



Looking Out: Hope, Help, and Friendship Between Poor, Teenaged Girls

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Looking Out: Hope, Help, and Friendship Between Poor, Teenaged Girls

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Committee on Higher Degrees in Sociology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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in the subject of

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And Professor Michèle Lamont

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Abstract

Experiences during adolescence can determine long-term life chances. Much research shows how, for poor teens, the peer group can be a risk factor. “Peer effects” spread risk behaviors, and peer influence threatens teens’ wellbeing and success.

By contrast, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over four years with two cliques of poor teenaged girls in North Cambridge, Massachusetts, I show how young women helped each other cope, thrive, aspire, and achieve. Through their constant connection—facilitated, in part, by cell phones and social media—the girls sourced and generated a wide range of resources. By supporting one another day-to-day and also in times of strain, the girls’ friendships helped mitigate some of poverty’s burdens.

The young women helped meet each other’s material needs, and in so doing, gave each other dignity and inclusion. Together they managed boredom, which researchers find can lead to petty crime for time-passing thrills. They coped jointly with emotional challenges—like instability, family conflict, and stigmatization—that they faced at home, at school, in the neighborhood, and in their community. And as girls struggled when it came to boys and dating, they tried to support one another, even when peer support

proved less effective in this realm than others.

The girls' friendships offered vital support, so they fought for their relationships when they were threatened. After traumas, including local violence or the death of peers, the girls had a patterned response to crises. Their digital rituals for mourning diverged from adult expectations, but helped the girls shield each other from downward spirals, while protecting their friendships. And, when old bonds were tested by new differences as some girls started dabbling with risk behaviors, they used a moral and interactional pragmatism to defend their relationships, rather than seeking the behavioral homophily that researchers typically find in peer groups.

This shared aid was one factor helping the girls reach their dreams of getting to college. But they all struggled when—in addition to the financial, logistical, and cultural obstacles that face low-income, first-generation college students—they lost the peer support on which they had long relied.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	vi
1. Introduction	2
<i>Part 1: Peers and Problem Solving</i>	
2. Broke: Material Support	28
3. Bored: Social Support	65
4. Emotional Support and Breakdown	100
5. Bodies, Boyfriends, and Sex	135
<i>Part 2: The Peer Group Under Threat</i>	
6. Technologies of Trauma.....	174
7. Growing Up and Apart.....	211
<i>Part 3: After Graduation</i>	
8. College Bound: Struggle and Support on Campus.....	241
9. Conclusion.....	292
Theoretical Addendum.....	313
References	341

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Looking Out:

Hope, Help, and Friendship Between Poor, Teenaged Girls

1 Introduction

Aisha rolled down the window and stuck out an arm. Spring wind whipped warm through her fingers, and she flexed her hand. Aisha rode shotgun, in charge of the music, as Najma kept her eyes on the road. Behind them, Brittani and Joanne lounged in the back. The girls were celebrating: in a few days, Joanne would be the first of the clique to turn eighteen.¹

The Dodge sped through mid-Cambridge, the residential streets quiet with Saturday afternoon's languor. The bass throbbed with the opening beats of A\$AP Rocky's familiar hit, and Aisha nudged the dial.

"Yesss!" Najma squealed. The girls laughed, their giggles coursing through the well-worn grooves of an inside joke. Najma was Indian-American. She was the only non-Black girl in the group, but the most into "hood" music.

The song shook the car and trembled through the girls. They laughed louder, and shouted snatches of lyrics. The noise and the synchrony felt good as they flew down the evenly paved road. They dared the world to have a problem.

Aisha, charged and vivacious, craned her upper body out over the rolled-down glass. She screamed the explicit chorus as they raced past fine houses hidden by hedges. A coiffed white woman tugged a small dog with a leather leash over the red-brown sidewalk.

"Be quiet! I don't have my license!" Najma scolded, grinning all the while.

Quiet wasn't Aisha's forte. When she strolled down the street, heads turned. Strangers whistled from windows, friends hollered *Heys*. Aisha expected to know everyone in the neighborhood, and she typically did.

"Oh, it's Liam Hinton's birthday," she said, as a group of boys crossed the street.

¹ Names and social media handles are pseudonyms. Place names have not been changed.

“And Farah is having a party tonight,” she nodded, tilting her head towards another clique packed onto the sidewalk. “Is that Jordan?” she squinted. “Apparently he has a white girlfriend now.” In Aisha’s hood, her stomping ground, she had a high seat in the hierarchy.

Aisha was often the center of attention. When she spoke, people listened. No one could tell a story quite like Aisha, the way she teased with tangents and timing. She used her whole body, too, commanding and expansive as she charmed and entertained. It helped that she was beautiful, though she didn’t like to dwell on that. As confident as she came off, her front plated a vulnerability that slipped sometimes into view like accidentally exposed skin. Aisha met compliments with a keen, “No!” though her voice picked up at the end, like a hint of hope these nice words might be true.

On this Saturday afternoon, Aisha turned her weekend energy inwards, facing her three best friends. She bopped on the spot, movements mimed from the dance videos they streamed on YouTube and practiced in their rooms. Her seatbelt strained to hold her, and her clique whooped her on. In the back, Joanne clapped along with Aisha and the radio.

“Boys can’t have fun like girls can, I swear!” she said. Shudders of laughter shook Joanne’s broad shoulders, bare but for the thin straps of her white tank top, and made her pendant dance on her chest.

“Right?” her friends echoed.

It was March of their senior year, and the girls were on track to graduate high school in a few months. After that, they hoped, would come college. The girls sought futures different from the past they had shared growing up in Jefferson Park, a low-rise, brown-stone housing project in North Cambridge, just two miles from Harvard’s pillars and pomp blurring by.

The girls went hard for birthdays. They loved to celebrate each other. But this day in particular, levity felt overdue after a heavy few weeks. Less than a month earlier, one of their friends from the neighborhood had been killed. Like always, grief fell like a dust that seemed to get everywhere. There was also the looming anniversary of another friend's death, a girl a grade below them at school.

As usual, Aisha and Joanne and their friends had leaned on one another to get through. The girls listened to one another's hurt, and tried to keep focused on school, work, and college applications. Growing up together, the girls had long helped each other out, not just in the hardest of times, but also day-to-day. This peer support was one of the things that helped young women get through tough teenage years, while staying on a path heading to bigger, better things.

The care, support, and love shared by young women who came of age together in a poor neighborhood is the focus of this book. By spending time with these girls and others in their community over a period of four years, I saw the versatile ways they looked out for one another. I saw the girls shore each other up and help each other out. They shared food, money, joy, stability, and other material, social and emotional goods. This peer support seemed like an important mechanism boosting wellbeing among a group of young people marginalized by poverty and racism.

However, as I read about groups of young people growing up in poor neighborhoods, like the one where Aisha and Joanne lived, I found that a great deal of research was telling a different story. Often, scholars and policymakers see close peer ties as a risk factor for poor teenagers. They focus on the spread of social problems through social networks. But the young women I met shared diverse support through their friendships, helping one another

cope, aspire, and achieve. In what follows, I summarize what existing research tells us about friendships and social dynamics between young people, especially between young people growing up in poor, urban neighborhoods. I raise some questions unanswered by existing studies, and I consider why we might have missed stories like the ones told here. I then explain how I came to know the young women in this book, and how I learned about their lives, before previewing the argument in the chapters to come.

Coming of Age

Adolescence is among the most important periods in a person's life. During these years, teenagers start forming more stable and adult identities. They develop ideas about social and sexual relationships, and they begin to assert their independence. At the same time, they undergo rapid neurological and physiological development. For adolescents, cognitive skills surrounding things like problem-solving and decision making are still budding, but the habits, skills and social identities formed in the teenage years can profoundly influence future opportunities.²

Adolescent experiences can determine trajectories for decades to follow.³ Scattered through the teenage years are important moments that researchers call "turning points," which can have highly durable consequences.⁴ Young people might get pregnant, join gangs, or get caught up with the legal system. These types of turning points are concentrated

² Clausen 1991; Schoon, Parsons, & Sacker 2004; Zeng-yin & Kaplan 2003

³ Class-, race-, and gender-based inequalities can expand during adolescence. Critically oriented research of 'reproduction' theorists focuses on the ways that social institutions, like schools, exacerbate inequities during this time. See e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles & Gintis 1977; Ferguson 2000; Willis 1977; Bettie 2003

⁴ Laub & Sampson 2003

disproportionately in high-poverty neighborhoods, like the one where Aisha and her friends lived, because teens are typically less integrated into supportive institutions, and more subject to state surveillance and punishment.⁵ This is one reason why living in a poor neighborhood as an adolescent more than doubles the likelihood of dropping out of high school, all but ending opportunities for social mobility.⁶

Teens in poor neighborhoods face further hardships. For young people like Aisha and her friends, racism, poverty, absent and overworked parents, local violence, and stigmatization were daily realities.

