theoretical Implications

As we have seen, such ambivalence already lurks in the background of many ethnographies and interview studies, from *All Our Kin* (Stack 1974) to *Evicted* (Desmond 2016). There are analytical payoffs, however, of bringing it into the foreground.

First, foregrounding ambivalence serves to highlight the emotional toll of material interdependence under pervasive and chronic hardship: while people in Victoria's network expressed yearnings for "ride or die" partnerships with family and friends, they lacked the resources to extend frequent help to their loved ones, and their own needs were beyond what their intimate network could meet. They needed each other but also, predictably, disappointed and resented each other. Whereas conditions of poverty make the dream of unconditional support uniquely attractive, poverty itself is a source of conditionality: a sharply felt lack of resources increases trade-offs between one's own needs and those of others. Consequently, highlighting poverty-related ambivalence also throws into sharper relief how the widespread construction of the family as the ultimate source of solidarity rests upon implicit economic requirements that are unattainable for a segment of the population.

Second, cycles of commitment and disappointment may help explain the coexistence of mutual assistance (Stack 1974) with isolation and distrust (Patterson 1998, Smith 2007). Research on stress and coping indicates that individual well-being is tied to *perceived*, rather than actual, support (Thoits 1995, 2011). Perceptions of support, in turn, are influenced less by specific episodes where support was received than by a generalized sense of its availability on a daily basis, and of the willingness with which others would extend it (Thoits 2011:149-150). Perceived support, therefore, may track "slack" in a network (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013), the presence of more resources than are strictly needed and their availability to be drawn upon. By contrast, in a context of poverty where help is frequently extended, but also discontinued while needs remain ongoing, people may perceive social support as limited or unavailable, even if they have benefitted from it on separate occasions. This is how Victoria, after staying with six different friends or acquaintances in as many months, and after returning to Barbara and Damon's reluctant hospitality in August 2016, could conclude in a Facebook post: "Whos there for me? Kno one." (08/19/2016)

Third, the study of ambivalent bonds enriches our portrait of the social ties of the poor, by offering both a complement and a counterpoint to the concept of "disposable ties" (Desmond 2012). It is worth elaborating on the convergences and divergences of the two perspectives.

Theoretical Discussion: Ambivalent Bonds and Disposable Ties

Some of the dynamics of ambivalent bonds, from elated honeymoons to bitter break-ups, resemble those of the "disposable ties" documented by Desmond (2012, 2016). Indeed, when considering periods when people in Victoria's network "went MIA" on their closest

friends and kin (or Edin and Nelson's (2013) research on serial fatherhood), one may wonder whether disposability is an even broader feature of personal ties in concentrated disadvantage, one that isn't restricted to friendships of circumstance but also threatens kin and other long-standing relationships.

To be sure, my conceptualization of ambivalent bonds differs from that of disposable ties in at least two respects. The more obvious one is that I derived it from the observation of on-again, off-again relationships – ties that I saw being 'recycled,' so to speak. Since the ambivalent bonds described in this chapter linked people who were related by "blood" (as siblings, mother and child, or relatives of common children), while Desmond's disposable ties connected new acquaintances, one could further hypothesize that ambivalent bonds and disposable ties are complementary parts of the same picture, and are even causally related. In this interpretation, tumultuous family bonds create the conditions that make disposable ties necessary among poor people: while they are on break from their families (and always against the backdrop of deficient institutional supports), chronically deprived people have to turn to strangers to meet their basic needs.[20] In view of the existing literature, this hypothesis seems plausible, and it is certainly consistent with some of the dynamics I observed (for example when Victoria,

[20] A variant of this causal hypothesis could emphasize choice over necessity, and might run as follows: Scalded by past experiences with committed but painful relationships, the urban poor are hypothesized to *privilege* disposable ties as a way to meet their needs while limiting their exposure to the devastation of betrayal. Such a formulation would be in line with some of the literature on "psychological" and "rational" (dis)trust (see Aguilar 1984, cited in Smith 2007:36-37). Its intentionality would strike me, however, as inconsistent with my data as well as Desmond's ethnographic descriptions: the evicted tenants he followed do not come across on the page as con artists who expected to use and discard other distressed individuals. They rather seemed to be taking chances on strangers in the hope of developing mutually beneficial partnerships. Then the trials of daily life in severe deprivation, combined with the pulls of prior commitments and conflicting interests, often led to the demise of these partnerships.

banned from her children's grandparents' house, moved in with Ms. Jones, a former co-worker she hadn't seen in over a year).

However, neither the on/off versus short-lived character of ties, nor their binding people by blood versus chosen commitment, constitute the *essential* distinction between ambivalent bonds and disposable ties. For one thing, ambivalence due to constrained interdependence may well characterize many disposable ties while they are ongoing. For another, there might be a certain amount of contingency in the process by which some new ties end up being discarded for good and others being maintained or at least recycled. Finally, some of Victoria's tumultuous yet enduring relationships were with friends and chosen family: Victoria's aunt Clarissa, who hosted her for months on end in New York (with interruptions due to fights over money and drugs), was not a blood relative, but the long-time girlfriend (now separated) of Ramona, a maternal aunt of Victoria's. Clarissa's children, whom Victoria called cousins, were by a man who had disappeared well before Clarissa met and left Ramona. Thus, instead of characterizing empirically distinct ties, ambivalence and disposability rather signal a difference in perspective and theoretical thrust.

The central analytical difference between the disposable ties and ambivalent bonds approach is this: The disposable ties approach focuses on the *material* necessities pushing people together and pulling them apart, and treats the idiom of intimacy ("sister," "best friend") in which exchanges occur as "a gloss" used by acquaintances to embellish their relationship and justify its accelerated intensity (Desmond 2012:1315).[21] Ambivalent

[21] In other words, Desmond analyzes the language of love and friendship as a tool for maintaining a "veneer of consensus" among acquaintances (Goffman 1959), whereas I am interested in the affective "underlayment" (Winship 2004) that supports some people's intense involvement in new or rekindled

bonds, by contrast, direct our gaze to the emotional experience of participants in a relationship. Focusing on ambivalence means taking seriously both the pressures of economic survival *and* the affective yearnings motivating parties to a relationship. This reorientation helps explain outcomes not accounted for by the disposable ties perspective, such as moments when relationships break down despite still being potentially gainful (such as between Victoria and Kurt), or the devastation experienced when some brief but intense bonds ended. In sum, the ambivalence perspective may apply to ties other than disposable ones, but its distinguishing theoretical feature is to foreground the *emotional* costs of material hardship in the context of institutional abandonment and cultural constructions of unconditional family support.

Policy Implications: Safety Nets Provided To, Not By, Families

Alongside its analytical payoff, the ambivalent bonds approach also holds broad lessons for policy-making. My findings point to the need to strengthen the *institutional* safety net as a way to alleviate the burdens of the *family* safety net and thus reducing the intense ambivalence that plagues intimate bonds among the severely deprived.

Before I elaborate on these recommendations, a word of clarification: I am not arguing that ambivalence as such is the enemy. Like others before me (e.g., Freud 1923, Smelser 1998, Weigert 1991), I regard it as a feature of the human condition – one that may be more or less salient across different societies and historical periods (Bauman 1991), but that is nevertheless pervasive in the historical and anthropological record (Merton and Barber 1963, Peletz 2001). Ambivalence may even have its uses and

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relationships.

benefits: as an attitude toward specific actions or situations, it may be a visceral manifestation of humans' critical capacity to examine and reassess their choices, moral commitments, and attachments. It may also work as a prompt for self-reflection, creative action, and social change. But to be productive, ambivalence has to be resolved or at least softened, if only temporarily (Weigert 1991). The problem with *sociological* ambivalence – ambivalence produced by contradictory injunctions embedded in dominant discourses, or tied to social prescriptions made unattainable by structural arrangements (Merton and Barber 1963) – is precisely the lack of institutionalized means of resolution. Indeed, the acute and protracted ambivalence of intimate bonds in Victoria's network revealed dilemmas generated by institutional deficiencies. If there is anything productive in such sociological ambivalence, it is in enjoining us to rethink the sociopolitical organization of solidarity in the contemporary United States.

One of the central tropes in contemporary welfare policy, explicitly encoded in the 1996 Welfare Reform Act (PRWORA 1996), is that family instability and single-parent households are among the leading causes of poverty in the United States.[22] What the findings of this chapter suggest, however, is that poverty and economic insecurity are themselves a major source of strain on intimate bonds. The poor are placed in a cruel double-bind: Economic dispossession makes them more reliant on each other, not only for material assistance, but also for emotional support and nurturance. At the same time, the same circumstances of chronic scarcity make it more likely that intimates will disappoint each other's expectations. Under such conditions, it is unsurprising that people

[22] After the table of contents, the first sentence of the welfare reform bill is: "The Congress makes the following findings: (1) Marriage is the foundation of a successful society." (PRWORA 1996, H.R. 3734-6)

will argue or break up over feelings of having been let down or betrayed. Hence, if stable relationships and two-parent households are key to protecting individuals against chronic poverty, then the state must focus on providing the material conditions under which such relationships *can* be stable.

Achieving this will require breaking with the trends that underlie our current welfare regime since 1996, which have aimed to diminish the relative importance of the state safety net compared to the "family safety net." When your family is your safety net, you turn to them for company and emotional support in hard times, but also for childcare, transportation, money, food, and shelter. Your destitution becomes your family's impoverishment. Your crisis their hardship. Either your kin are willing and able to sacrifice their resources in your time of need – if there are resources to be sacrificed – or they have to stop acting like kin under that definition. The entire network is stressed and strained by each member's trouble, or it tears apart. Family shouldn't be an individual's primary safety net. On the contrary, families need safety nets to maintain themselves as families. If people's intimate bonds are to function as a source of support and nurturance, they first of all require a foundation of economic security that is a precondition for more peaceful and enduring intimacies.

CHAPTER 3 - MENTAL HEALTH BETWEEN CARE AND VIOLENCE: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

The line that separates care from violence also tethers care to violence.
(Kelly and Chapman 2015:47)

In *The Hero's Fight* (2015:119), Patricia Fernández-Kelly remarks that "in lieu of productive investments to address the consequences of intergenerational dispossession, the American State has deployed substantial resources into relief programs to alleviate the consequences of poverty." The manifest danger, she observes, is that such "policies of palliation" can mask the need for, and displace, the kinds of productive investment – by the state or private enterprise – that alone can effect lasting social change. At the same time, Fernández-Kelly acknowledges, some forms of investment can take generations to bear fruit. "In the long run we are all dead," goes the Keynesian saying, and in this spirit palliation (without repression) remains part of the agenda of anyone who wants to see dispossessed people's lives improve.

Given the amount of emotional and psychological distress documented in the previous pages, one particularly relevant form of palliation is mental health support and counseling. As Eva Illouz (2007) notes, the therapeutic model of self-examination and interpersonal communication is a useful technology for managing self and relationships in late modernity. Amid uncertainty (an experience which Illouz associates with late capitalism in general and which I consider in connection with poverty in particular), the therapeutic model provides tools "for coping with (…) disruptions, and, perhaps most importantly, for preserving the self's standing and sense of security" (Illouz 2007: 71). Thus, access to psychotherapeutic support and the skills it imparts can justifiably be

considered a matter of social justice. However, whether therapeutic discourses and practices end up benefiting the people they intend to help very much depends on the conditions under which mental health assessments are deployed and people access counseling and treatment. Based on two different case studies, this chapter and the next argue that mental health approaches as different as psychiatric medication and trauma counseling, when they are nested within structures of poverty governance, present a troubling fusion of care with control, mistrust, and even violence. This chapter illustrates this process by focusing on Victoria and her son Swing's experiences with counseling services and psychiatric treatment. Chapter 4 will take the view of the institution in order to document the early stages of the turn toward "trauma-informed care" within a social service agency.

The Caring Hand of the State: Both Too Light and Too Heavy

One of the mysteries of Victoria's story is this: how could the abundance of nonprofits and state agencies filling Trenton's downtown buildings and directories be of so little help? One answer, as seen in Chapter 1, is the dearth of funding – especially when measured against the cost of life in Trenton and the severe deprivation of many Trentonians. But there was no shortage of free counseling and other mental health services in Trenton, and Victoria would have been eligible for several of them. In this chapter, I trace Victoria and Swing's interactions with mental health services and the ways in which the care offered to them so often blurred with control. In Victoria's case, the ambiguity appears to have been counterproductive, since she repeatedly refused treatment provided within "liminal institutions" (Fernández-Kelly 2015), even as if she recognized that she might benefit from mental healthcare provided under different

conditions. In five-year old Swing's case, treatment and violence intertwine so closely that the very grounds of assessment are called into question: on the one hand, psychiatric medication seems to have been effective in a narrow sense, insofar as it has made the little boy's behavior more manageable for his teachers and caregivers and may have interrupted his incipient career as a problem child. On the other hand, side effects are already noticeable and likely to accumulate over the years. We are left to ask whether neurochemical alteration at the behest of a public institution is a legitimate way to solve problems originating in the early experience of poverty and insecurity.

Mixed Mandates and Missed Opportunities

In November 2017, when I asked Victoria whether she had been offered any kind of counseling after her gruesome assault at the hands of Marsh, she replied she hadn't, but added: "Maybe I should [look for some]… You know that's not my thing. I don't talk about my feelings like that." Except Victoria did talk about her feelings, openly and frequently. For months on end, she used Facebook as a form of emotional journaling for public consumption. She also discussed her emotions and her history of trauma with family, friends, and romantic partners. Her self-disclosures and intent self-reflection suggest that, like many disadvantaged young adults, she embraces "therapeutic selfhood," a model of self-worth centered on the overcoming of psychological suffering (Silva 2012, 2013). What may not be "her thing," however, is getting psychological services through institutions that also seek to surveil and constrain her. We will recall from chapter 1 that Victoria was hospitalized in psychiatric care during her adolescence, and that she saw her mental health evaluations as brutal and discrediting misrepresentations of her experience. During my fieldwork, she was nevertheless tempted to find counseling a couple of times.

Unfortunately, the resulting encounters did little to improve her relationship with mental health services.

In April 2015, Victoria was able to claim a brutal fight with Jay as an incident of domestic violence, thereby allowing her to have welfare-to-work requirements relaxed (and sanctions for failing them lifted) under the Family Violence Option of TANF/Work First New Jersey. As a consequence, she had to be evaluated by a clinical counselor at an organization specializing in issues of domestic and sexual violence. She dragged her feet to go in, and only eventually did so in order to have her cash benefits reinstated. At the time, she and Jay both knew he would soon have to turn himself in, and that he would then go to jail for an unspecified amount of time. So he gave her his blessing: she should feel free to "put it all on him" if it meant having money for the kids. She went in thinking she was gaming the system, but came out genuinely moved, surprisingly relieved to have been allowed to cry and to give an account of the fight in which she was the aggrieved party, rather than a participant in mutual aggression. She briefly considered attending the women's group held at the counseling center every Monday evening, but that would have required taking two buses, which at most hours of the day meant an hour's commute each way. The center offered free childcare during the group therapy session, but she didn't see herself imposing a three-hour outing on her three children on a weeknight. With Jay bound for jail, there would be no one to watch the children at home for free.

In February 2016, the child protection caseworker who had investigated the family (and found no signs of abuse or neglect) referred Victoria to long-term counseling at a downtown office which was easier to access by bus. Victoria met with a counselor twice and filled out all the intake papers. At that point she realized she was assigned to a

clinical program where psychological therapy went hand in hand with substance abuse counseling, and she had to submit to urine testing, the results of which would be reported to the office of Child Protection and Permanency that had just investigated her. Not wanting to quit marijuana, which functioned as self-medication against stress and as a form of bonding with the various friends who let her crash at their places, she stopped going to counseling.[23]

In the end, over the course of my acquaintance with her, Victoria's most consistent contact with mental health services came by way of the criminal justice system. Between February and late April 2017, she attended the sexual assault survivor's group offered by the Virginia jail where she waited for her indictment. She didn't have much to say about it, except that she was bored and it was something to do.

Psychiatric Assessment under Judicial Supervision

After Victoria was granted probation in Virginia, she was arraigned in New Jersey and enrolled in the state's Pretrial Intervention program (PTI), which required her to plead guilty to second-degree arson and to submit to judicial supervision for up to three years. If she met the conditions of her judicial supervision by the end of the program, the arson charges against her would be dismissed and no conviction would be entered on her

[23] Since 2010, New Jersey has a medicinal marijuana program, and since 2013 a few treatment centers have been certified and have started operating. Victoria, however, couldn't benefit from that program, for at least three reasons: a) She didn't present any of the qualifying conditions, which were restricted to illnesses with physical symptoms, such as epilepsy, cancer, HIV, or multiple sclerosis. b) There weren't (still aren't in 2018) any treatment centers in or around Trenton. The closest is in Woodbridge, NJ, 45min away by car and 1h30 by bus and train. c) She may not have been able to pay the $200 lump-sum registration fee – to be compared with the marijuana she could buy from neighbors and acquaintances $5 or $10 at a time. Since March 2018, six new conditions, including anxiety, have been added to the qualifying conditions recognized in New Jersey. In addition, public assistance recipients benefit from a discounted fee of $20. Between March and July 2018, the number of registered patients shot up from 15,000 to 25,000, according to the NJ Department of Health. See https://www.nj.gov/health/medicalmarijuana/.

record. As part of Victoria's PTI conditions, she had to be evaluated, and perhaps treated, by a mental health professional. Victoria was not keen, but she went for her evaluation in June 2018, in preparation for her one-year assessment, and received the clinic's report in early July 2018. Before forwarding it to me, she announced its verdict by text[24]:

Victoria: My mental health came in n it sucks.

Ekédi: What's wrong with your mental health?

V: Lmaooooo girl

E: Why you laughing silly?

I mean what did you want on the paper and what did it say?

V: Ima take a pic of it n send it when I get in the house. They got events [of the arson] wrong but turns out im really crazy n a walking weirdo

Lmaooo

Ima take a pic of it n send it

U gonna laugh with me

E: Lmao girl

(Text conversation, July 9, 2018)

In this dialogue, Victoria not only apprised me of a bureaucratic event with consequences for her arson case, she shared a potentially defacing assessment of her person, and at the same time defused it with laughter. She cast the result of her assessment both as a

[24] In text speak, one of the usages of the letter "n" is as an abbreviation for the word "and". "Lmao" stands for "laughing my ass off", and the extraneous o's are added for emphasis. "Ima" is short for "I'm going to".

confirmation of something everyone knew about her (‘turns out I’m really crazy”) and as comical in the extreme picture it painted of her (“a walking weirdo”).

The first reply in which she claimed to be “laughing [her] ass off”, with its riotous five o’s, gently mocked me for asking “what’s wrong with [her] mental health”. She probably understood I meant “mental health *evaluation*”, and simply omitted the last word like she did in her first text. But I suspect she pretended to take the question at face value as a quip, a riff on the well-known theme of her “issues”. Like the “really” in “turns out I’m *really* crazy”, that joke refers to the many conversations in which she mentioned, sometimes in passing: “well, you know I got anger issues” (05/02/2017); “maybe it’s just me and my emotions, but that shit got me tight [i.e., angry]” (06/17/2018); and, more defensively: “people keep pushing and pushing and then [they say] ‘Oh, that Victoria is crazy’” (03/15/2016). Given this shared history, how could I ask what was wrong with her mental health? Didn’t I already know? Except attributions of “craziness” are not set in stone, or beyond dispute, especially when made by family and friends. Victoria certainly didn't hold them to be true at all times. She spoke of her tendency to “OD [overdose] on people”, that is, to get angry and violent, in at least five different ways: a) as circumstantial, a justified reaction to insult; b) as an essential quality, a personality trait that made her a force to reckon with; c) as an outgrowth of her history of trauma and sexual abuse, which made her lose control when she felt threatened; d) as a quirk, something her close ones should accept if they truly loved her; and more rarely e) as a character flaw that made her “fuck up” her relationships and bore the risk of making her unlovable. Victoria’s labile interpretation of her own behavior and character, therefore, diminished the extent to which she truly believed there was a widespread consensus over

her “issues”. Sure, everyone knew she was “crazy”… but perhaps she wasn’t. Perhaps she was just proud, strong, or (in her words) “a G[angsta]” raised on the streets, a survivor who “went through a lot”, a difficult but still acceptable person. Previous mental health assessments contributed to the proliferation of interpretations. Before she moved to Trenton, Victoria had been enrolled in Supplemental Security Income in New York, on the grounds that she suffered from severe depression and bipolar disorder. When she tried to transfer her case to New Jersey, she was evaluated again and that diagnosis was rescinded. She was considered well enough to work full time.

Thus, the result of that latest assessment, the one Victoria would have to carry in front of a judge, didn’t really confirm a pre-existing consensus. Rather, it lent medical authority to some of the least flattering interpretations of her person, and added a few more for good measure. It offered the following “impression” (the word diagnosis is not used) and treatment plan:

> “Impression:
> R/o [rule out] Bipolar disorder
> PTSD
> Antisocial Personality Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder
> Polysubstance dependence, in partial remission
>
> Assessment/Plan:
>
> - Will start patient on Depakote 250mg BID [twice a day] for mood stabilization, sent to [omitted name] pharmacy
> - Discussed risks/benefits, AE [adverse effects] of medication including birth defects, patient states she receives Depo Provera q3months [every three months].
> - Discussed hazards of substance use and dangers of combining medication with drugs.
> - Brief psychotherapy provided

- Safety plan reviewed, including calling 1-800-LIFE-NET and going to the ER or calling 911 in emergency; not an imminent risk to self and others at this time.
- RT WIC [return to walk-in clinic] in 2 weeks"

(Behavioral Health Walk-In Evaluation from a public hospital [name omitted for confidentiality purposes], New York City, June 2018; punctuation in original; abbreviations explained in [].)

In all, this evaluation suggested that Victoria might be suffering from six different mental disorders, including two personality disorders, and recommended a course of the Depakote medication as a way of "ruling out" bipolar disorder. (According to several dictionaries of medical abbreviations, "ruling out" is standard code for "assessing the presence of.")

Hence Victoria's appraisal that the report "sucks", that it characterizes her as "a walking weirdo", and that it is so over the top that it will make me "laugh with [her]." As I often did, I accepted her definition of the situation, and with my own "Lmao girl", I tried to do my part to wrap the wound in laughter. After all, the anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes teaches us that "humor (…) contains within itself a refusal of the demand to suffer", and as such it makes "existence itself (…) possible" in circumstances of chronic adversity (Scheper-Huges 2008:49; see also Goldstein 2003). Even so, it is worth scrutinizing the meaning of these hypothesized disorders, and wondering whether they track a disordered person or a disordered environment.

According to the current *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (DSM-5):

> "Individuals with antisocial personality disorder fail to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behavior (Criterion A1). (…) They are frequently deceitful and manipulative in order to gain personal profit or pleasure (e.g., to obtain money, sex, or power) (Criterion A2). They may

> repeatedly lie, use an alias, con others, or malinger. A pattern of impulsivity may be manifested by a failure to plan ahead (Criterion A3). Decisions are made on the spur of the moment, without forethought and without consideration for the consequences to self or others; this may lead to sudden changes of jobs, residences, or relationships. Individuals with antisocial personality disorder tend to be irritable and aggressive and may repeatedly get into physical fights or commit acts of physical assault (including spouse beating or child beating) (Criterion A4)." (American Psychiatric Association 2013:656-660)

Note that all these "antisocial" patterns are also made more likely by life in poverty and in violent contexts (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). The DSM-5 itself notes that: "Antisocial personality disorder appears to be associated with low socioeconomic status and urban settings. Concerns have been raised that the diagnosis may at times be misapplied to individuals in settings in which seemingly antisocial behavior may be part of a protective survival strategy" (American Psychiatric Association 2013:662).

Victoria also meets many of the criteria for borderline personality[25], and – by her own assessment – the associated features of depression, possible bipolarity, substance

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[25] "The essential feature of borderline personality disorder is a pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image, and affects, and marked impulsivity that begins by early adulthood and is present in a variety of contexts.