Given that adolescence can determine life chances, researchers explore what might boost wellbeing and development for young people. They have several ideas. Some psychologists, for instance, point to individual-level traits that help teens succeed, like skills of self-regulation, which predicts high school achievement.⁷ Angela Duckworth argues ‘grit’ makes the difference. Grit—passion and perseverance for long-term goals—associates with on-time high school graduation and with lifetime educational attainment.⁸

Sociologists take a wider view, expanding the focus on individual attributes to show how institutional and structural factors—like neighborhoods and schools—impact teenagers.

⁵ Turning points can be also especially *damaging* in poor neighborhoods, where young people are more subject to surveillance and punishment. As Ranita Ray explains, “putting one puzzle piece in the wrong place can drastically alter [young people’s] trajector[ies] as the formidable constraints of poverty ascribe great costs to seemingly inconsequential choices and leave no room for minor mistakes” (2017: p11).

⁶ Harding 2003; Haskins 2008

⁷ Duckworth & Carlson 2013

⁸ Eskreis-Winkler et al. 2014; Duckworth et al. 2007.

From the discipline's earliest days, sociologists have insisted that where we live matters.⁹ Neighborhoods might be more or less violent, more or less poor; they might have long-term, neighborly residents or tenant churn; they might have stores, libraries and churches, or they might lack services people need. All of these things make a difference, and studies find that neighborhood conditions and events impact adolescents even more than they do young children.¹⁰ Typically, high-poverty neighborhoods have more crime and violence, fewer public services, and fewer social supports than low-poverty neighborhoods.¹¹ These factors tie to teens' physical and mental health, as well as their academic achievement.

Schools also matter for young people's success and wellbeing. School size and resources make a difference, as do *who* teens go to class with, measured by factors like average student achievement and socioeconomic background.¹²

Most often, however, researchers see the family as the most critical site when it comes to adolescent development and success, with parents viewed as most responsible for youth socialization and development.¹³ Studies show that many features of families make a

⁹ Beginning with the ecological approach of the Chicago School (e.g., Park & Burgess 1925), the notion that neighborhoods influence their residents' outcomes has guided almost a century of social science research and policy initiatives, like Moving to Opportunity. For reviews of the sizable body of research examining neighborhood effects, see Johnson, 2010; Leventhal, Dupéré, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002.

¹⁰ Elliot et al 2006: p91

¹¹ E.g., McLoyd 1998; Ellen & Turner 1997

¹² E.g., Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn 1995; Jencks & Mayer 1990. Factors as diverse as school size, the level of violence, mean SES, mean student achievement all matter (Bryk & Driscoll 1988; Coleman & Hoffer 1987; Rutter et al 1979; Paulle 2013; Mayer 1991). Coleman's (1996) Equality of Educational Opportunity Report found that classmates' socioeconomic backgrounds were a more substantial predictor of an individual's success than were school resources (Coleman 1966; see also Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn 1995; Hoxby 2000, 2002).

¹³ Elliot et al 2006; for a review see Burton & Jarrett 2000

difference for young people. Household resources and family poverty impact outcomes—including educational achievement, drug abuse, and physical and mental health. Family income affects young people’s grades and school completion, even controlling for neighborhood environment.¹⁴ Dynamics at home are also important: parenting styles, parental involvement, and child monitoring practices all shape youth development.¹⁵

Individual-level traits, institutional factors, and key social and environmental contexts shape and constrain young people’s opportunities. But there is another critical factor, too, one that teens, themselves, see as the most important part of daily life: the peer group.¹⁶

Peer Effects and Social “Contagion”

The peer group is typically the most significant source of social influence for teenagers. In adolescence, parental efficacy wanes as the “parents to peers transition” leads teens to orient themselves increasingly to their friends.¹⁷ Support systems outside of the home surge in importance. For poor teens, who often have less ‘quality time’ with parents and few extra-curriculars, peers are even more important.¹⁸

¹⁴ Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, Yeung, & Smith 1998

¹⁵ E.g., Elliot et al. 2006; Furstenberg et al. 1999. Laub and Sampson 1988; Eccles & Harold 1993; Spencer & Dornbusch 1990. An *authoritative* parenting style, which combines close supervision and clearly set expectations with a degree of autonomy, can promote adjustment and achievement and reduce adolescent deviance (Larzelere & Patterson 1990; McLoyd 1990). But researchers have found that low-income parents, spurred by perceptions of neighborhood risk, are more likely to use an *authoritarian* style, which emphasizes power and obedience (Baumrind 1991; Furstenberg 1993; Jarrett 1997).

¹⁶ E.g., Corsaro and Eder 1990; Cusick 1973; Everhart 1983; Willis 1977

¹⁷ Furstenberg et al. 1999; Corsaro 1985; Corsaro & Eder 1990

¹⁸ Lareau 2002

Adolescence is a “culture of peers.”¹⁹ Teens spend hours every day with their friends, both at and after school. They socialize each other, developing norms about how to act as they grow up together.²⁰ As a result, adolescents have a large and measurable effect on one another. Researchers use the term “peer effects” to describe this impact. Since James Coleman’s *The Adolescent Society*, researchers have explored the nature and magnitude of peer effects, finding that peer influence among friends can be as large as that between siblings.²¹

Among friends, there are often correlations in realms ranging from academic achievement, social and moral values, college aspirations and more. However, in studies about poor young people in particular, researchers often focus on something else. They focus on “risk behavior,” and how peer influence boosts young people’s likelihood of things like drinking alcohol, using drugs, getting pregnancy or committing crime.²² In poor neighborhoods especially, researchers find that increased peer support predicts increased levels of antisocial behavior.²³

Quantitative research works to identify and measure peer effects, and qualitative

¹⁹ Leadbetter & Way (1996) show how age segregation throughout society leads to an adolescent culture of activities, expression and entertainment.

²⁰ E.g., Thorne 1993, Adler & Adler 1998, Corsaro & Eder 1990, Pascoe 2007

²¹ E.g., Youniss & Smollar 1985; Duncan, Boisjoly & Harris 2001. Research into peer-effects dates back at least to the work of Coleman and his colleagues (1966), who argued that middle-class students often have beliefs and behaviors that associate with greater achievement. They suggest that in schools with many middle-class students, the students create a normative climate that promotes achievement.

²² Elliot, Huizinga & Menard 1989; Beyers, Lobber, Wikstrom & Southamer-Loeber 2001; An 2011; Kremer & Levy 2008; Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993; South & Baumer 2000; Crane 1991; Shaw & McKay 1942; Danisen 1972; Kandel 1978; Akers et al. 1979; Sullivan 1989; Matsueda & Anderson 1998; Haynie 2001

²³ Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn 2000: p327

studies show *how* risk behaviors flow through social ties.²⁴ Research shows peers sharing drugs, seeking thrills or enacting violence together, or otherwise hampering success.²⁵ As a consequence, some researchers view a close peer group as a hazard to young people, and a threat to their wellbeing and mobility.²⁶ Some label peer influence a “contagion,” or an “epidemic.”²⁷ For instance, sociologist Jonathan Crane claims, “social problems are contagious and are spread through peer influence.”²⁸

It can seem that tight integration into a social group can jeopardize adolescent wellbeing. Perhaps, it appears, social isolation would better serve some young people. In a study of teenaged children of immigrants in New York City, sociologist Philip Kasinitz and his co-authors express this idea: “Whereas ‘social capital’ helps better-off groups cope with many types of trouble, being heavily ‘embedded’ in networks of reciprocal obligation among the worst off can be a real disadvantage. In such groups, many of the most successful members describe themselves as ‘loners.’”²⁹

It is not just academics who take this view, but some residents of poor neighborhoods, too. Parents of adolescents sometimes say that peers pose a risk to their children.³⁰ Some try to keep their children apart from other kids with discipline or distraction, maybe luring them