Individuals with borderline personality disorder make frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment (Criterion 1). (…) Individuals with borderline personality disorder have a pattern of unstable and intense relationships (Criterion 2). (…) There may be an identity disturbance characterized by markedly and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self (Criterion 3). There are sudden and dramatic shifts in self-image, characterized by shifting goals, values, and vocational aspirations. There may be sudden changes in opinions and plans about career, sexual identity, values, and types of friends. (…) These individuals may show worse performance in unstructured work or school situations. Individuals with borderline personality disorder display impulsivity in at least two areas that are potentially self-damaging (Criterion 4). They may gamble, spend money irresponsibly, binge eat, abuse substances, engage in unsafe sex, or drive recklessly. Individuals with this disorder display recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures, or threats, or self-mutilating behavior (Criterion 5). Individuals with borderline personality disorder may display affective instability that is due to a marked reactivity of mood (…) (Criterion 6). (…) Individuals with borderline personality disorder may be troubled by chronic feelings of emptiness (Criterion 7). Easily bored, they may constantly seek something to do. Individuals with this disorder frequently express inappropriate, intense anger or have difficulty controlling their anger (Criterion 8). (…) The anger is often elicited when a caregiver or lover is seen as neglectful, withholding, uncaring, or abandoning. Such expressions of anger are often followed by shame and guilt and contribute to the feeling they have of being evil. During periods of extreme stress,

use, and trauma. With her mother's history of schizophrenia, she may have a genetic predisposition for bipolar disorder, which is characterized by marked changes in mood, and an oscillation between bouts of depression and bouts of extreme excitement. Of course, all of these behaviors, too, are also intelligible as responses to conditions of poverty. Nevertheless, to paraphrase Erving Goffman in *Asylums* (1961:128), Victoria had created enough "trouble for [her]self and others" that some agents of the state started "thinking about [her] psychiatrically", and began a formal process of evaluation, labeling, and reporting[26]. Victoria herself believes that New Jersey's Pretrial Intervention (PTI) program does not mandate her to accept medication or treatment. At her most recent hearing, in late July 2018, what the judge insisted on was her ability to start making payments on the $10,000 she was assessed as restitution for the burnt truck cabin. Compared to that obligation, Victoria's mental health care appeared to the judge as secondary[27]. However, the steps she takes toward rehabilitation are supposed to be

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transient paranoid ideation or dissociative symptoms (e.g., depersonalization) may occur (Criterion 9). (…)

Physical and sexual abuse, neglect, hostile conflict, and early parental loss are more common in the childhood histories of those with borderline personality disorder. Common co-occurring disorders include depressive and bipolar disorders, substance use disorders, eating disorders (notably bulimia nervosa), posttraumatic stress disorder, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Borderline personality disorder also frequently co-occurs with the other personality disorders." (American Psychiatric Association 2013:663-665)

[26] The original quote, in *Asylums*, emphasizes a different idea. In a footnote to his essay on "The Moral Career of the Mental Patient", Goffman actually notes that "case records (…) show the incredible amount of trouble a person may cause for himself and others before anyone begins to think about him psychiatrically, let alone take psychiatric action against him." (Goffman 1961:128) In Victoria's case, that "amount of trouble" has apparently been exceeded – though Goffman also highlights the importance of *contingencies* in the labeling and institutionalization process, as do later scholars (e.g., Gove 2004). One question in need of further investigation is whether, with the continued rise of a "psychopharmacological common sense" in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century (Rose 2003), the average "amount of trouble" that triggers psychiatric action has decreased. The case of Victoria's son Benjamin, detailed in the next section, raises that question with even more urgency.

[27] This point echoes Anne-Marie Smith's analysis of poverty governance as paying "lip service to (…)

evaluated holistically, and the official brochure for PTI does include "compliance to [sic] recommended treatment programs" in the possible conditions for successful completion of the program (New Jersey Courts 2016). Let us recall that if Victoria fails to complete PTI, her conviction for second-degree arson will be added to her criminal record and she will be issued a sentence that is likely to include five to ten years of prison time. If treatment is a condition of judicial supervision, is it a form of help and care, or a form of constraint and blackmail? Can people be healed under threat?

Taking a mood stabilizer may benefit Victoria since, by her own account, she suffers from her intense and volatile emotions. It is unlikely that it will end her outbursts of anger or her bouts of depression, as long as there is so much in her life to be angry and sad about. But a combination of therapy and medication may dull the edges of her distress, provided it is actually appropriate to her case. Chemical efficacy aside, however, what meaning does a medical intervention take when it comes by way of a criminal proceeding? Like in her previous flirtations with psychotherapy, Victoria is not sure she wants to go ahead with the recommended treatment, or even return to the clinic for further evaluation of her situation. She never made the two-week return visit requested on her evaluation report. On the phone she told me, with long pauses between sentences: "It might help, you know, with my moods… I don't know… You know I don't like that kind of stuff." If Victoria approaches therapy and psychiatric treatment with a combination of hope and distrust, their being mixed in the adversarial relationship she has with the criminal justice system is unlikely to help her engage.

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uplift and correction" but actually investing its material resources in punishment and deprivation (Smith A. 2007: Introduction).

When Care and Violence Merge: The Neurochemical Taming of Benjamin "Swing" Quintana

Victoria's missed opportunities for therapeutic relief illustrate the counterproductive ambiguity of nesting the possibility of care within a repressive set of institutional mandates. Her son Benjamin, by contrast, may be an example of effective medical treatment – but one that throws into even sharper relief the disquieting ways in which care and institutionalized violence merge in the lives of poor people.

Vibrant but Difficult

Since the spring of 2018, five-year old Benjamin (best known by his nickname Swing) is being treated with a 10mg dose of Abilify, an antipsychotic drug with side effects that include an increased likelihood of developing diabetes, as well as tardive dyskinesia and other motor problems. Agile, vibrant Swing, who at less than 3 was doing pushups to impress his dad, could shoot hoops on the plastic basketball hoop in his living-room, and kept climbing onto kitchen chairs and countertops to reach the treats hidden above the fridge, now has trouble catching, dribbling, and following his sister onto the playground's monkey bars. He is still within the normal range for children his age, but compared to his past dexterity, he now appears hesitant and slowed-down. It is as if a blanket has been spread over him, and all his movements, reactions, and speech are muffled by it. When I saw him and his sister Aleida in June 2018, less than six months into his treatment and for the first time since he had started it, I was so surprised by his change in demeanor that I asked him and Aleida whether they had just gotten up from a nap. But Aleida said no and Victoria concisely explained: "They got him on meds". The

meds are effective: from willful, loud, cheeky, and so active as to be unmanageable for most adults, the little boy has become agreeable, soft-spoken, tentative, and so calm he edges on dopey. If Aleida, his quasi-twin, is any indication, people now call him Benji at least as often as they do Swing, that nickname born of his unusual vitality.

Of course, adults (and fellow children, too) might like Benji better than Swing, or at least find it easier to relate to the tamer version of the little boy. For Swing's formerly overflowing energy frequently manifested in rebellion against adult commands, as well as physical aggression against both adults and fellow children. Among his deeds: he once punched me in the face because I wouldn't let him play with my eyeglasses; he interrupted a conversation among adults by kicking a frail, crutch-bound neighbor in the legs; whenever he got his hands on crayons, he drew doodles on surfaces as varied as his living-room couch, walls, and my shoes; he would rummage through any unattended pocketbook or backpack, tear most of its contents to pieces, and flush some down the toilet with unalloyed glee; and finally, when left in the care of adults other than his parents, including aunts, grandmothers (and a couple of times, myself) he often threw himself on the ground, shrieking without interruption and refusing to move until his mother returned or he fell asleep. Taken in isolation, none of these instances of difficult behavior are out of the ordinary for a three- to five-year old child. But their accumulation, and the frequency of their recurrence despite the many punishments doled out to Swing, troubled and exhausted his caregivers.

More problematically, Swing used to attack his sisters frequently – pushing, hitting, and scratching them. Aleida, in particular, who spent most of her days with her brother while Mina was at school, often bore small scratch marks that reddened her

otherwise smooth brown skin[28]. One November evening, when Swing was just over three years old, Victoria, Jay, and I heard commotion in the children's bedroom and found Swing using a white plastic stick (a piece from a broken clothes hanger) to beat his sisters. Aleida, who shared a bunk bed with Mina, had retreated to the far corner of the lower bunk and had folded herself against the wall to evade Swing's attack. Mina, from her position on the top bunk, was reaching down in an attempt to push him back, and perhaps retaliate. Victoria immediately grabbed the stick and spanked Swing. But he went back to his own bed only when Jay, belt in hand, threatened to "whoop [his] ass".

Making Sense of Troublesome Behavior

Many material, familial, and biographical factors may help make sense of Swing's troublesome behavior. First, and simplest, Swing and his sisters lacked space, and often seemed to feel hemmed in in their apartment on the Island. There was no park or playground within walking distance. There was a patch of grass behind their building, but nowhere to sit, not even a stoop, for the adults who would have to watch them. The nearby riverside posed a similar problem, with the added danger of being next to deep water.

Mina, in this respect, was better off because she could play outside during recess at school, and at the age of 7 she was sometimes allowed to frolic behind the building with other children from the neighborhood, her parents checking on her now and again through the back window. But this arrangement wasn't secure enough for Swing and Aleida, then in their third and fourth year of life. The "twins" weren't continuously

[28] Aleida was so used to adults examining variations in her skin color and texture as evidence of Swing's wrongdoing that when she noticed acne blemishes on my face, she asked: "Who did this to you?"

enrolled in daycare, because Victoria's failure to meet TANF work requirements caused her to lose her childcare subsidy for months at a time. When they did go, it was a welcome change of scenery. (After three months spent mostly at home, in December 2015, 4-year old Aleida once shouted, to no-one in particular: "I wanna go to schoooooool!") But her "school" (in fact, a rather bare-bones daycare center) didn't have any outdoor space either, just a large room covered in gym mats. The conditions at the various places the children experienced after the family's eviction were not much better. So they learned to jump, run, climb, balance, and even shoot hoops indoors, all of which made for frequent fights among siblings, broken toys and objects around the house, and a general feeling of agitation. Of all the spaces available to Victoria's children, Barbara's house was the only one with a backyard, and it was close to a playground, too. But as we'll see below, the children weren't there on a daily basis until September 2016, and for Swing until February 2017. By then he was already defined as a problem child.

A second factor in Swing's behavior had to do with how he related to his parents. As discussed in chapter 1, the family stress model predicts that financial strain will degrade conjugal and parenting relationships and increase the risk of children engaging in "problem behavior". But I am making a different argument here: I propose that the specific ways in which Swing *bonded* with his parents involved behavior that others (his parents included) experienced as unruly.

Mina and Aleida actively sought to enroll surrounding adults (including me) into their circle of care by giving them small gifts, inviting them into their games and imagined stories, or asking them to watch some feat of agility. Swing did some of that, but unlike his sisters, he often marked some distance toward other people and explicitly

singled out his parents as privileged caregivers and recipients of his affection. One quiet Sunday afternoon in the Island apartment, Jay was taking a nap on the living-room couch, Victoria was cooking in the kitchen, and I was sitting with the children in the dining room, in view of both the couch and the kitchen. When Jay woke up and slowly began to sit up, Swing ran out of the dining room, jumped on his father's back, threw his arms around Jay's neck, and rocked him in a tight embrace. As he was doing so, he looked at me and, beaming with pride, he sing-sang: "This is my daddy! This is my daddy!" A special aspect of Swing's relationship with his father was play-fighting. Jay praised all his children for their physical achievements, and encouraged the girls to do push-ups just as he did his son. But it was only with Swing that I saw him strike the pose of a boxer and pretend to throw punches, encouraging his son to take symmetric action. In those moments, Swing's face was illuminated with both joy and pretend fierceness. As a result, when Jay suddenly stepped toward Swing and took a menacing pose, even when he meant it as an earnest reprimand and deterrent, the little boy responded in kind, with a sly smile. Swing seemed to have trouble knowing where play ended and confrontation began.

Like many children his age, Swing also singled out his mother as special. But perhaps more than most children, he appeared terrified to lose her. We'll recall that Victoria's children, despite their young age, had lived in two different cities and countless apartments. Just in New Jersey, they had lived first at their grandmother's, then in transitional housing, and finally, for eighteen months, in the Island apartment. After the family's eviction, each week they bounced between Barbara's house and the various friends' places where their mother stayed. And finally, after the arson, they were separated from Victoria and from each other. Up until that last cataclysm, however,

Victoria had been their anchor. Fathers came and went: Mina never lived with her biological father Paul and he visited or called her only rarely; Jaydore and Benjamin (the man who gave Swing his name) succeeded each other for years. Even after Jay supplanted Benjamin Sr. for good, he wasn't always around, because he was sometimes incarcerated. Aunts, cousins, and even their two grandmothers could be around every day for a while, and then not seen for weeks or months on end. Amid all this flux, Victoria was their constant: her mood, patience, or willingness to play could vary, but she was always there. For Mina and Aleida, it might not always have been so: Victoria is evasive on the exact timeline, but over the course of many conversations about her past she consistently mentioned leaving the girls with her mother Emily for extended periods when she was hustling and "house-hopping". Swing, on the other hand, seems to have lived with his mother continuously from his birth to early 2017. One can therefore speculate that, in Swing's worldview, everyone could disappear without warning, but one possible loss was truly panicking: that of his mother. Hence the screaming fits that exhausted his other caregivers, and which could take place after a relatively brief absence on Victoria's part. After one such episode (while Victoria was attending a two-hour compliance class at the welfare office), Swing, still hiccupping from too much crying, kept declaring: "I love you Mommy." Turning to me in the car, Vee prognosed: "Once he gets his snack, let me tell you he gonna stop with 'I love you.'" She gave him a juice box and a bag of chips from her backpack, and Swing did grow silent for a few sips and a couple of bites. After that, however, he resumed his sobbing declarations of filial love, and continued until we reached home.

Swing's selective disobedience was another way in which he signified, to his mother and to others, that he belonged to her first and foremost. Of course, causality also runs the other way: Swing obeyed his mother because she was in fact the main authority in his life, and almost always made good on a promise of punishment. Jaydore, partly in sincere frustration, and perhaps partly to further shift the balance of parenting duties toward Victoria, regularly complained to her: "That booooy! You the only one he listens to!" To which Victoria responded with a mix of gloating and admonishment: "That's cos you keep playing with him! You don't tell him what it is. You keep playing, you keep laughing, and he don't take you seriously!" Both parents' agreement on Victoria's superior authority consolidated her position as the family's enforcer and Swing's primary caretaker. But Swing wasn't passive in that pattern of relationships. In choosing whom to heed and whom to defy, he communicated with intent, too: he often sported a sly smile as he ignored adults' warnings (and frequently did the very opposite of what they ordered), until Victoria intervened with a nonnegotiable tone of voice and sometimes with direct physical action. Before retreating, when he wasn't busy crying because Victoria had slapped his hands or "popped" him in the chest, he would often steal a prideful glance at whoever had previously tried to curb his will. Then, a few minutes later, he would venture again near his mother and, with arms extended and lips pursed, ask for a hug and a kiss. In this pattern of undivided authority and selective compliance, Victoria and Swing defined themselves as unique to each other.

Last but not least, any attempt at understanding Swing's behavior in the relevant context must consider his witnessing of violence at home and his own experience of corporal punishment. First, there was the belt, though its use was mainly symbolic. I saw

Jay use his belt exactly once on Swing, and never on the girls. That one time, he brought it down only once and aimed for the boy's diaper, which buffered his bottom. I never noticed any marks on the children's bodies that would indicate a more brutal use of the belt. Nevertheless the three children visibly understood the meaning of the belt as a last limit, and the threat must have been credible enough in their eyes that it effectively made them cease and desist. It also may have made enough of an impression to inform Swing's attempt at whipping his sisters, recounted above. Apart from brandishing the belt, most of Jay's physical interventions on the children consisted in constraint rather than punishment: he grabbed them to separate them from one another, or to stop them from running, or to remove one of them to another room. Victoria, on the other hand, used slaps to both punish and incentivize: if she sent the children to their bedroom and they didn't go right away, she rarely dragged or carried them there, though she certainly had the strength to do so. Instead, she either flicked them in the face or used the back of her hand to slap them on the chest and arms, until, in tears, they decided to go on their own.

More significantly, the children witnessed serious physical violence, as well as milder forms of physical antagonism, between their parents. By the time they vacated the Island apartment, the doors of both the bathroom and their parents' bedroom were broken, partially destroyed by one parent while the other one had barricaded themselves on the other side. (Jaydore fractured the top part of the plywood bathroom door; Victoria kicked in the bottom of the bedroom door –see Chapter 2). The most brutal of these fights, by both Victoria and Jay's assessment, was the one that took place in late March 2015 and resulted in a 911 call. Victoria denied that the children had seen or heard any of the fight but her friend Monique, who was there and placed the 911 call, affirms that the

children woke up from the commotion and came out to see what was happening. Through this range of experiences, Vee and Jay's children learned that physical violence was a way of asserting one's will, and perhaps of expressing strong feelings. That kind of lesson is not uncommon in spaces where the brutality of sociopolitical arrangements is refracted into intimate antagonism: in contexts ranging from Argentinean shantytowns to American "hyperghettos" (Wacquant 2001), parents have used harsh talk and corporal punishment as techniques to raise appropriately tough children, as well as to keep them out of the greater troubles of gang or police violence (Auyero and Berti 2015, Coates 2015, Scheper-Hughes 1992, 2008). More generally, in these zones of institutionalized brutality, interpersonal aggression functions as a polyvalent resource: a source of agency, an expression of self-respect, and a tool for self-preservation (Auyero and Berti 2015, Bourgois 2003, Bourgois and Schonberg 2009).

Lack of space, residential and familial instability in early life, and intimate violence: given these factors, what requires explanation may not be Swing's troublesome behavior so much as his sisters' relative lack thereof. Gender researchers have long demonstrated children as young as toddlers have already developed an embodied understanding of gender norms and they actively police their own and others' gender performances (Martin 1998, Thorne 1993). By the time I met them, at ages two-and-a-half, three-and-a-half, and seven, the siblings already knew that being a boy or a girl didn't open the same avenues of action and expression.

In striking consistency with gendered archetypes, family members often described Mina as "emotional", Aleida as strategic and even "sneaky", and Swing as "active" (on

good days) and "crazy" or "a little thug" (on bad days).[29] When the girls cried, be it in upset or in anger, they weren't just sent to their room or threatened with punishment so they would "know why [they] crying." Victoria also called them ugly and instructed them to "go fix [their] face[s]." Between these injunctions and their older age, it stands to reason that the girls developed a different range of habits and strategies to make their feelings known and obtain adults' cooperation, such as being docile, wooing adults with small gifts and attentions, staying pretty, and in Mina's case, expressing more sadness than frustration. The following episode illustrates how Aleida's supposed manipulations should be understood in the context of the gendered lessons she learned.

One afternoon in May 2015, Victoria and I were at the welfare office with Allie and Swing, while Mina was at school. (Victoria was waiting to see a caseworker about the unexplained interruption in her food stamp benefits.) At 2:30pm, when it was time to collect Mina from school, Victoria still hadn't been seen, so I agreed to go pick her up. Swing chose to wait with his mother at the welfare office but Aleida welcomed a break in the day's monotony and asked to come with me. During the fifteen-minute ride to Mina's school, Aleida's objective was to convince me not to leave her in the parked car while I fetched Mina from the school playground, but to let her walk over with me instead. I was planning to do so anyway: being the only adult in the car that day, I wouldn't have left her alone even for a few minutes. But she didn't ask me directly. Instead, she started by

[29] One day after the family received their notice of eviction, when it became certain that the kids and Jay would move to his parents' house while Victoria stayed with friends, Victoria expressed worry about how the children would react to the new arrangements: "I can't do it, Katie, I'm telling you… Oh Gooood! Swing's gonna go crazy, Mina is gonna start again with her emotional shit. Allie… Allie will be fine. She the favorite there [at Barbara and Damon's] and they do whatever she want." Barbara may have had a preference for Aleida, but she still concurred about the little girl's manipulative temperament: "That one… she does her stuff behind your back."

making conversation, and asked me if I would like to join her (imaginary) "Minnie Mouse club," where she, Minnie, and other friends (only the ones Aleida selected, of course) played together. I replied I would love to join. Then Allie switched gears and ordered: "You got to let me come get Mina if you wanna be with Minnie Mouse! If you don't, you not in the club, and then you gonna cry, and then who you think gonna love you with that face? I be 'oh you wanna cry and be ugly?' And then you be. All. Alone."[30] Aleida's attempt to enroll Minnie Mouse in a blackmailing scheme still makes me smile years later, but the content of her threats doesn't. When I repeated the conversation to Victoria, she laughed heartily and confirmed: "That's what I tell her when she be crying."

Swing, too, was given lessons in gender. Like the roughhousing with his dad, they contained mixed messages about the appropriateness of his rebellious behavior. First, Swing was constantly compared to Jaydore. Though Jay himself found his son's behavior occasionally bewildering and frequently frustrating, his mother Barbara, his aunt Des, and his uncle Clay all insisted that Swing was just like Jay at the same age. Victoria, who met Jay when he was sixteen, also claimed to see his impulsiveness, his willfulness, his "ADD" (her word), and his goofy temper in Swing. This legitimized Swing's troublesome behavior as part of his inherited nature, and affirmed him as his beloved daddy's son.

Furthermore, adults met Swing's disobedient and aggressive behavior in two ways. On the one hand, Swing was yelled at, punished, and hit more often and more harshly than his sisters. On the other hand, adults (mainly Victoria, Jay, and their male

[30] I wasn't audiorecording Aleida that day but her rant struck me as memorable and I reconstructed it, as close to verbatim as I could, as soon as I got to the school, while the sisters were catching up with each other in the back of the car.

friends) also chuckled at some of his acts of willfulness, and characterized them as thuggish, an ambivalent descriptor that could connote both admiration and disapproval. D.J., a friend of Jay who spent a few weeks on the family's couch, once called Swing "a thug for real". Smooth, another friend of the family nicknamed Swing "Little G", with G standing for "gangsta", and regularly greeted him as such. Even disparate and mundane happenstances were adduced to build a picture of Swing's precocious masculinity. Smooth, who had crashed with the family many times, and later hosted Vee and the children for several weeks after their eviction, was privy to the less elegant sides of their communal living. One afternoon, he and Victoria were cracking jokes about the burdens of Swing's bowel movements: "When he takes a shit it stink like a grown man! That nigga be stinking the whole place up!" That expression, "grown man", recurred in various contexts. Swing got told off for swearing, but Victoria and Jay often exclaimed, not always out of his earshot: "That boy be cussing like a grown man!" Overall, Swing was constructed as problematic, but also as a true man in the making. He wasn't the only one to be hesitant as to what constituted appropriately masculine behavior and what constituted transgression.

"He's a handful": Childcare for a problem child

Despite the above enumeration, Swing shouldn't be reduced to disobedience, willfulness, and aggression. Even before his medication made him eerily compliant, he often showed himself to be sweet, affectionate, well-meaning, and at times hilarious. But the more troublesome parts of his behavior, regardless of whether there were good reasons for them, were enough for most adults to find him difficult, if not impossible, to handle. When he went to day care in March and April 2015, he came home with at least three

disciplinary notes from the director, and he was given another one in the second week he returned there, in January 2016. All were for hitting or scratching other children. In July 2016, Victoria asked me to drive her and the kids to the Bronx for a few days away from Barbara's house. She intended to visit Barbara's sister Desdemona (Des for short), but also to leave the children in Des's care while she went on a tour of her New York friends. When Des saw Victoria get up to leave, she exclaimed: "Hold the fuck up! You really leaving? Can't you at least take Swing?" Victoria laughed and replied, already at the door: "Yeah, I'm really doing this to you!" Des raised a finger and grabbed her phone: "Hold on while I call my neighbor. If I'm gonna watch that motherfucker, I'm gonna need some weed!" Adults' reluctance to take on Swing had always made it difficult to find a babysitter. After the arson, it also complicated the issue of Swing's custody. Between October 2016 and March 2017, Swing lived in three different homes and three different family members succeeded each other as his primary caregiver, something neither of his sisters experienced.

In October 2016, when Victoria left to join her sister Ceci in Northern Virginia, she left Aleida in Barbara's care, but took Swing with her, although Barbara was now both children's legal guardian.[31] Victoria feared that Barbara's preference for Aleida would disadvantage and distress Swing. Had Barbara heard Victoria characterize her affections in this way, she would have probably objected. In front of me at least, Barbara never admitted to liking one grandchild better than the other. She just said, like many others, that Swing was "difficult" and demanded a lot of energy. After a pleasant

[31] Mina, we'll recall, stayed in Yonkers with Teri, her biological father's sister. Victoria thought that Teri, who had always cherished Mina, would make a better guardian for her than Barbara, who Victoria claimed had always made a difference between Mina and her biological grandchildren.

afternoon spent just with him at a local fair and parade, Barbara was beaming and the little boy so exhausted that he kept dozing off as soon as he sat down. Barbara explained: "I like taking Swing when I got something for him to do. If he got something to do, he's happy; he *enjoys* it. And it tires him *out*! You got to tire that boy out, so at night, you good!" Thus, as much as she enjoyed taking Swing out on a day off, Barbara wasn't keen on minding him every day, and preferred Victoria to keep him. Jay didn't fight them on that decision either: he would miss him but he, too, recognized that it was easier and less expensive to have Aleida alone than to keep the "twins" together. Jay, at that time, was working night shifts at an Amazon warehouse from Monday to Saturday and, of a common accord with his mother, had moved out of her house. He now rented a single room in downtown Trenton and visited the children on Sundays. Barbara had cut down on the hours she took at her second job, but even so she needed childcare until 6pm on weekdays, and Childcare Connections (the New Jersey office of childcare subsidies) assessed her household income as sufficient for her to contribute $1,000 per month to maintain the children at the day care center around the block from her house. Barbara's husband Damon wasn't expected to watch the children on his own: he had a bad back and was scheduled to undergo surgery; also, he was only Jaydore's stepfather, so the grandkids were not "his". What he did for them was a gift, or a compromise with his wife, not an obligation. In Victoria's absence, then, Barbara would need a sitter – one who could look after the children for the bulk of every weekday and would be less expensive than the day care center. Such a person was much easier to find for Aleida alone than for both her and Swing. Victoria took Swing to Virginia.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, however, things quickly soured between Victoria and Ceci. At the start of 2017, Victoria drove up to New Jersey and dropped Swing off at Barbara's: Ceci had kicked her out just after New Year's, and with that she had lost both shelter and her primary source of childcare. She couldn't keep Swing. Victoria drove right back to Virginia so she could at least keep her job at Sam's Club. With Barbara still finding it impossible to weave Swing into her daily life, Swing stayed with Jay in the downtown rooming house. For the first time, Jay experienced life as a full-time worker and a primary caregiver. He convinced a neighbor to watch Swing while he was at work; on the weekends he could rely on Barbara. But the neighbor became less and less willing to help despite being paid for it, and Jay started missing shifts. By the end of February, he had lost his job. This time, Barbara had to take him and Swing back in. As things began to stabilize, Jay found a new warehousing position at Amazon, this time with sick days and healthcare benefits.