²⁴ e.g., Thrasher 1927; Whyte 1943; Sullivan 1989; Anderson 2000; Harding 2010

²⁵ MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977; Bourgois 1996; Anderson 2000

²⁶ Yet peers can be a double-edged sword, exposing young people to the threat of violence while also being *protective* from such threats (e.g., Cloward and Ohlin, 1966; Anderson, 2000; Harding, 2010)

²⁷ Jencks & Mayer 1990; Case & Katz 1991; Crane 1991

²⁸ Crane 1991: p1227

²⁹ Kasinitz et al. 2008: p350

³⁰ Waters 1999: p235

inside by adding cable subscriptions to stretched budgets.³¹ Young people themselves at times shy from social intimacy to avoid trouble or obligation.³² In journalist Alex Kotlowitz's account of Chicago's infamous Henry Horner homes, one boy, James, "figured the only way to make it out of Horner was 'to try to make as little friends as possible.'"³³

Friends can be distracting, or dangerous. Sociologist Nikki Jones studied young women in Philadelphia who used "relational isolation" to "isolate themselves from close friendships" with other young women."³⁴ Friendships carried costs, she found, like the obligation to physically defend a friend who was attacked. "Thus," Jones explains, "by avoiding close friendships, girls can reduce the likelihood of their involvement in a physical conflict."³⁵

Peers can, of course, threaten wellbeing and derail trajectories. But the focus on negative peer effects, and on the "epidemic" spread of problem behaviors through peer ties, only tells part of the story.

Friendship and Wellbeing

Friendships meet deep and profound needs for adolescents. Friends promote social and moral development, and boost emotional intelligence. Peer relationships offer intimacy and attachment. With friends, young people learn skills like negotiation and conflict management, as well as other behaviors necessary for adult relationships and integration into

³¹ E.g., Jarrett 1997; Edin & Lein 1997

³² Jones 2009: p54; Williams & Kornblum 1988; Richardson & St Vil 2016

³³ Kotlowitz 1991: p31

³⁴ Jones 2010: p54

³⁵ Jones 2010: p54

adult institutional spheres.³⁶ Friends can encourage one another, and even boost college aspirations and graduation rates.³⁷

Friends can also protect each other from strain and buffer the impact of environmental stress on mental health. Social scientists Kathleen Call and Jeylan Mortimer see the peer group as a vital “arena of comfort;” a “context for individuals to relax and rejuvenate so that... [stressful] experiences in another arena can be endured or mastered.”³⁸

Friendship is critically important for adolescents, but we know little about social bonds between young people like Aisha, Joanne, and their friends. There are a number of factors that limit the light existing research sheds on peer relationships between low-income women of color like the girls in this book.

First, a lot of research about peer ties uses quantitative methods to measure the aggregate-level impact of friends on outcomes. Such studies can capture and illuminate the power of peers to influence one other. However, they can also obscure the day-to-day interactions and influence that make up friendships, leaving us with only a partial understanding of what social bonds look like between young people.

Moreover, even qualitative research—particularly neighborhood-based urban ethnographies—tends to focus disproportionately on the social lives of certain populations,

³⁶ On the benefits of friendships for adolescents, see Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup 1998; Hartup 1993; Savin Williams & Berndt 1990; Stanton-Salazar & Spina 2005; Laursen 1983; Selman 1980; Schulman 1993; Younis 1980; Youniss & Smollar 1985; Goleman 2005. Since Mead (1934) and Vygotsky (1978), scholars have known that social interaction is essential to cognitive development and growth.

³⁷ Brown 1990; Scales & Lefter 1999; Steinberg 2001; Entwisle 1990; Masten & Coatsworth 1998; Winiarski-Jones 1988

³⁸ Call & Mortimer 2001: p2

especially young people who are connected to social problems.³⁹ Sociologists have studied gang-members, drug-dealers, fighters, and fugitives.⁴⁰ But most young people in poor neighborhoods—like most young people in any neighborhood—are not criminals, not armed, not pregnant. Some recent studies have criticized the outsized focus on these outliers, and instead offered portraits of young people in poor neighborhoods who, “play by the rules.”⁴¹ Yet we still know little about the social lives of the majority of low-income youth who are not connected to a “deviant” subculture, or to social problems.

Another group that receives disproportionate attention is young men. A great deal more research spotlights the experiences of young men in poor neighborhoods than young women.⁴² Women in neighborhood-based urban ethnographies are often relatives or partners of male protagonists. Studies that center women typically focus on mothers, not young

³⁹ Ray 2017; DeLuca et al. 2016; Kaplan 2013

⁴⁰ See e.g., Venkatesh 2008; Cloward & Ohlin 1960; Anderson 2000; Harding 2010; Goffman 2012; Bourgois 1996

⁴¹ Two examples are *The Making of a Teenage Service Class* (Ray 2017) and *Coming of Age in the Other America* (DeLuca et al. 2016). Stefanie DeLuca and her colleagues suggest that one reason for the over-emphasis on the “most sensational” aspects of urban America, including on deviant young people, is that, “observational studies run the risk of giving disproportionate voice to those few who dominate public space (“the corner”) rather than those youth who withdraw to their bedrooms to play video games, who head to the library to read books after school, or who spend their after-school time working” (2016: p65).

⁴² E.g., Goffman 2014; Fader 2013; Rios 2011; Harding 2010; Venkatesh 2008; Anderson 2000; Bourgois 1996; MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977. The lives of poor young men dominate much of urban ethnography’s canon. Some feminist scholars critique the focus on “urban poverty, migration, and the resulting shifts in neighborhood composition,” a focus which motivated many seminal urban ethnographies, as, “also concerns about the stability within and reproduction of the male-headed nuclear family and middle-class status” (Cox 2012: p14).

There is a well-established field of girlhood studies (e.g., Cox 2012, Caron 2011, Ward & Benjamin 2004) that aims to decenter the common emphasis on boyhood and masculinity when it comes to studies of youth. However, in studies of young people and urban poverty, women and girls remain very much marginal. For important exceptions see e.g., Bettie 2003; Jones 2009; Miller 2008; Ness 2004; Ladner 1972.

people navigating paths to adulthood.⁴³ Few studies explore peer groups made up of adolescent girls coming of age together in poor communities.

Finally, little research conveys the social lives of young women like Aisha and Joanne because cell phones and social media have transformed what it means to be a teenager today.⁴⁴ Eighty-nine percent of American teenagers say they are online “almost constantly” or “several times per day.”⁴⁵ This has implications for how we understand not just young people and their relationships, but also urban poverty more generally. Many classic ethnographies consider daily life and survival strategies among groups who are marginalized and isolated. But, in many ways, the girls were hyper-connected, making their lives starkly different than those of poor young people written about in earlier decades. This book shows how young women, members of the first generation of ‘digital natives,’ used social media to give and gain support from their friendships.⁴⁶

Drawing on four years of ethnographic fieldwork with young women of color growing up in a poor, urban neighborhood, the chapters that follow describe friendships often missed by research. Tight integration into a peer group brought the girls access to vital support. Instead of isolating themselves, the young women I met leaned on each other to meet their needs, manage conflict, survive trauma, and plan for the future. They used their cell phones to keep in touch with one another day and night. In the face of poverty, racism, and trauma, the girls helped each other cope, thrive, aspire, and achieve.

⁴³ E.g., Edin & Lein 1997; Stack 1974

⁴⁴ This work joins a growing body of research looking at how social media is changing youth and poverty (E.g., Patton et al. 2016, Lane 2018, Stuart forth.)

⁴⁵ Pew Research Center 2018

⁴⁶ E.g., Liebow 1967; Stack 1974; Bourgois 1996

In the Field

I met Aisha and most of the other girls in this book at their high school, where I volunteered a half-day per week between February 2012 and February 2013. In May 2012, as summer break approached, I asked some of the teens whether I could spend time with them during the upcoming vacation. I said I was writing a book about growing up in Cambridge, and hoped to learn about their lives.⁴⁷

That summer, I hung out with a few girls and began meeting their friends and families. After a few months, I wanted to spend more time with the girls in their neighborhood, where they spent most of their non-school hours. So that Fall, I moved into an apartment across the street from the housing projects where all but one of the girls lived. The move meant I could stay out late with them, and find them fast, if things came up. I conducted the bulk of the fieldwork for this book during the year I lived in North Cambridge, with follow-ups over the next three years.