Barbara registered both her grandkids at a nearby Catholic preschool with affordable rates. The cost ended up being the same as the subsidized day care the children used to attend ($500 per child per month), but she felt that they would get a better education and more individualized attention at the new place. When Jay became employed again, they split the cost: Barbara and Damon would pay for Aleida's childcare, and Jay would pay for Swing's.

Barbara also took Swing to see a therapist, who diagnosed him with ADHD and recommended behavioral therapy. Barbara reported improvements in her grandson's behavior, but after-hours childcare continued to be a challenge. In early May, when Victoria's three-month stay in jail ended and she was released in New Jersey, she

immediately visited the children at Barbara's house. Jay filled her in on the arrangements he had made, and Victoria took serious issue with them. With Barbara having resumed work on Saturdays, Jay relied on his aunt Des, who was on an extended visit from New York. Des required $100 per Saturday. During the week, when no-one could pick up the kids by their new preschool's 5pm cut-off, Jay sometimes called on Yvette and her common-law husband King, who used to be the family's next-door neighbors when they still lived in their apartment on the Island. Yvette and King presented the advantage of charging little and of knowing the children well, but they were also drug dealers and drug users, and that part worried Victoria. While the children were having dinner under Barbara's supervision, Victoria and Jay stepped out onto the porch for the following conversation:

> Jay: You giving me temper now but you don't know what I'm going through (…) You got to understand with Swing, like… He's a handful… He doesn't really listen to everybody, you know? You don't understand! Why you think everybody keep on quitting this? Come on, this is the second babysitter that quit. I had to… I lost my job already! Didn't I go through it, Katie?
>
> Ekédi: Yep. One month.
>
> J: And I just got my job back permanently, where I can't lose it! I was a temp before… By the grace of God I was able to get my job back. Weeks later, but…
>
> Victoria: Alright, what I'm trying to tell you, Jaydore, is… what I've seen from my eyes is totally different from what you seen. You was always at work, so you didn't see half the shit that I seen. When I had to go to appointments, who did you think I left the kids with?
>
> J. *[tries to interrupt]*: Victoria…
>
> V. *[continues]*: Yvette! And when y'all came back why d'you think I stopped leaving them with her? Because of the simple fact that they didn't

give a *fuck* what was on that table, my nigga… And they was coming in and out!

J.: First of all, it was an hour… You don't understand. You ain't never been in they house when Swing is sitting out there and acting out… First of all, it was only from like 5:30, 5:15. *[Phone rings, one sentence inaudible.]* So I will pick him up by, like, 6, 6:15, soon as I come out. I come straight on [route] 29. You don't understand me. It'd be rough… You don't understand.

V.: First of all, it's not the fact of not understanding that. I understand that. It's not the fact of not understanding, Jaydore. At the end, you can't fuck around like that… I mean, go ahead, by all means. You can't complain…

J. *[mumbling over V.]*: He's just… Broke my phone… That little nigger is… See, look!

V. *[continues]*: You can't complain when it comes to… him fucking around and learning more things than what he already know. Like… I'm telling you, that's, that's… *[Victoria looks at Jay's broken phone screen; shakes her head.]*

J. *[under his breath]:* Bullshit… If the kids was with y'all *[i.e., spending the night at my place with Victoria]* I'd have got blowed out. I just… just…

[Ten-second silence; Victoria lights another cigarette, takes a pull.]

V: I mean, if that's what you feel you had to, then fine. By all means, do what you feel you need to.

J. : Alright. *[Getting up from the porch ramp:]* It's cold out here.

(05/01/2017; (...) is for omitted speech, "..." for hesitations or unfinished sentences, [] for clarifications and descriptions I added.)

This is the tragedy of Swing: at age 4, he was such "a handful" that, apart from his great-aunt Des, the only people who would babysit him regularly for a price his family could

afford were a drug-dealing couple who left powder on their coffee table and regularly stepped out to run errands. Jay was so drained by his intensified work-family time bind that his dream was to have the children away for one night so he could get high. Later that evening, he told just-released Victoria that he felt he was in jail, too. Victoria didn't take offense: she understood. "See what I was going through?" she asked Jay, referring to the many months when he gave his work priority and she was expected to hold down a job while caring for the children. Because she understood, and because she couldn't do anything about it, she surrendered. She accepted that, while she'd be back in Virginia serving her probation and trying to get on her feet, her four-year old son would be "learning more than he already knew".

These dilemmas of after-hours childcare were exacerbated by the cost of care during the day, so Jay and Barbara were looking forward to both children going to public school from the fall of 2017 on. The school district required children to be five years old by October 1st in order to enroll them in kindergarten. With Aleida born in early November and Swing in late September the following year, this meant they would enter kindergarten the same year. On their first day of school they both looked sharp, with new high-tops (Nike for Allie, AirJordan for Swing), star-shaped nametags around their necks, and a fresh fade haircut for Swing. They said they were both excited to go. Soon, however, school became a new place where Swing was causing trouble: he hit other children; he tried to kiss girls despite their resistance; he screamed. That November, Victoria saw the children for Aleida's birthday and reported that Swing's behavior "got Allie tight" (angry, frustrated) because he kept attacking her girlfriends. The siblings had been play partners day in and day out. Now Aleida wished her brother weren't in the

same school, let alone the same grade. In the end, Barbara agreed to take Swing out of the regular kindergarten class, to put him into a special program, and to start him on an antipsychotic medication because, in Aleida's words, "he'[d] been bad".

Hope and Grief

Now – a scant few months later – Benjamin seems to clearly understand the importance of being "good". The June weekend I first noticed the little boy's new deportment, Victoria and her new "husband" Lito had come from New York to visit Aleida and Benji for the first time since March. With both Lito and Jaydore present, it was unthinkable, not to mention logistically impractical, for Victoria to spend the night at Barbara's. Victoria asked if I could host her, Lito, and the kids overnight, and I accepted. On our way to my apartment, still more used to Swing's former behavior than to his newly regulated conduct, I asked him: "You're going to listen and behave yourself, right, Swing?" Before Victoria had time to reinforce my request by making it an order, as used to be our routine, he gave an affirmative nod and replied, in the most reassuring tone a five-year-old can master: "I won't act crazy." Troubled by the adjective he used, I hastened to respond: "I never thought you were crazy." Once in the apartment, while his sister was in the shower, Benji asked for a coloring book, and when I handed him one, he proudly announced that he "color[ed] inside the lines now." As I was preparing a makeshift bed for him and Aleida in the living room, he suddenly interrupted his quiet coloring and, locking eyes with me, earnestly declared: "We wanna be good for you at your house."

These declarations of goodwill indicate that Benji has learned an important lesson of childhood: he needs to please adults to have his needs met. In my case, he probably wanted to ensure his future welcome at "my house", that place where he might again be reunited with his mother[32]. And indeed, as troubled as I was by his transformation, I found myself more relaxed around him, and I looked forward to future visits with him more serenely than in the past. Others took notice, too: Monique, on the phone with me, exclaimed: "Allie and Swing are so grown! And Swing changed *a lot*. He so calm now!" (Monique didn't seem to know about the medication, or at least didn't mention it to me.) Barbara, now divorced from Damon (something she says was long-coming but also precipitated by the added stress of daily life with Swing), had found a stable childcare solution for the summer and was able to accept a promotion that required her to start at 6am in a post office an hour's commute away. A neighbor across the way, whose son was friends with Aleida from school, agreed to watch her and Benji from 5am to 6pm every day of the summer.

The new Benji, then, is easier on people, and we can hope that in return, people will be easier on him. Perhaps he'll escape the vicious cycle in which an insecure environment fuels his distress, and his troublesome behavior becomes a further obstacle to stable caring arrangements. Perhaps more adults will be willing and able to look after him; perhaps they will be less exasperated and therefore less likely to tell him that he's

[32] Before that weekend in June 2018, Aleida and Benjamin had never been to my apartment. I had always visited them where they lived, or taken them to the park, or driven them to see relatives. This made "my house", as they called it, a mysterious place, and on that Saturday night, perhaps a slightly magical one. During the drive from Trenton to Princeton, the siblings asked where I lived, how soon we'd get there, and suddenly, Benji piped: "Is Mina at your house?" If at my house he could spend the night with his mother, perhaps the sister he hadn't seen in three months would appear as well. Sadly, Mina wasn't there. She was still in Yonkers with her paternal aunt, because Victoria had used her scarce money to pay for her and Lito's train tickets, and didn't have enough for a third one.

"bad" or "acting crazy". Perhaps he will be able to transition back to regular school, and mainstream institutions will be more accepting of him. Perhaps his path will be smoother and take him higher than if he had continued in his incipient career as a problem child and a "thug" in the making. Yet, in this trade-off between Benji's newfound agreeableness and Swing's past liveliness, there remains something to grieve.

In this reshaping of a little boy, can we distinguish between help and control, between care and violence? To some extent, what the Abilify medication purports to give (and what its name announces) is a greater ability to relate to the world in an acceptable way. This process of socialization – of 'civilization', one might say – is one all human beings have to go through, especially in their early years. No subject without discipline, Foucault taught us (Foucault 1975). But not all disciplining interventions use the blunt force of neurochemical alteration, with the long-term physiological risks it entails. The case of Benjamin "Swing" Quintana, if nothing else, presents in stark relief the dilemmas and trade-offs wrought by "the neurochemical reshaping of personhood" (Rose 2003:59) and its use as a corrective for the unruly consequences of social inequities.

Summary and Conclusion

The case study of Victoria and her son Swing illustrates how mental health interventions, when nested within poverty governance, result in a problematic mix of care and control that can be counterproductive (in Victoria's case) or offer effective but costly palliation (in Swing's case). In both instances, psychiatric interventions place the burden of change on disadvantaged individuals and obscure the social roots of problematic behavior.

As part of her Pre-Trial Intervention, Victoria found herself compelled to undergo a psychiatric evaluation, which returned the stigmatizing diagnosis of antisocial

personality disorder and borderline personality disorder. As we have seen, these diagnoses rest largely on behavioral patterns that might also be construed more charitably, namely as consequences of, and indeed understandable reactions to, the concentrated poverty and disadvantage characterizing Victoria's life. Thus, while the psychiatric interpretation of Victoria's behavior may seem like progress over the harsh moralism of law and order policies, it nonetheless risks medicalizing what are, at root, social problems (Horwitz 2003). While the mental health frame tends to view these "antisocial" behaviors as the result of mental illness rather than moral deviance, this is nevertheless an analysis which finds fault, if not moral blameworthiness, with the individual. These mental health interventions thus appear palliative in precisely the sense that Fernández-Kelly identifies as problematic, namely by obscuring the need for more thoroughgoing social reform.

What is more, we saw that Victoria's contact with mental health providers occurred in contexts that understandably inclined her to view psychiatric treatment as punitive and coercive, as opposed to therapeutic. It was the criminal justice system, following her arson, which led to Victoria's latest psychiatric evaluation. And despite the benefits which therapy and medication might bring to Victoria, it is being 'proposed' to her as one component of her Pre-Trial Intervention, non-completion of which is likely to result in her being incarcerated. Conducting medical treatment under the threat of criminal sanction not only raises serious ethical concerns about the patient's valid consent; it calls into question its therapeutic nature in the first place.

The case of Swing, too, can plausibly be viewed as an instance of palliation in the problematic sense. It seems undeniable that the general instability of Swing's life played

a major role in the emergence of his 'difficult' behavior. Moreover, the succession of disasters that befell Victoria following the withdrawal of her rental assistance created a situation where she could no longer function as her son's primary caregiver. Swing's fear of being separated from his mother had come to pass. The task of parenting him then fell primarily to others, and – in the absence of affordable childcare options – soon became unsustainable. In addition, staff at the local public school found Swing's behavior impossible to accommodate. School, the first public institution most children encounter, required that Swing be treated in order to include him. A child born to unacceptable circumstances had in turn become an unacceptable child.

These were the circumstances in which 'taming' the child through medication came to seem like the only viable option. Yet, as we have seen, this was not a transformation without considerable loss. In this neurochemical reshaping of a child, help seems inseparable from violence. Treating Swing can be justified a form of help because it may allow him to 'function' better with others, and that may benefit him in the long run. But it also constitutes an instance of violence, as it diminishes some of his other abilities and exposes him to the serious risk of further side effects.

Overall, both Victoria and Swing's cases exemplify the human costs of attending to the consequences of poverty and inequality by attempting to fix individual selves rather than social arrangements.