To learn what the girls did beyond the school gates and away from adult supervision, fieldwork mostly involved ‘hanging out’ after school, on weekends and holidays, and through vacations. I joined the girls’ everyday errands and social activities. We went to sports practices and school sports games, to movies, to shop for dresses at the mall, and to visit friends working shifts at *Dunkin’ Donuts*, *Pinkberry* and more. I joined the girls at house parties, birthday celebrations, cookouts, baby showers and graduation parties. I went to a Prom, a homecoming game, and two Thanksgiving dinners.

⁴⁷ The girls signed consent forms to indicate their agreement to participate. For those who were minors at the time, I obtained a signed consent form from a parent—in all cases, from a mother.

I spent most time with nine girls, six of whom were high school seniors the year I lived in the neighborhood. All nine of the girls were from low-income homes. All were members of racial minorities, and all but one had either immigrated to the United States or were the daughters of immigrants. Of the young women, six were Haitian-American, one was Indian-American, one was Ugandan-American and one was native-born African-American. A broader network of participants included many of the girls' friends, siblings and cousins, and other teens I met in the neighborhood.

The girls split into two social cliques. Aisha's best friends were Joanne, Brittani and Najma. Joanne's brother, Vincent, had a long-term, on-off romantic relationship with Odette, who was in the other clique, together with her sister, Maude, and their friends Stephanie, Nicole and Rosalie.

Growing up, the girls were all close, their ties wound tight from sharing classrooms and a neighborhood. But the cliques had grown estranged, a process many of the girls recalled differently. As Maude remembered, "I would always be the one to say, 'Hi,' and then one day I said, 'Hi,' and Najma didn't acknowledge me at all, and then we stopped talking," Others told of the tension between Odette and Vincent, or drama with Najma's sister, or Joanne's cousin, or step-father.

All the girls but Brittani lived in "JP," Jefferson Park, a low-rise housing project in North Cambridge, or "NC."⁴⁸ The projects were bounded at the front by a busy main road, and at the back by commuter rail tracks.

On the main road, a convenience store with an adjoined laundromat formed the

⁴⁸ The Cambridge Housing Authority administers both public housing and a Section 8 housing voucher program. The housing authority owns and manages 29 projects, which contain 2,400 affordable rental units. It also administers 2,823 Section 8 housing vouchers (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development 2014).

commercial hub of the immediate neighborhood. ‘Foodtown’ had seen better days. Gray-brown grime streaked its white paint, and graffiti tagged the public telephone outside. But Foodtown was an institution, ironically loved and always busy. Lit by stark, overhead strip lights, it sold basic grocery items—packaged, canned and processed food, and some bagged spinach and apples in a produce cooler—and household goods, liquor, and lottery tickets. Teenaged boys bought cigarillos, men hauled 12 packs of Heineken, and older women drilled clerks at the deli in the back-left corner, “*Un poco mas, pocito mas, alli!*” Beside the deli, a hand-written sign on yellowing paper taped to the wall offered, “Fried dough.”

In the laundromat next door, chatter lapped over the hum of washers as people waited for their clothes to dry. A thunderous clatter silenced talk when men tipped a tumble of glass bottles into the machine that spat out change for empties. Across the street was a playground and a public pool, where, come summer, children splashed and shrieked their laughter. Behind that, an alley led to the subway station that gave the quickest connection to the rest of the city.

A fifteen-minute walk away, a retail park housed a *Dunkin’ Donuts*, a *Starbucks*, and, later, a *Panera Bread*, where girls hung out and sometimes worked. *Entertainment Cinema*, the movie theater, was staffed almost exclusively by local teens. Families drove from bordering suburbs to shop at the *Whole Foods Market* and *Trader Joes*, but the girls’ families rode two buses to Somerville, for *Market Basket’s* cheaper groceries.

The girls felt mixed about their neighborhood, whose poverty rate of 47 percent was three times the city’s average. Some of the girls called their home the “hood” or “ghetto.” “JP is the hood, man,” Aisha said once. “JP is a modern-day hood. You see them dealing, playing that dice game. There was always someone getting arrested. There was always a fight

somewhere. I remember gunshots. It's the hood."

Joanne was more ambivalent. "Growing up, I remember lots of violence. Lots of people passed away... My boyfriend's brother died, and people were dying, and it was real." At the same time, she said, "It really was super happy. We had a really good time riding bikes, playing kickball, people breaking their arm, playing tag, hopping fences... But it was that underlying alertness. I-can't-really-walk-around-by-myself type of situation. You hear about people getting jumped, like women jumping women, like grown folks fighting. It was a lot, but it was still a very beautiful place."

To Joanne, JP's beauty was aesthetic, too. "These are nice looking projects," she once said. Sure, throughout the projects, some iron pipes had rusted green, and some skewed window air-conditioning units keened on cans of beans jimmied in just so. The signs weren't welcoming either, the ones that warned in red and black: "NO TRESSPASSING OR LOITERING. Violators subject to arrest. Police take notice," and "AREA UNDER VIDEO SURVEILLANCE." But, apart from that and the handful of units whose occupants the girls judged for loose trash and unkempt exteriors, Jefferson Park was a good looking development. There were groomed privet hedges, grand trees, clear walkways, and yellow flowers when the season came. When the light hit right, the square, white windows and gas-lantern style lamps over the entryways made the block look like the Harvard dorms two miles away. The best light was in the summer, when the setting sun had a way with the neighborhood. The low glow turned the plump boughs opal, and flecked the bricks with gold. But heat made people stir-crazy, and passions climbed with the temperatures. "When the summer would come, it would be hectic," Maude said. Joanne echoed. "Summer time was a dangerous time. They always say people get real hot during the summer. Lots of gun violence

and gang violence.”

In warm weather, people passed hours outside. The streets smelled of dust, hot tarmac, and the ripeness of blossoms soon to rot. Music came from porches and living rooms, beats and lyrics lapping over each other. For a few weeks one summer, kids made a trampoline from a twin mattress left on a sidewalk. Their friends slammed firecrackers to the ground, grinning at the crackle. Keeping watch, adults leaned against metal handrails and porches, or sat on chairs and stools, sometimes sharing a bottle or some smokes. The girls liked the bustle, but resented the noise if they had to settle babies or get an early night before a busy school day.

In summer months, the girls and I spent long, humid evenings lounging around the picnic tables at the back of the projects until the small hours. Sometimes we strolled down to the youth center, where the boys played basketball, to mingle or shoot variations on pool.

Come winter, things grew flat and dull. Flowers withered, and frost greyed the grass. Life moved indoors. Wind stung cheeks and made greetings quick, nodded through hats and hoods as people went on their way. We passed New England winter nights bundled in kitchens and bedrooms, eating hot food from paper plates and trading local gossip.

Year-round, we filled afternoons huddled around a computer screen, or walking the streets when nobody had plans.

I jotted fieldnotes on a ‘Memo’ app on my smartphone, typing up and expanding my notes back home each night.⁴⁹ I added to the ethnography with informal and unstructured interviews with teens more peripheral to the central group. I recorded and transcribed these

⁴⁹ This was conveniently inconspicuous, as holding and using a phone was normal, if not expected. In fact, not having and using a phone (and therefore signifying the ability to self-entertain) was sometimes read as unduly expectant and demanding of amusement from companions.

interviews, adding them to my fieldnotes, which I analyzed by reading and re-reading to identify themes and patterns.⁵⁰

To further map the girls' social lives, I used their preferred social networking sites—including, at various times, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Vine—to connect with roughly sixty teens I met during fieldwork.⁵¹ In total, I gathered over three thousand screenshots and transcribed twelve hundred single-spaced pages of fieldnotes.

Online and On the Street

The girls all went to the same high school, often riding the bus together there and back. They hung out many afternoons and evenings, too. But they kept in touch even when they were apart, like when someone worked a shift or had to babysit. The girls texted each other, they Tweeted, sent Snapchats, posted on Facebook and Instagram, and more.

It began as soon as their alarms beeped them awake, when they scrolled through what was missed overnight and maybe sent a “good morning” Tweet or Snapchat. Through the day, their communication imperative made no concessions for meals, movies, or school, where cell phones lay cabled into outlets like IVs. Headphones hung around necks or dangled from one ear, even during class or conversations. When teachers begged students to put phones away, they were slipped into pockets or tucked into Ugg boots. At night, screens beamed inches from faces as fingers swiped to refresh one last time before sleep.

Writer Nancy Jo Sales charts the pressures and insecurity online life can bring.⁵²

⁵⁰ See Desmond 2012.

⁵¹ Conducting fieldwork both online and in person had two main benefits. First, I could triangulate what teens would express online with what I knew from spending time with them. Second, I could learn how the teens use these media in everyday life.

⁵² Sales 2016

These risks are real, particularly for young women, for whom increased social media links to mental health consequences like depression and low self-esteem.⁵³ The chapters that follow speak to some costs of the girls' rampant cell-phone use. But even as headlines warn of cyber-bullying and grooming, or dopamine-hungry teens growing "tethered" to their devices,⁵⁴ young people are finding new ways to socialize and support one another with their hand-held touch-screens.

Cell phones let girls get company or care; they brought an audience when girls were sad, bored, happy, or had news to share. With text messages and social media, girls killed time, made plans, jostled for status, shared jokes, vented about conflict, processed trauma, and more. As media scholar dana boyd argues, "Most teens aren't addicted to social media; if anything, they're addicted to each other."⁵⁵

Conversely, too, cell phones also offered privacy. In busy housing projects like Jefferson Park, a cell phone meant escape.⁵⁶ It held a whole world. Photos lay safe behind passcodes, along with private messages and thumb-dashed poems.

Phones were a non-negotiable need, for which girls gave up new clothes or subway fare. When payment plans were too pricey, girls paired a second-hand phone with Wi-Fi, bypassing the need to pay a provider for service. The hunt for free Wi-Fi directed the girls' social geography, and they judged hangouts based on the reliability of their connection.

⁵³ E.g., Kelley et al. 2018

⁵⁴ Turkle 2011

⁵⁵ Boyd 2014: p80

⁵⁶ Many girls did not have computers at home, and would have likely balked at conducting social business close to parents' prying eyes.

⁵⁶ Hutchby 2001

These were often places of consumption, but not always. As Aisha once explained, “Half my church has Wi-Fi. The left side.”

Spotty Wi-Fi frustrated the girls. In *Dunkin’ Donuts* after school, Aisha hustled a classmate working the evening shift for a free frappe. At a table, her cousin Leisha brushed crumbs and a torn-up straw wrapper onto the floor. Leisha tried to hook up to the Wi-Fi, but banged her phone on the table when her tries failed. She squinted at the sticker on the window, deceived. Beneath the bold, “FREE WIFI!” someone had scrawled in black ink: “A lie!” and “FUCK YOU!” Leisha shrugged, and gripped her non-functional phone in her hand.

Phones also needed power. Teens attended to the battery percentage displayed digitally atop their screens. They knew vaguely what it was, like having a rough sense of the time. As the number fell, unease grew, and eyes ran around rims of classrooms, cafes, or friends’ kitchens, scouting for outlets. Arriving at the Sheraton hotel for a banquet to mark a cohort’s graduation from the city’s after-school program, the girls went straight to the corner table, and claimed the outlets before sitting down. Mr. Seeds, the organizer, approached and warned, “Girls, if you sit there you won’t be able to see the stage, or all the videos we have!”

“No, we’re good,” rang their chorus.

Hope, Help, and Friendship: Overview of the Book

This book has three parts. Part 1, *Peers and Problem Solving*, shows how the girls helped each other get by. The young women faced various challenges to their wellbeing, and these chapters chart their collective solutions.

Chapter 2, the first empirical chapter, focuses on being broke, often the most salient daily hardship facing the girls. As teenage children of adults living in public housing, the

girls did not have to worry too much about staying housed, or, mostly, fed. But their youth intensified other consequences of poverty: they lacked the money to buy the consumer and status goods to feel accepted, or the funds to join in with social activities. The chapter shows how the girls got what they needed from jobs, from boys, and from the peer group. It also shows how they got by without money, laying other paths to the status and freedom that cash could grant. In compensating for material hardship, the girls met needs that were more than financial: they brought one another dignity, agency, and esteem.

Chapter 3 turns to boredom: an constant threat and under-recognized hardship facing poor teens, who have little money but plenty of time. The girls used connection to pass time, fight tedium, and generate emotional intensity. Social media was often a vital tool. They consumed and produced digital content for hours each day. They also altered the temporal horizons of fun, *making* or *magnifying* moments of excitement. Ceaseless connection had drawbacks, however, and the girls were left with a different understanding of ‘time management’ than some of their better-off peers.

Chapter 4 proceeds to emotional support. When the girls’ homes were fraught with conflict, their friends calmed and compensated, offering dependability when adults could not. Outside of the home, the girls managed feelings of risk in their neighborhood, sharing practical strategies to stay safe, and bonding over talk of danger. They affirmed and validated one another in the face of racial and socioeconomic stigma suffered at school, in stores, or on the street. These threads of emotional support wove a supportive net around the girls. The net was fragile, however, and could fray sometimes into social conflict because needs were both so critical and so vast.

Chapter 5 spotlights the girls’ experiences as they became young women. Age

brought new realms to navigate: physical changes, romance, and sex. Romantic relationships promised partnership and validation, but could also lead to betrayal and disappointment when they didn't work out as the girls hoped. Boyfriends could burden the girls with care work, or, on occasion, expose them to second-hand risk. As the girls explored their sexuality, their desire and autonomy could be compromised by stigma or by coercion from boys and men. When it came to sex and dating, the reach of the peer group was shorter than in other spheres. Romance was a hard spell to break, and the girls lacked the commonality of experience that they used to solve other problems. Still, they tried to help where they could, picking friends up after loss, rejection, and abuse.

Part 2 shows how the girls protected their friendships when they came under threat. Chapter 6 looks at trauma, in the form of neighborhood violence and the death of peers. To shield friends from spirals of grief, and to protect their social ties—which can be fractured by crises—the girls made trauma *manageable*. They disseminated news quickly online, through their densely clustered connections. Though rumors and misinformation could spread this way too, girls looked to their networks for information. Then, girls began comprehending what had happened, to whom, and why. They worked out who owned a trauma, and who deserved most care. After disseminating and comprehending news, the girls started coping. They bolstered their sense of safety, accounting for violence with reference to another physical or social world. They shared scripts, including digital rituals, to speak when they didn't know what to say and act when they didn't know what to do. They also encouraged one another to “stay up” and shut down pain. The girls' tools for managing trauma were often confined to their peer group, not known or shared by adults.

Chapter 7 shows what happened when some of the girls experimented with “risk

behaviors,” like drinking and smoking weed. Research finds that these kind of behaviors spread rapidly through social ties, and also finds that teenaged peer groups are typically “homophilous”—either because teens find friends with similar habits or because they socialize their friends to start acting as they do. But the girls did neither. Instead, they worked to preserve their old bonds through new differences. They minimized their sense of internal variation by contrasting their cliques to “ratchet” outsiders, which smoothed down disparities. When confronted clearly with their differences, girls often practiced pluralism, drawing on interactional skill or wells of empathy to preserve their conversations and relationships. But they also pushed back against things they opposed. The girls’ policing made space for a degree of behavioral difference, while also likely limiting it.

Part 3 turns to the girls’ longstanding goal: college. Chapter 8 chronicles how the girls supported one another in their shared goal of leaving home for college. All nine central girls graduated high school and were accepted to college. But many barriers await first-generation, low-income college students, like the Cambridge girls. They struggled with money problems, bureaucratic confusion, and isolation on campus. They were also tested by something else: the loss of each other. What would happen when they lost one of their most vital sources of support, just as they needed it most?

The conclusion explores what the girls can teach us about poverty, peers, and wellbeing. It considers how far their stories shed light on young people coming of age in different places. And, it shows the limits of peer support as well as the ways it works together with support from adults and institutions.

The young women in NC looked to their friends to meet some of their basic needs, including those that adults could not—or would not—meet. Typically, the term ‘basic needs’

conjuges only economic or physiological urgencies, like food, housing, or clothing. On occasion, the girls did give each other these things. But no one can thrive with necessities alone. Social goods, like inclusion, self-worth, and participation, are also critical to wellbeing.⁵⁷ As social scientist Christopher Jencks writes, “Neither morality nor common sense requires human beings to value their health and physical comfort more than their honor, pleasure, or self-respect.”⁵⁸ The girls met a full spectrum of one another’s needs, offering aid that was elsewhere in short supply. By sharing diverse, steadfast support through their peer group, they helped mitigate poverty and its hardships. Friendships promoted development, wellbeing, and even, opportunities for mobility.