CHAPTER 4: THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF TRAUMA-INFORMED SERVICES FOR THE POOR

While psychiatry, since its inception as a scientific discipline and a set of treatment and containment practices, has been implicated in the government of denigrated populations (Rose 1998), not all mental health approaches share this intuitive affinity with institutional control and the maintenance of public order. An incipient movement in social service agencies privileges the concept of *trauma* as a heuristic for understanding the potential mental health struggles of disadvantaged service recipients. "Trauma-informed care", as this new approach has been coined, proposes that organizations view any client as having a possible history of trauma, and accordingly design programming and service delivery so as to minimize the risk of re-traumatizing them. On the face of it, this new development may present a much different side to the interlacing of mental healthcare and poverty governance. Indeed, according to psychologist Judith Herman, author of the modern classic *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), the birth of "trauma" as a psychological concept and a political issue has its origins in progressive social movements that problematized the suffering of vulnerable members of society, namely sexually abused women and children within the patriarchal family, as well as soldiers who fought their government's wars. Similarly, sociologist Thomas DeGloma found that certain social movement organizations and advocacy groups worked to expand the notion of trauma from an individual affliction to a collective experience characterizing entire categories of people victimized by unfair social arrangements. In doing so, these "trauma carriers" promoted affective solidarity between disadvantaged groups and the wider public, and they laid the rhetorical ground for demanding social remedies to social

injuries (DeGloma 2009). In these studies, the trauma lens is on the side of collective protest, political reform, and social justice.

True to these progressive affinities, the project of trauma-informed services prescribes extensive forms of institutional support and offers an inclusionary narrative to make sense of poor people's distress. As such, it appears to contain the seeds of a best-case scenario for the inclusion of therapeutic intents in social service programming and delivery – a scenario with the potential to challenge the long-standing distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor.

Discourses, however, may vary in their meanings and in the practices they support when they migrate from one field of activity to another (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003, Reed 2011). Here, I turn to 8 months of weekly visits to a social service agency and I explore how a newly adopted trauma lens affected social workers' interpretations of their clients' situation and the kind of resources they made available to them. I find that the trauma narrative functioned as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it entitled clients to symbolic and material resources earmarked for people with mental health issues. On the other hand, it could reduce their access to other resources, as the mental illness label primed service providers to doubt the accuracy of their clients' difficulties or concerns. That latter process underlined the potential for slippages from one type of mental health approach to another, since the general suspicion of mental health issues among service recipients could cover personality disorders as well as post-traumatic stress disorder in the strict sense.

Before elaborating on these findings, I introduce Somers' (1994) concept of public narrative as a frame for understanding the significance of trauma-informed care, I

summarize the official guidelines issued by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health administration, and I briefly describe the nonprofit where I conducted my observations.

Framework: Trauma-Informed Services as Progressive Narrative

Public Narratives and Social Suffering

The diffusion of 'trauma awareness' from healthcare settings to social services is significant not only by comparison to psychiatry other mental health approaches, but also in relation to prior discourses animating the policies and practices of the welfare state – especially the invidious trope of "the undeserving poor" (Katz 1990). The concept of narrative is a useful tool for exploring the implications of this new development.

Margaret Somers, in her 1994 agenda-setting piece, theorizes the importance of narratives to organize one's life and its unfolding. In particular she highlights the importance of public narratives (such as the American Dream, the idea of progress through hard work) to the creation of ontological narratives (stories about who we are as individuals). A key aspect of social suffering is the collapse of these life-organizing narratives (Auyero and Swistun 2009, Silva 2013, Wilkinson 2005).

In the specific case of poverty, the suffering associated with being unable to function fully in the American market society can be conceptualized as a painful gap between the general narrative arc of a life well-lived (education, graduation, work, self-sufficiency, family) and the realities of life in poor neighborhoods (low graduation rates, scarce opportunities for living-wage jobs, unstable relationships, pervasive incarceration, early parenthood). Furthermore, the poor's deviation from the standard narrative arc becomes ground for their vilification, when the way they organize their lives under scarcity becomes reinterpreted as evidence of sexual promiscuity, irresponsibility, and

dangerousness. The experience of social suffering is thus inextricably tied to the sense-making narratives available to people in different social positions.

Narratives are cultural material produced and maintained in a variety of social locations. But the narrative work done by state institutions is particularly consequential, because (a) it is widely publicized, (b) it both influences and justifies policies, and (c) the implementation of these policies, in turn, organizes the allocation of resources and services at the federal, state, and/or local level.

The "undeserving poor" is a much studied, and still consequential form of narrative work by the welfare state (Fraser and Gordon 1994, Katz 1990, Steensland 2006). In this context, trauma-informed services appear as a competing narrative for understanding and addressing the sorrows of poverty.

Trauma-Informed Services

In recent years, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a division of the US department of Health and Human Services, has issued guidelines for "trauma-informed care", a service delivery approach that (a) emphasizes awareness of the prevalence of trauma, (b) recognizes the consequences of trauma for behavior, and (c) seeks to "anticipate and avoid institutional processes and individual practices that are likely to retraumatize individuals who already have histories of trauma" (SAMHSA 2012, 2014:20). These guidelines recognize poverty as a risk factor for trauma (SAMHSA 2014:67), and though primarily intended for behavioral health providers, they are also advertised to social service agencies.[33]

[33] Note also that the distinction between behavioral/mental health providers and social service agencies can be fuzzy in itself, since many social programs – especially of the "wrap-around" kind – include a

In contrast to the discourse of (un)deservingness, SAMHSA's trauma-informed approach offers an inclusionary narrative: it defines various behaviors for which the poor have been vilified (such as substance abuse, violence, or involvement in illegal activities) as results of prior psychological injuries rather than moral deviance. It thus normalizes 'problem behaviors' as understandable reactions to adversity, and places the onus on service providers to adapt to victims' behaviors. In this perspective, suffering entitles people to better care from service agencies, and from society in general. Moreover, this approach emphasizes the strengths of trauma survivors and the importance for the service provider to empower them, by, in part, including them in the design and evaluation of the services they receive. Guidelines for trauma-informed services, however, also highlight the emotional, biological, and cognitive "dysregulation" that comes from traumatic experiences. Though the guidelines are designed to increase clients' entitlement to better service delivery, and are intent on "highlight[ing] resilience over pathology"[34], a trauma diagnosis still implies that the service provider should view the client as being in an abnormal emotional, biological and cognitive state. This labeling effect might therefore mitigate the inclusionary intent of trauma-informed services.

How does this tension play out in the agencies that seek to implement a trauma-informed approach? How does the narrative of trauma awareness affect social service institutions' management of poverty-related distress? So far I have treated trauma-informed services as a text to be analyzed for its salient themes and implications, which is what most narrative analysis does. But to understand the efficacy of a narrative in actual

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mandatory or optional mental counseling component. This overlap in missions might well be an earlier sign of the rise of the poverty-as-trauma narrative.

[34] Elliot et al. (2005), cited by SAMHSA (2014:12).

practice, we need to turn our attention to the deployment of that narrative in specific social settings (Polletta et al. 2011). In other words, we need to develop an ethnography of narrative practices in context. I seek to do so, albeit in a very preliminary way, in the following case study of a social service agency for low-income men.

Fieldwork in a State Satellite

Street-level bureaucracies are one of the most consequential contexts for the deployment of poverty-related narratives (Lipsky 1980/2010, Watkins-Hayes 2009). In our times of public service decentralization and devolution (Van Slyke 2003), these bureaucracies are more fragmented, and frontline providers are found in various nonprofit organizations contracted by the state to deliver its services. Fathers and Workers, which I have described in the Data section of the introductory chapter, is one of these "state satellites" (Haney 2010): it is funded by grants from the federal government and the state of New Jersey to implement two aspects of the 1996 welfare reform – the promotion of "responsible fatherhood"[35] and the fulfillment of work requirements for welfare benefits – as well as to help with prisoner reentry.

Fathers and Workers, however, is also funded by private money from individual and corporate donors, and it offers its services to any man residing in the city who wishes to take advantage of them. Like most state satellites, FW is a "hybrid organization" (Haney 2010), characterized by multiple missions, publics, and sources of funding. FW's trauma-processing group, begun in November 2014, reflects that hybridity. Connor, the manager of the fatherhood program, started this group because he estimated that many

[35] See Curran and Abrams (2000) on the responsible fatherhood component of PRWORA.

men in the community suffered from trauma and "undiagnosed mental illness"–an assessment he is not alone in making (see Collins et al. 2010). Connor obtained a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson's Community of Health initiative, and used it to fund overtime for himself, the presence of a therapist during group, and dinner for the participants. He invited to the group clients of FW from the fatherhood, the employment, and the halfway-house programs. Though, as explained above, these men had often not chosen to become FW's clients, they were free to choose whether to sign up for this group, and whether to attend any given session. They could also bring friends from outside FW who they thought might like the group, though Connor reserved the right to cap attendance if the group became too large.

The group ran weekly for sixteen weeks in 2014-2015, until the grant money ran out. It resumed from November 2015 to February 2016, after Connor secured the grant for a second time. In the first period, Connor co-led the group with Janeria, a family therapist and social worker whose day job was in a correctional facility. In 2015-2016, ToShawn, also a therapist and social worker, replaced Janeria.

I requested permission from both Connor and the participants to sit in on the trauma group as an observer and researcher, and I re-introduced myself every time a new member joined. During group sessions I did not use any audio-recorder and I wrote very few things down, so as not to make participants uncomfortable. I took detailed notes immediately after the group session. In November 2015 I also attended a training and discussion workshop on trauma-informed care organized for FW's staff and other nonprofit and social workers.

Findings: A double-edged sword

Hearing frontline workers discuss their clients' mental health needs among themselves, as well as observing them interact with clients within the framework of trauma-informed and trauma-specific services, has allowed me to capture the nuances and contradictions attached to the deployment of the trauma lens in social services. In conversations among themselves, caseworkers and managers professed the importance of empowering clients and recognizing their strengths and resilience, but also portrayed their clients as damaged and in need of strong guidance. During Fathers and Workers' trauma group, the mental health lens entitled clients to an attentive ear, kindness, and the practice of some behavioral skills. These benefits are not to be dismissed: they contribute to participants' "interactional citizenship" (Colomy and Brown 1996) and may also enrich their repertoire of everyday coping strategies. However, the same trauma lens also worked to minimize the importance of clients' concerns, allowing social workers to chalk them up to the hyperarousal typical of traumatized individuals. In this way, it disentitled social service clients from the freedom to define their own needs, and from more concrete forms of assistance.

Acceptance and Affirmation: Shoring up clients' interactional citizenship

Several qualitative studies have found that state bureaucracies' ordinary dealings with vulnerable populations curtail the latter's "interactional citizenship", "the set of vague and diffuse but vitally felt expectations and obligations that pertain to interactional displays of respect, and dignity for the person" (Colomy and Brown 1996: 375, cited in Auyero 2012). Auyero (2012) interprets the long and costly waits imposed by Argentinean state institutions on those who need their services (welfare recipients,

foreigners requesting naturalization, shantytown dwellers awaiting relocation) as a key mechanism in the subjection and domination of marginalized populations. Similarly, Walker and his colleagues, in a comparative study involving seven countries, find that recipients of state aid frequently experience humiliation in their interactions with the employees in charge of dispensing benefits (Walker et al. 2013).

Contrary to these examples, I have observed FW staff aim, deliberately and self-consciously, to shore up their program participants' interactional citizenship. The trauma group is a prime site for this, as it is explicitly set up as a space of equality and mutual respect.

Connor opened the first session of each installment of the group with a short speech, in which he explained that the group was owned by its participants, and that it would only work if reciprocal trust was built among all. He insisted that he was "no better than you", and illustrated the point by drawing a pyramid on the white board, then striking it and replacing it with a circle: he was not at the top dispensing knowledge, but we were all in a circle, sharing experiences and supporting one another toward our respective goals. "I learn from you too," he added. "This group might be therapeutic for me as well." To make good on his words – and perhaps because he enjoyed it, too – he often discussed his own experience, that of a biracial, divorced father who grew up in the projects without knowing his own father. Some participants also enforced this display of equal standing among all present: when Bart, an often vocal participant, saw that the therapist and I hadn't written our information on the sign-in sheet, he demanded that we do, since he'd had to do it. Later he said that if he was going to talk about "his shit" he

needed to know about all of us, a statement which ToShawn and Connor met with strong approval.

Beyond equality, safety and acceptance were the other professed features of the group. As we will see below men did share extremely personal and difficult experiences during sessions. After every story, Connor said "thank you" – which might seem trivial or perfunctory but still serves to enforce the Goffmanian imperative to protect others' face after they've disclosed potentially stigmatizing information. And indeed, when a participant expressed outrage or sadness, he was often met with empathy from the other men: "I feel you" and affirmative "Uh-uh"'s punctuated every session. Connor also used a studied, soothing voice, to deflect hostility between participants or directed at himself. At the end of one session in March 2015, Bart crumpled the handout instead of taking it with him and threw it on the table towards Connor, saying "No offense but this reminded me of too much." Connor simply replied: "None taken, I understand."

The group thus offered several immediate benefits to its participants: a surface agreement over moral acceptance and equality between participants and providers, individualized attention, and a safe space to recount difficult experiences or express extreme feelings.

Discredited Subjectivities

Despite the entitlement to care and respect manifested in the group, when service providers discussed group sessions afterwards, clients' stories and concerns became interpreted as symptoms of individual disorders—rather than viewed as reflections of their circumstances or considered as problems to be solved through the provision of services other than counseling. The setting of the therapy group, in which the trauma

narrative prevailed and framed the interpretation of what was said and done, seemed to partially suspend the organization's mission to provide concrete, material support to men facing hardship. This process is particularly salient in the case of two men: Bart, whom we've met earlier, and Shiloh.