Aisha and the other girls in this book were not neighborhood outliers. They weren’t uniquely straight-laced or bookish, religious or sheltered. As they grew up, they dabbled, as many teens do, with alcohol and drugs, and they embraced new freedoms of age. They got into trouble. They lost things. They made mistakes. This book is an attempt to listen to them and learn from them. Their story, largely untold, challenges how we think about tight ties between adolescents in low-income neighborhoods. Their story is one about the deep well of potential and power found in the strong bonds between poor teens themselves.

⁵⁷ Hall & Lamont 2013

⁵⁸ Jencks 1997: pxiv

Part 1: Peers and Problem Solving

2—Broke: Material Support

“Happy birthday Joanne! Look at you, all legal!” Aisha cried, throwing up her arms to welcome her best friend into the surprise party. Joanne would soon turn eighteen, and to celebrate, Aisha had invited their best friends, Najma and Brittani, over to her own apartment.

Joanne’s deep-brown eyes widened as she walked through the front door. “It’s not my birthday for another two weeks!” she stammered.

“Duh!” Aisha said. “But we’re celebrating today. Were you surprised?”

“Obviously!” Joanne said. She giggled and hugged Aisha. “Look at all this food!” Joanne clutched both hands to her chest.

Joanne’s friends had gone in on a store-bought cake, chocolate with chocolate frosting, with *Happy 18th Birthday Joanne!* iced in white. In the kitchen, Aisha had filled a foil tray with home-baked chocolate chip cookies. She’d lain the tray and the cake gently on the living room chair. To make space, she had lifted the garbage bags stuffed with winter coats and blankets, one by one, and piled them in a corner of the room. The bags lay in wait through the warm months of the year.

She would have to move the bags back before her mom got home from her Saturday shift at the psychiatric hospital, where she worked as a community residence counselor. Diana didn’t allow guests. Any friends Aisha snuck in might have to scramble, running down the back stairs when Diana’s footfall sounded on the stone steps out front. Some days Aisha got a heads up, when her mother called the landline to check on her before leaving work. Aisha’s rowdy chitchat would fall to hushed Lugandan murmured earnestly into the phone, while her friends bit their cheeks to keep from laughing at the transformation.

Aisha wanted to celebrate Joanne. The girls had been best friends since seventh grade. Aisha called Joanne her “first American friend,” the first girl she’d grown close to after moving from Uganda aged eleven with her mother and two older brothers. Joanne had also moved to Cambridge from another country. She was born in Haiti. When she was seven months old, Joanne’s mom, Carole, moved to the States, leaving Joanne and her brother with their Grandma. Five years later, the three moved in with Carole and her new partner, Frantz, in an apartment in the same projects as Aisha.

The girls played together and bonded over what they shared. For instance, neither knew their father. Aisha’s left before she could speak. “I didn’t start understanding I had a dad until about six or seven,” she said. “I didn’t know how a family structure was. My drawings would be me, my brothers, my auntie and my mom.” Although Joanne grew up around Frantz, her common-law stepfather, she kept her distance. She claimed she was raised by a single mom, and said, “I don’t really see anyone as a father figure.”

The girls lived minutes away from each other, Aisha in a smaller apartment she shared with her mom and brother, and Joanne in a four-bedroom apartment which housed ten family members. Joanne called her home a “theme park.” It was welcoming and loud with the mirth and rows of three generations sharing space. Friends and neighbors dropped in through the back door, joining her Grandma at the kitchen table and talking over the TV Kreyol or action movies that played on a small TV. In the kitchen, food sizzled in oil, and two yellow birds in a white cage squawked or pecked at each other’s beaks—“they’re kissing,” Joanne would say. Children’s sounds rang through the house: gleeful shrieks, small feet thudding on big stairs, pained moans seeking comfort.

There was also the roar from outside: thirty-four times each day, from 6:35 in the

morning until twenty minutes after midnight, commuter rail trains thundered down tracks yards behind the house. Visitors sometimes raised their voices, trying to out-shout the noise. But Joanne and her family had learned to pause habitually at the first tremor of an approaching train. Some twenty seconds later, suspended sentences resumed.

Joanne was a faithful caretaker for her family. She spent a lot of time with the children, caring for her four younger siblings when her mom worked shifts in the janitorial department of a hospital in a neighboring town. Sometimes she threw spelling bees, finding online lists of grade-appropriate words.

When she needed a moment alone, Joanne went to her bedroom and closed the door. She had her own room, as did her 20-year-old brother, Vincent. Her mother, Frantz and baby brother took the third bedroom. The fourth bedroom was for the other five family members. Grandma and four-year-old Madeleine slept in one bed; 6- and 7- year old brothers Jonas and Evens took the other. When Rachelle, a distant cousin of the family around Joanne's age, spent a year with the family at the house after fleeing an abusive uncle, she slept on a fold-up bed in the corner.

Joanne's bedroom was her sanctuary. She taped pencil drawings on curling white paper to the wall above the dresser: a self-portrait sketched in art class, a copy of a Picasso painting she liked. Stuffed teddy bears lay prone by her pillows, one from her boyfriend, another, "Fluffy," from Aisha. On the chest, there was a bulk-sized tub of ibuprofen for her migraines. To relax, Joanne liked to ease into a novel, or find refuge in writing. She journaled and wrote poems, sometimes for spoken word 'slams,' sometimes for release. **Writing brings me peace, I can get lost in a page and words for hours**, she once tweeted. Joanne wrote out her heartbreak and gratitude. She wrote through grief, when friends were

lost. She indicted racism when she watched older kids drop out of college.

In Aisha's living room, the girls crowded around the cake and the cookies. Aisha squinted at the candles sunk into thick frosting: six pink and two yellow. "We need to light these!" she said. "But how?"

"I have a lighter," Najma offered, reaching into her purse.

"Why do you have a lighter?" Aisha asked.

"Don't judge me," Najma said.

Najma was a sharp and sassy seventeen-year-old, easily irritated by the daily grind. Raised in NC, her parents immigrated from India before she was born. When Najma wasn't with her friends, at her job, or caring for her sister's young son, she, too, retreated to her room. She closed the door and tuned out the world to the throbbing beats of J Cole and other rappers. Najma pasted photos of her friends to the walls, and tucked them into the rim of the mirror she glanced at as she tried on outfits and did her hair.

Aisha reached out a palm and smiled. She took the lighter, lit the candles and started singing.

"Happy birthday to *youuuuuu*!" she screeched. Najma, Brittani and I joined in, and the girls raised their phones to take photos and videos. They angled their screens for lighting. Two windows let in the day, and a bare bulb on a leaning six-foot pole in the corner glowed yellow.

The girls uploaded their snaps to Facebook and Twitter and tagged everyone present. Then, Najma pressed her phone to lower the volume of the music playing out loud.

"Hey," Najma said. She had an idea. "We should pack all this up and go take it like a picnic!" It was a clear, warm Saturday, the first fine day after a winter where snow

had come until March. The girls cooed approvingly. “I can even pitch in some leftovers from home,” she offered.

Aisha nodded enthusiastically. “Let me see what I can contribute,” she said, and swung open her refrigerator. Her eyes scanned the shelves: a large, plastic container of cooked white rice, a tub of butter, ketchup, bottled water. She slammed the door close, cringing through a grin. “Damn, I’m broke,” she said.

“We cleaned out her fridge. It’s not even her fault!” Joanne said, massaging the moment and her best friend’s ego. Aisha looked down.

The girls decided to pool what they had and buy food for a picnic. Najma had a five in her pocket. I did too. Brittani and Joanne each pitched in four. Aisha had a dollar in change, and we took our \$19 to a local Chinese take-out. Najma drove. At the restaurant, the girls pored over the paper menu at a sticky linoleum table. Joanne wanted scallion pancakes. Aisha was craving crab rangoon. The girls also ordered egg-fried rice, prawn crackers, and a family sized Sprite.

“Do you think I can get Wi-Fi in here?” Aisha asked, once the order was in, waving her phone high. “Wait, is that Daniel out there?” she peered out the window. “You know who I saw yesterday? Jontray. You know Jontray is seeing Tina now?”

“White Tina?”

“Yeah. She’s blonde now.”

“The one with no butt?”

“Oh my God. Isn’t he bi? I heard he was bi.”