Shiloh is a tall black man in his fifties, who often smelled of alcohol when I saw him at FW or on the street, who liked to play chess and teach it to other FW clients, and who served in the military from 1983 to 1994. Before and during sessions, he often talked about the horrors he witnessed and the violence he committed in the army. He frequently spoke of an easily activated "kill switch" in his mind, one that he needs to keep off when he is provoked or threatened with violence on the street. He described himself as peaceful ("I'm a monk") but also ready to defend himself and dangerous if provoked, because his "hands are weapons."

One night, after a session that Shiloh alone had attended, Connor and Janeria were discussing their assessments and immediately agreed that they didn't believe anything Shiloh had said that day – or any other day – because, in Connor's words, Shiloh "postures too much." For example, Shiloh said he had four sons who were in college or had completed it, and cited their majors. To Connor and Janeria that sounded too good to be true – though Connor himself grew up in the projects, struggled with addiction like Shiloh, and has children who are doing well in school. Also, after I mentioned that my husband is German, Shiloh spoke a few sentences in German and explained that he had grown up in the Ruhr area as an "army baby." When I mentioned this to Connor, he scoffed at the possibility – though the few German sentences uttered by Shiloh were correct and many African-Americans were stationed in West Germany after WWII.

More importantly, Connor and Janeria did not believe that Shiloh had served in the military, even less that he saw combat. Janeria declared in a definitive tone: "I don't know what happened to him, but he must have dissociated and invented everything." This is not a trivial sentence: the first part, "I don't know what happened to him," indicates that Janeria thought something traumatic – and undisclosed – had happened to Shiloh. The second part, "he dissociated and invented everything," meant that what he did disclose was dismissed as an armor of self-protective lies. In that assessment, I see the meeting of two sets of professional dispositions: first, those of an experienced social worker, who has often been lied to over the course of her career and has learned to cultivate both outward understanding and inner skepticism toward her clients; second, those of a mental health expert, who has the semantic authority to interpret signs of illness for more than what they appear to be. Both these interpretive frames converged to make Janeria and Connor radically doubt what their patient said.

Bart is the other man whose treatment best exemplifies the double-edged sword of the trauma lens. A short white man dressed in baggy pants and hoodies, he describes himself as an honorary black man and has two (elective, some would say "fictive") siblings who are black. This racial self-identification is a strong marker of social background: he grew up and still lives in poor, majority-black neighborhoods, and sees whites as The Man. When he was 18 he did a stint in prison, immediately followed by residential treatment in a psychiatric hospital. He was 36 in late 2014, and hadn't seen his two young children in 11 months because of a restraining order filed by their mother. Unlike Shiloh, who is always composed and speaks in a quiet voice, Bart is nervous, gets up and raises his voice easily. The stories he told before and during group sessions were

always full of violence – the one he experienced at the hands of others and the one he imposed on them. He readily fights moral trespassers: people who attack him, who talk ill of his mother, or, most importantly, who hurt children (his as well as children in general). He spoke often and vehemently of his ethical code: never touch women and always protect children. This code, he says, organizes his use of violence.

One day in February 2015 he came in with a broken nose and deep bite marks on his upper back and arms. He explained that, a few days earlier, he had fought with his own brother, who had grabbed Bart's baby niece (i.e., the brother's daughter) from her mother's arms and thrown her. Bart had caught the baby before she hit the ground and then beaten his brother. His brother had punched and bitten him. From the story it wasn't clear how the fight itself ended but Bart called the police and had his brother arrested. Shiloh, who was friends with Bart at the time, confirmed the story. He added that it was not the first time Bart got bitten by his brother.

In another session, Bart talked about his concern, and anger, with his children's maternal uncle. One early morning, as he was riding the bus to his job as a janitor, he called his ex-girlfriend, and while on the phone, he heard her brother slap his children in the background. He thought he was going to "lose it" in public, but steeled himself because he had to stay on the bus and go to work. Then, a little later during the same group session, Connor explained that if children still wet their beds by the age of 4 or 5, it could be a sign of sexual abuse. Bart jumped: "I'm going to kill my kids' uncle! I'm going to kill him!" He then explained that his five-year-old son was still wetting his bed, though he was generally tough and unafraid. Connor and Janeria tried to calm him down and told him not to jump to conclusions. As his voice broke, Bart revealed that "this"

(i.e., abuse) had happened to him and he couldn't let that happen to his kids. Silence ensued, and then Connor's soft voice: "I understand". The rest of the session was tense and when we approached the end, Bart declared he was so upset he was ready to kill someone. Looking in my direction and away from Bart, Janeria made a semi-frightened, semi-disgusted face, as if more shocked by the inappropriate talk than by the distress it expressed. Connor said, "no, man" in his soothing voice. At a loss, I offered to do a breathing exercise together and Connor piggy-backed on the suggestion, but Bart refused. He said he was ready to go, that he needed to "smoke a cigarette and go to a bar". Connor offered Bart to come talk the next day. Bart replied that he needed to check his work schedule. Bart and Shiloh left together, Shiloh reassuring Bart he was "there with him" and reassuring us that he would "look out for" Bart. Though the FW fatherhood program specializes in advising non-custodial fathers, nobody addressed the concrete worry at the origin of Bart's outburst: how could he ensure his children's safety while not being allowed to see them? What formal or informal steps could he take to have someone check on them?

That night, after the end of group, Connor and Janeria sighed and commiserated over how difficult Bart and Shiloh were – Bart, in particular. Janeria whispered with intensity: "he is a *borderline personality*! And that thing about his kids' uncle! He was just spoiling for a fight. He grabbed onto whatever we gave him." Connor agreed with that label, though neither he nor Janeria had had access to Bart's medical records, and at the time, they had only known him for a few weeks.

Bart didn't come back the next day to see Connor. But he returned to FW a couple of weeks later, in April, to ask Connor whether he had seen Shiloh lately. Bart had been

fired from his position as an office cleaner – a job that required him to commute for two and a half hours each way, but in which he took so much pride that he often wore the purple hoodie inscribed with the cleaning company's name, asking everyone around to admire it and saying that he didn't care what people thought about the color purple on men[36]. After Bart's firing, Shiloh had taken over his position. Bart saw this as a betrayal calling for violent revenge. Connor denied any knowledge of Shiloh's whereabouts, urged Bart to calm down, and finally sent him on his way, persuaded that he had more bark than bite.

After their falling out, I never saw Bart and Shiloh together again, though they had been fixtures of the downtown sidewalks and parks. (I did see them separately, however, and to my knowledge, no physical harm came to Shiloh despite Bart's threats.) By then, the first iteration of the trauma group had come to an end. When it resumed, in November 2015, Bart came back to it but Shiloh stayed away. Bart continued to speak about his children at each session of the group. The number of months since he had last seen them continued to mount.

The mental illness lens entitled Bart to kindness and patience but disentitled him from any concrete help with his concern. His worries and discourse were discredited and delegitimized by the improvised diagnosis of "borderline personality." In his and Shiloh's

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[36] The color purple, any reference to Alice Walker's novel aside, had two main connotations in this context: first, it could be seen as a girl's color and diminish a man's claim to masculinity. Second, it is one of the colors associated with the Crips gang, an offshoot of which is active in Trenton. Bart proudly defied both meanings and the risks they presented. With bravado, he explained (to me, Connor, and other FW clients present) that he was respected ("known") enough that he could wear his purple sweater and walk into the Donnelly homes, a public housing complex dominated by Bloods, without anyone bothering him. That declaration, combined with his general swagger, also reaffirmed his manliness, and thus countered the first purple threat. Instead of submitting to the general meanings of the color he wore, Bart crafted his hoodie into a symbol of his individuality, his independence of spirit, and his honor as a hard worker.

disclosures, I heard stories from brutal lives, where violence and abuse are pervasive and therefore guide people's concerns and interpretations. Connor and Janeria heard lies and exaggerations from mentally ill men.

Ironic Effects: Shiloh's "Disability"

It is important to note, however, that the link between the label of mental illness and access to material resources doesn't always function in the same way. A recognized mental disorder can give someone access to specifically earmarked resources. A couple of months after the first iteration of the trauma group had ended, I ran into Shiloh on the street, and he asked if I, with my graduate school connections, knew any medical doctors who would accept to certify him as suffering from a mental disorder. He wanted to apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), which requires recipients to be low-income and disabled. Shiloh formulated his question as a request for a somewhat illicit favor, complete with winks and low voice. His definition of the situation, which he expected me to share, was that he was not ill, but wanted a "retarded check" to make his life easier, while he worked off the books on the side. Unfortunately for Shiloh, I could not help. Another couple of months later, in October, I learned from Connor that Shiloh did get SSI, and that Connor had helped him with the application because he thought Shiloh's alcoholism was indeed hindering his ability to work and could justifiably be considered a disability. There, Shiloh's and Connor's diverging interpretations of Shiloh's mental health *helped* Shiloh secure an important resource.

Zooming back out: The social work relationship

The interactions recounted above are significant and, I argue, suggestive of a new twist in the complicated history that ties poor populations to social service agencies and their

street-level bureaucrats. These episodes, however, do not represent the full extent of the relationship between Connor and his clients. Nor do they capture all the ways in which Connor used a mental health lens to make sense of his work and life. To understand why the mental health lens presents both promises and pitfalls in social services, it is worth zooming back out and considering Connor as someone who exemplifies both the goodwill and the tensions at the heart of social workers' relationship to clients.

The April day when Connor told me about Bart asking him for clues as to Shiloh's whereabouts, he chuckled at Bart's hyperbolic fury: 'Imma put a contract on his [Shiloh's] head!' Bart had declared. But Connor also shook his head and briefly put his face to his left hand, rubbing his tired eyes with a thumb and middle finger before raising his head again. This is what he had to deal with every day. Three months before, in the dead of winter, Connor had asked me if I knew the concept of "compassion fatigue."[37] He'd come across an article about it and recognized his experience in it. I had read about the concept but at the time, a few months into our acquaintance, I would not have thought to apply it to Connor, who seemed an endless well of energy, friendliness, and banter. I believed Connor when he said he felt burdened by the emotional demands of his job, but for many months I could not detect the signs of his exhaustion in his jovial behavior. That spring afternoon, however, when he tiredly shook his head, half laughing and half despairing at Bart and Shiloh's spat, I saw clearly both the compassion and the fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is a serious issue, with consequences for both service providers and recipients (Figley 2002; Zacka 2017). But it is only one of the tensions at the heart of social work – possibly an outcrop of the more fundamental contradictions

[37] See Figley (1995, 2002) for a classic discussion of compassion fatigue.

animating poverty work. Fernández-Kelly (2015) calls the various agencies of poverty governance "liminal institutions," as they occupy a shadow zone between explicit commitments to benefiting vulnerable populations and latent functions of repression, surveillance, and control. The burden of navigating this institutional ambivalence falls to social workers, making them "adversarial allies" to the populations they serve (Kelly and Chapman 2015). These dynamics can be compounded by what Schram (2000) calls "advanced marginality" and Wacquant (2001) "custodianship," that is the process by which one of disadvantaged minorities' main paths out of poverty is to cross over into poverty management. These "welfare bureaucrats" with a lived experience of poverty and discrimination find themselves in the position to administer to others from similar backgrounds, which gives rise to a range of adaptations, from identification to distinction through attempts at racial uplift (Watkins-Hayes 2009).

Connor illustrates these layered contradictions. The biracial son of a white single mother, he grew up in one of the Trenton projects which the city has now converted into affordable senior housing. His ebullient mind let him graduate from high school while devouring Rastafari philosophy and developing an encyclopedic knowledge of post-1970s music. He began college, but the confluence of addiction issues and unplanned fatherhood led him to drop out at age 19. Since then, he has always worked as "a helper of people:" he started as an aide in a home for people with mental and developmental challenges, then moved on to being a patient advocate at a large behavioral health agency targeted at low-income people, a career counselor for public assistance recipients, and finally the manager of Fathers and Workers' fatherhood program.

Connor saw himself not as a delegated agent of the state but as an agent of change and social justice. He often scoffed at the mass processing of job seekers at the county's career center, compared to the individualized attention he and his colleagues were giving FW's clients. On our very first meeting, he proudly mentioned that FW used its private donations to serve men who didn't fit the eligibility criteria of government grants. Together with another colleague he organized evening screenings of documentaries on social issues and obtained permission for the halfway-house participants to stay after hours in order to attend. Before showing *The House I Live In*, a documentary on the war on drugs, he offered an introduction on the Rockefeller laws and sentencing disparities; after the film, he led a discussion centered on Michelle Alexander's claim that mass incarceration constitutes a New Jim Crow (Alexander 2012).