When the cashier brought out our brown paper bags, Najma drove us in her dad’s car. The girls sniffed eagerly at the food, but knew not to touch it. Najma hated crumbs.

At Danehy Park, the trees were still bare and the grass came in stuttered patches through hard brown earth. But the sky was blue, and by a small lake that flashed white in the sun, there were empty picnic tables. Wordlessly, intuitively, the girls chose one, and unpacked the soda, the plastic forks, and the white boxes of food. They laid out the cake and the cookies, and passed around paper plates and red cups Aisha brought from home.

A chill stole through the afternoon. Joanne pulled on a cream cardigan; Brittani wrapped a copper-colored scarf around her neck and pushed her toes deep into the shearling of her moccasins. But the girls were cheery, warmed by the food and the scene they'd made. They talked as they ate, sharing stories, telling jokes. They were calm in the ease of one another's company.

Aisha smiled. This celebration was just right.

Aisha hated not being able to give. None of the girls had more than just enough, but for Aisha, times could be especially lean. She slept on a bare mattress on the floor, and stored her clothes in garbage bags, everything low to the ground. Aisha kept everyone, even her best friends, away from her bedroom. She claimed her room was messy. Her friends would nod, though they knew that Diana enforced cleaning chores around the clock.

"Christmas is my worst," Aisha once explained. Her family didn't trade gifts, and she never had money to return gifts from friends. Diana gave Aisha thirty dollars for the bus each month; the pass cost twenty-eight. Diana also gave her daughter money for the laundromat next to Foodtown, which she might round up to a ten if Aisha was lucky. Sometimes, Aisha found that a vociferous testimonial of love at church on Sunday could earn Diana's good graces along with a small bill or two. But it never seemed to be enough.

Poverty feels different for adolescents than adults. The girls lived in public housing; so stable shelter was not a major worry. Nor did it fall to them to feed or clothe children. But housing and food were not their only basic needs: so too were dignity, agency, and participation. These could be costly. People craft identities through consumption.¹ As sociologist Allison Pugh shows, young people, in particular, use consumer goods to express themselves, and to feel like they fit in and belong.²

Teens vie for status and approval from peers. Their freedoms can be limited: teens have less control over their schedules and mobility than do adults. But, as sociologist Murray Milner explains, “In one realm... their power is supreme.” Teenagers “control their evaluations of one another.” He continues, “[T]he kind of power they do have is status power: the power to create their own status systems based on their criteria.”³

This helps explain why young people can be determined to get the things they need. In a Chicago neighborhood called “Groveland,” sociologist Mary Patillo found that Nike sneakers set the pecking order. A young man she met, Tyson, explained that sneakers were more need than indulgence. “Your parents buy ‘em when you rich, you gon’ have ‘em.” Tyson said. “If you po’, you sell dope, you gon’ have ‘em.”⁴ Reflecting on Tyson’s words,

¹ Classical theorizing on the link between consumption and identity dates back at least to Veblen (1994 [1899]) and Marx (2010 [1867]). Bourdieu (1984) added a seminal elaboration of the ways in which status goods are used to (re)produce class differentiations. More recent empirical work on consumption, status goods and identity expression, particularly among minority groups in the USA include Lamont & Molnar (2001), Anderson (2000), and Chin (1991).

² Pugh 2009. Julie Bettie explains, “The expression of self through one’s relationship to and creative use of commodities (both artifacts and the discourses of popular culture) is a central practice in capitalist society” (2003: p44).

³ Milner 2015: p34

⁴ Patillo Mc-Coy 1999: p165

Patillo said, “[t]he status-enhancing properties of consumer goods [make] the draw of the streets... more comprehensible.”⁵ Studies find that young people who turn to the underground economy to make money are often driven by just such worries over status.⁶

Teens everywhere care about having and wearing the right things. But some sociologists have considered the particular importance of things like clothes and styles for teenagers in poor neighborhoods, where paths to status can be limited.⁷

In Cambridge, girls and boys wanted *hip* consumer goods. They wanted cellphones, especially iPhones—Androids were sometimes ridiculed—and the right accessories, too. Aisha thought her over-ear headphones looked cool from a distance, clunky and retro-chic. But up close, she would apologize: “They’re not *Beats*,” referencing Dr Dre’s ‘in’ brand.

As in Groveland, sneakers mattered, and Jordans were the freshest kicks.

“Look how they *curve*,” said senior Derek, a tall, lanky classmate of the girls who lived in “East.” He was holding up two shoes he’d bought before school, waking at 5 a.m. to meet the seller in Boston. His friend leaned and sniffed the soles: “I feel like I’m gonna get high off the smell!”

Jordans were so prized that teens worried about theft. Dani, an older friend of Aisha,

⁵ Pattillo Mc-Coy 1999: p146-7. As put by Sampson Davis in *The Pact*, his memoir of growing up in a poor, Newark neighborhood, “How can a mother’s pleas compete with the thrill of having wads of cash handed to you when your pockets are empty and the pantry is bare?” (Davis, Danikins & Hunt 2003: p32).

⁶ E.g., Williams & Kornblum 1988; Sullivan 1989; Bourgois 1996. Sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton describe teenagers in Chicago’s Bronzeville, whose “[p]arents were without money to give children for the shows, the dances, and the ‘zoot suits’ which lower-class adolescent status required.” This helped explain, they argue, why “Purse-snatching became general in lower-class areas and even on main thoroughfares. Occasionally, too, a gang of youngsters would crowd some other child who had a little money into a doorway and rob him— at knife-point” (Drake & Cayton 1945: p589)

⁷ E.g., Anderson 2000; MacLeod 1987

warned the younger girls about college. “I lock all my shoes in a chest in my room,” she said. “And when I go to the bathroom, I take the key with me!” The girls nodded. Some had seen the risks first hand, like when Joanne made Vincent drive us out to Revere beach one Saturday night in June. On the sand, Joanne slipped off her sandals and paddled in the surf. As Vincent stood back from the water, joking, “Black people don’t swim!” his friend Jeff unlaced his Jordans and joined Joanne. As Jeff looked out to sea, somebody swiped his shoes. His friends howled with laughter and slapped their thighs, unsurprised.

Boys were especially dependent on specific status markers, like Jordans and chunky belts.⁸ Girls, though, could get social status from faces or physiques deemed attractive, which gave a little leeway when it came to brands and labels. Aisha worked this angle, buying and customizing thrift-shop clothes to look cool. “Brittani hipped me to Goodwill,” she explained. “I bought five dollar things and I could put outfits together.” At the same time, girls needed more money for grooming: nails, eyebrows and hair could add up fast.

As well as buying clothes and consumer goods to make them look cool, the girls needed money to pay for activities that made up their social lives. They wanted to buy snacks or coffee drinks from fast-food joints. They wanted to go to movies or see their favorite bands or rappers when they came to town. They wanted to have fun, and not to be left out or left behind.

Finally, money brought the girls freedoms. It allowed them to hop on the subway, the fastest way to get around, and spending bought a thrill of agency.

⁸ Expensive alcohol was another key status good for boys. “Dark liquor” was favored, Hennessy and Remy Martin in particular. At parties, boys clutched their bottles to their chests like trophies. Girls would duly swarm, trying to sweet talk for a quick sip. More than just conferring popularity at parties, liquor was also considered the proper way to give respect. Commemorating the anniversary of a local teen’s death, the boys laid bottles of Hennessy beside bouquets of flowers to his grave.

For the girls, being broke risked their access to status, inclusion and autonomy. Sociologists have long explored how poor adults get by financially. Besides the underground economy, researchers find that collaboration is often key to economic survival. In poor, urban neighborhoods, people often count on friends, neighbors and acquaintances to make ends meet and secure their urgent needs.⁹ The girls, too, leaned on one another and on their broader peer group to solve the problems posed by being broke. They had two main solutions. One was *getting* money, from paid jobs, from their friends, and from boys. The second was *bypassing* money, when the girls met ostensibly material needs in other ways.

Getting Money

Jobs

Some of the girls worked part-time paid jobs around the city: a couple shifts per week during the school year, and full-time through the summer. They staffed counters of food joints like *Dunkin' Donuts* and *Pinkberry*, or worked registers at supermarkets or cleaners. Others used city programs that connected local students with administrative jobs in offices or law firms. Girls' narratives about work praised self-sufficiency and working hard.