If Connor interpreted his clients' predicament as resulting from sociopolitical injustices, he also saw them as men who, much like he had himself, struggled with addiction, impulsive behavior, poor choices, and a limited sense of the world's possibilities. "Our men," as he called FW's clients, needed education and guidance. In addition, regardless of his broader political commitments, the daily exigencies of his work had to do with localized and constrained – if creative – action: obtaining one more grant, linking a client to a specific resource, adding a new class to the agency's programming, staying within budget. Within these parameters, he still had great ambitions and attempted to provide 'his men' with comfort, practical guidance, and knowledge fit to deepen their self-understanding, improve their parenting and co-parenting relationships, and expand their horizons.

An autodidact and voracious reader, he sought to work his new discoveries into his clients' curriculum and was proud to tell attendees in his fatherhood class that he was bringing them college-level materials. One week the class discussed Khalil Gibran's poem "On Children" (Gibran 1923), the next Connor guided them through the legal maze of child support enforcement recourses, and another one he introduced them to the tenets of Martin Seligman's school of positive psychology (e.g., Seligman 2002). He installed a Little Free Library box in his office and furnished it with his own books. At the trauma group, he insisted on serving dinner, and used it as an opportunity to share his own project of enlarging his food repertoire and improving his nutrition. Every week he served comfort foods (pizza, chicken, fried rice), plus one item he regarded as both more adventurous and healthier (cucumber water, sushi, mixed salads). From the restricted environment of his childhood, Connor had grown to revel in the many wonders of the world and wanted to be a conduit for his clients to access them.

It is in the context of these pursuits that Connor decided to start his evening group and to introduce its participants to the S.E.L.F. model of trauma-processing[38] and other notions of mental health. If his avid reading had helped him make sense of his own struggles with addiction and his sister's chronic depression, why not share it with the men of Fathers and Workers? For Connor viewed many everyday occurrences through the lens of mental health. One day we met for lunch in Princeton, we sat outside and discussed projects he had for Fathers and Workers. An elderly woman, seated at the next table over, heard parts of our conversation and, as we were leaving, asked us whether we were

[38] SELF stands for safety, emotion, loss, and future. It is part of the Sanctuary Model of trauma-informed care. See: http://sanctuaryweb.com/Products/SELFGroupCurriculum.aspx

volunteering at one of Princeton's nonprofits, citing several names. She was glad to hear that Connor worked in Trenton, which according to her didn't receive enough attention, and then proceeded to tell us about her own commitment to helping vulnerable people through her church. Connor cut her short before she could finish the enumeration of her church's actions, though he sweetened the interruption with a warm smile and an apology. As I walked him back to his car, he explained: "When you've worked with people with mental health issues like that, you know that at some point you got to stop them or they'll go on forever." Connor also turned the mental health lens on himself: at the fatherhood program graduation in the fall of 2015, before the ceremony started, Connor was standing outside to direct guests to the correct room of the rented venue, and he looked gloomy. As soon as I greeted him and asked how he was doing, he declared: "Ugh, I don't know, Ekédi… I'm having mental health issues today." He then explained that he had gotten very little credit for a project he had been spearheading at FW and felt deeply upset about it, more than he thought he should. The category of "mental health issues", in Connor's use, seemed to work as a catch all for a range of uncomfortable behaviors and emotional experiences[39]. Naming is a form of mastery over the world, and the language of mental health makes it possible to name all sorts of trouble, even in a vague way.

Applied to Connor's demanding work, the mental health lens served a similar function. By categorizing his clients' unruly behaviors and intricate issues as mental

[39] Connor is not alone in using mental health categories in this way. Scheff (1966) famously argued that mental illness labeling is a reaction to "residual rule-breaking" – breaches in acceptable behavior that have not be accounted for in other ways. Later, Thoits (1985) theorized that self-labeling follows a similar process: people label themselves as mentally disturbed when they persistently experience feelings and reactions that they consider inappropriate and therefore threatening to their social identity.

disorders, he made them either manageable within the confines of his mission and resources (Shiloh's disability application) or rejected them as outside his purview (Bart's borderline personality disorder). In this way, the trauma lens and its mental health derivative may serve as a tool for overextended social workers to guard against too much compassion and its corollary fatigue.

Conclusion

Theoretical Implications

Though the trauma narrative is intended as grounds for solidarity with and entitlement of survivors – and may well work that way when enacted by social movements that militate on their behalf – it can also work to discredit those diagnosed with a traumatic disorder, especially in the context of a parastate institution with a contradictory mandate (part help, part social control) and insufficient resources. The example of Fathers and Workers shows that the trauma narrative does make the poor highly eligible for and deserving of care. But this is not the same thing as treating them as full-fledged citizens. Deservingness isn't synonymous with inclusion or equality.

An alternative conceptual framework may be needed if we want to take the social distribution of hardship seriously, without succumbing to the "empire of trauma" (Fassin and Rechtman 2009) and its construction of sufferers as irremediably damaged (Scheper-Hughes 2008). The concept of trauma itself may not be the best suited to understand lives that are shot-through with violence and adversity. Through a trauma lens, we tend to see extreme hardship as occurring in the form of punctual events that disrupt our taken-for-granted expectations about how life should go. Though the concept of trauma remains essential, combining it with an attention to narrative will help us conceptualize – and

perhaps alleviate – suffering that does not result from bounded crises in an otherwise calm life, but rather pervades everyday life and shifts the entire ground of expectations for what normalcy means. This opens the way for a pluralistic understanding of emotional conditions, one that doesn't view people as normal or abnormal, regulated or dysregulated, but rather as shaped by, and more or less adapted to, different social circumstances.

Policy implications

As chapter 2 did in the context of intimate relationships, chapters 3 and 4 home in on a deep form of ambivalence plaguing the kinds of support available to people in poverty, but this time the ambivalence is on the part of public institutions (Fernández-Kelly 2015). As previously, I argue for policies that resolve the ambivalence by increasing disadvantaged people's entitlements to public action that seeks to redress their plight rather than correct their flaws.

While medical labels should not obscure the social origins of poverty's sorrows and the need for structural changes in order to address them, mental health counseling and treatment may nevertheless be useful to people already marked by painful life histories, such as Victoria, Swing, Bart, or Shiloh. However, such services being made available for free, or on the recommendation of an agent of the state, should not justify their failing to meet the basic tenets of the therapeutic relationship: person-centered care and confidentiality.

Although the term "person-centered" is associated with the specific school of "humanistic therapy" developed by Carl Rogers (1951), the underlying idea is present in many mental health approaches, from the "working alliance" of psychoanalysis (Bordin

1979) through more recent experiments with "therapeutic communities" for people with addiction (Pickard 2017). For the purposes of the current discussion, it may suffice to recall the essential and rather obvious idea that therapy and treatment should be conducted to meet the patient's own needs and goals. Taking such a step wouldn't necessarily resolve the dilemma posed by Benji/Swing in chapter 3, since the definition of his needs within the psychotherapeutic and psychiatric framework is fraught in itself and furthermore, given his young age, the negotiation over such a definition has to be delegated at least in part to his caregivers. For the other Swings of this world, hope probably lies less in a retooled approach to psychiatric treatment than in interventions addressing the root cause of childhood insecurity and distress (starting with his family's experience of hardship), as well as in increasing schools' capacity to respond to troubled and troublesome behavior without excluding the child from mainstream education (Winship, Razer and Friedman 2018). But going back to the basics of patient-centered care may make a difference in other cases. In Victoria's case, for instance, this would have meant giving her access to the psychological counseling she wanted in the wake of her 2016 eviction without the added condition of submitting to urine tests whose results would be transmitted to the office of Child Protection and Permanency (CPP). And today it would mean that, beyond the initial assessment of her criminal responsibility in the arson case, her choice of mental health care should not affect the success of her judicial supervision and her risk of long-term incarceration.

The official guidelines for trauma-informed care (SAMHSA 2014) do take a person-centered approach and recommend that the client a) define her situation from the outset and b) be constantly included in the design and evaluation of the services she will

receive. But as we have seen at Fathers and Workers, a significant gap may separate guidelines from their implementation. A client-centered approach is not incompatible with group therapy, but even so, it necessitates time and continuity to develop. As such, it cannot rest on the shoulders of a couple of overstretched employees working overtime and funded through short-term grants. Even for palliation, real investments are necessary.

The other basic dimension of therapeutic care is confidentiality, and this has direct bearings on the current nesting of counseling services within more repressive institutions of poverty governance. Based on her ethnography of pre-natal care for poor women, legal scholar Khiara Bridges (2017) argues that women who enroll in Medicaid and other means-tested programs effectively have to renounce their privacy rights to access basic services. This infringement upon poor citizens' privacy rights has particularly dire consequences when other powerful institutions are already scrutinizing them. To go back to Victoria, reporting duties to other offices of the state are part of what made her encounters with mental health professionals so symbolically violent and therapeutically counterproductive: in the first case, the mental health and addiction agency was contracted by the office of Child Protection and Permanency that had just investigated her for possible child neglect; in the second, ongoing one, she herself has to provide the New Jersey court system with proof of her "compliance" with recommended treatments. Some reporting duties are probably unavoidable, and even desirable in the extreme cases where a person is a danger to herself or others. Smoking marijuana, or undergoing treatment for a possible mental disorder that is not associated with risk of harm, do not seem to qualify.

The argument for confidentiality applies to services beyond health care in the strict sense: people participating in educational and other rehabilitative programs would benefit from a legal guarantee of confidentiality as well. About a year after he'd secured funding from the New Jersey Office of Child Support (OCS) for his fatherhood program, Connor realized that his reporting duties, which appeared light at first glance, meant that OCS could use the roster of attendees in his fatherhood class to levy sanctions on those men who were in arrears. Connor was both outraged and disheartened when he discovered the actions taken by OCS against "[his] men." Participants in his fatherhood program were all men surviving on unemployment insurance for the lucky ones or on the meager sums of New Jersey's General Assistance benefits ($140 in monthly cash for a single adult). As part of the FW program they were expected not only to attend the weekly fatherhood class, but also to search for jobs or training programs in order to improve their economic circumstances. When OCS "came after them" with wage garnishing, these men became even more destitute; when they were given short jail terms for non-payment, they mechanically failed to report to their jobs or training activities – which, if they were concurrently subjected to weekly work requirements under the terms of Work First New Jersey, could result in administrative sanctions and the suspension of their cash assistance. For supportive services to actually function as such, they need to be insulated from the more punitive sectors of poverty governance, instead of serving as a conduit for potentially devastating sanctions.

In emphasizing confidentiality and insulation, I am not advocating for a complete absence of coordination between different institutions. Megan Comfort and colleagues (2015), in a project that combined the collection of ethnographic data with the provision

of intensive casework for hypermaginalized people, have powerfully demonstrated that the current levels of coordination (between housing services, health care, and the criminal justice system) already result in "organizational irrationality" and the locking of vulnerable individuals between contradictory institutional requirements. Better coordination in the interest of service recipients, however, should be compatible with limits on the kind of information transmitted across services and its subsequent use. Even more importantly, institutions of poverty governance should aim to step out of the shadow of liminality by reevaluating their tendency to interpret destitute people's vulnerabilities and challenges as willful offenses calling for sanctions.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has invited you to go small, down the path of a single family's life, in order to return with larger lessons, about the challenges faced by similarly poor families, but also about the broader social organization that creates the possibility of their predicament in the first place. The terms of many political and scholarly debates assume that studying poor people teaches us about deprivation and only that, as if poverty were its own fenced-up enclave and researching it could not tell us about the world beyond its walls. As the previous pages have hopefully demonstrated (and eminent others have argued before), disadvantage is not a bounded thing, an island condition that only affects its residents – though they are, of course, the most wronged by it. It is a relation between different segments of society, shaped and sustained by institutional arrangements as well as cultural schemas (Desmond 2015, Fernández-Kelly 2015, O'Connor 2001, Wacquant 2010). Consequently, the view from inside a poor family's life has informed us on the specific travails of chronic scarcity and adversity – including how they shape bodies, hearts, minds, and personal relationships – but it has also served as a revelatory device for shedding light on the assumptions, narratives, and policies that frame all of our lives: the material requirements shaping one's chances at a fulfilling intimate life in a market-driven society; the dilemmas of autonomy and interdependence in an era that both lionizes individualism and sanctifies loving connections; and the merging of care and violence involved in the medicalization of social suffering.

In other words, severe deprivation is a privileged site of analysis for uncovering and illuminating the dilemmas that people, through a social organization all participate in creating but none control, impose on one another, and then cover up as essential qualities

of a particular subgroup of individuals. This approach and this commitment locate the work presented here in the lineage of inquiries into exploitation, oppression, hegemony, and domination. For much of sociology's history as a discipline, these processes have been investigated and theorized in relation to labor and public life. Following in the footsteps of feminist scholars (Illouz 2007, 2012), sociologists of emotion and the family (Hochschild 1983, 1989), and anthropologists of social suffering (Bourgois 1987, Scheper-Hughes 1992, Biehl 2005), I have sought to extend the field of struggle to the sphere of intimate life, and to return with lessons for the collective fostering of *intimate justice* (Threadcraft 2014).

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