Joanne worked as a lab assistant in East Cambridge's hub of technology and engineering. At school, she was punctual and driven, helping run a program linking one hundred freshmen to older peer mentors. Joanne brought this diligence to the lab, where she earned respect from her older colleagues and outlasted more senior folks. Joanne felt

⁹ Stack 1974, Edin and Lein 1997; Newman 1999; Venkatesh 2006

challenged at the lab, and valuable. She also liked snapping selfies in a lab coat and goggles during the occasional slow moment. There were drawbacks, though, like when she realized her contract forbade her running track during the school year. Joanne thought she could have managed both. Still, the money was useful.

“I paid for my own stuff since I was fourteen,” Joanne explained. Since starting high school, Joanne and her brother had helped their mom with money, unusually among her friends. “I help pay the phone bill. We would pay for kids’ field trips. We paid for Jonas’s saxophone lessons for a semester.” There wasn’t as much left over as Joanne would have liked, but she found ways to extend the fun: “I would go shopping and try on twenty thousand clothes and pose and take pictures and then buy one shirt,” she said.

Girls pooled information about job opportunities, discussing what—and who—they knew when spots freed up at the toy store, at a catering company, or the new Panera. One summer, a man flyer’d the projects searching for teens to sell cooking knives door-to-door in the suburbs. The girls were tempted by \$18 per hour and the promise of commission. Odette even went to interview. But Stephanie warned her off. They decided that the gig with “knives guy” was too “sketchy,” and “too good to be true.” *The Peer Group*

At times, the girls all leaned on their friends to get by, perhaps none more than Aisha. Little was given to Aisha. She noted what her peers had, glancing at shoes or jewelry or cell phones. “I always felt like I had less,” she said. “Things that cool kids were doing or having, I didn’t have. I didn’t wear Jordans. I didn’t have the brand. I didn’t get presents for Christmas. We didn’t have a whole big Thanksgiving.”

When Aisha was younger, she thought she deserved to have less. She had a hard

relationship with her mom, Diana, who was unimpressed by touchy-feely, “American” parenting, and described herself as, “Not very good at pampering.” Aisha’s memories were sharper edged: “My mom made me believe I was this evil person. She started hating me.” And so, when Aisha’s friends had more and cooler things than she did, it made sense. “To me, my mentality was like, ‘I’m bad. I’ll never amount to anything.’ That’s what I was instilled by my mom.”

Over the years, Aisha’s energies flowed out from her home, and she had learned how to get things she needed from those around her. Najma paid Aisha’s cell phone bill for a few months, and Aisha often got meals and snacks from her friends. She ate slowly and attentively, cutting and chewing with focus. But this was a favor she could rarely return. Her boxy fridge was usually almost empty, which bothered and embarrassed her. She taped the refrigerator closed before guests arrived to the party she threw when her mom left town. During clean-up, she unpeeled the duct tape, murmuring, “So niggas didn’t drink my juice.”

Aisha developed an ease with others. “I feed off people,” she once mused. A skilled social analyst, Aisha read cues and gestures, watched body language, gleaned motive. She knew how to draw people close, or push people back. She knew how to make people useful, and how to make them want to be.

Aisha was dynamic. Her anecdotes were theatric as she teased and taunted with tangents. With timing and hyperbole she shot humor into the mundane. As Aisha fell to her knees to mimic her Aunt praying before a meal at Chuck E Cheese, Joanne, through throaty laughs, said, “How Aisha tells stories! It’ll take twenty years before she tells you what actually happened!”

A wide web of acquaintances sought Aisha's approval, though she didn't like sycophants. "A lot of people suck up to me. A lot of people try and make me like them and make me their friend. I don't like that," she said. But still, Aisha appreciated that peers had a certain worth. "She's low-key rich," Aisha once said, describing a new friend.

Beyond her small circle of close friends, who helped meet her most pressing needs, Aisha's broader peer group brought access to treats. Walking into *Dunkin' Donuts* after school, she ran to the counter and tried to pull Jordan, in his brown Dunkin' cap and apron, into a hug.

"This is the funniest guy I've ever met," she said to me. "You will never meet someone like Jordan!" When Jordan's manager went to the back, he gave her a free drink.

Another day, she suggested, "Let's go to *Pinkberry* and get samples." In the frozen yogurt store, the girls asked for complimentary tastes of several flavors. But today, Aisha was in for even more when she walked in and saw a classmate working the counter.

"No way! You work today?" Aisha asked Kayla, behind the glass.

"Yeah! Wait for those guys to leave," Kayla whispered back.

Kayla smiled sweetly while an older couple paid for their yogurt. Aisha pressed her hands against the glass and looked down at the toppings. She liked the strawberries best. As the door closed behind the couple, Kayla poured out a full sized fro-yo and slid the cup into Aisha's hands.

"No way! Thank you, honey. You are the best!" Today Aisha didn't have to make excuses—that she wasn't hungry, that she was only craving salty food—when others were buying.

Kayla was one of many classmates keen to please.¹⁰ Aisha's popularity stemmed in part from her vitality, so artless and free. But its roots were well cultivated. Aisha spent hours at the small desktop computer in the corner of her living room where paint flecked from grime-streaked walls. From a blue desk chair whose cushions had worn down flat and hard, Aisha manicured her social network profiles. Dubbed "Miss Social Media" by her best friends, she uploaded streams of digitally manipulated self-portraits, bold and glamorous, to several sites. She used free apps and filters to ensure that her photos conveyed the semiotics of value.¹¹

Aisha knew her photos were cool. She had come a long way since the media diet of her youth; old Hollywood movies on a squat TV in Kampala: Jean-Claude Van Damme, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Rambo. Now, Aisha used the image-focused and public nature of social media to boost her profile among peers. Various affordances helped this project, including the ability to 'like' photos and the fact that 'likes' were tallied and displayed.¹²

¹⁰ Giving and receiving gifts cements social relationships (e.g., Mauss 1967, Sahlin 1972)

¹¹ This was not about deception or falsehood; being 'fake' was a grave sin amongst the teens, so photoshopping or altering images beyond recognition would have been condemned. Rather, Aisha used filters and effects to glamorize her self-portraits.

¹² The concept of *affordances* is often traced back to the work of psychologist James Gibson (1979). Gibson explains, "The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal." For instance, a flat surface is 'stand-on-able'" (1979: p127). Affordances are "in a sense objective, real, and physical..." but an affordance "is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical" (1979: p129). The concept was later developed in science and technology studies, to capture the interplay of a technology's inherent features with the innovative and flexible applications developed by users, including those not intended or foreseen by the engineers.

Ian Hutchby (2001) used the term to theorize new communication technologies. Hutchby's discussion of affordances offered theorists a middle ground between the technological determinism that had characterized much research on new technologies (in which human agency yields to omnipotent machines), and the anti-essentialism of hard social constructivism. The concept of affordances recognizes the enabling and constraining aspects of new technologies. For instance, a keyboard affords users the ability to type words. It also affords them the ability to combine punctuation marks into a representation of different facial expressions: happy, sad, winking, and others. This interpretive flexibility allowed users to transcend the intended use of a keyboard, and

Aisha's posts were well-received, so her social status was quantified with numeric precision. You couldn't argue with math.

She also used social media to thank peers who helped her join in with consumption-based, teenaged social activities, like when she tweeted:

SHOUT OUT TO KAYLA FOR HOOKING IT UPPP WITH #BINKBERRY

Peterson buying me Chinese food ? #amped MY NIGGA DOE

WILSON buying me a Quesadilla >>>> MY NIGA

Shout out to @Joanne for my breakfast

Shout out to @Brittani fgiving me a 15 \$ gift card . comes so handyy

SHoutout to @Najma for payin for my meal... Mind you I bught more than she did !!!

REALL SHIT

Her social status meant the 'shout-outs' had value.¹³ It also meant that publicly expressing thanks did not demean her.¹⁴ By instantly 'repaying' gifts, Aisha stayed free of

infuse emotions and meanings into written messages. Nevertheless, a keyboard does not afford the ability to send pictures, or sounds. Ilana Gershon (2010) looks specifically at social media platforms and the types of communication that they facilitate or inhibit. She shows how young people use the 'relationship status' feature on Facebook in ways that fundamentally deviate from the intended use. The affordance allows them to mark their best friends, make inside jokes, or more.

¹³ Social exchange theorists would see Aisha's grateful broadcasts as "return" or reinforcement (e.g., Homans 1961; for a review see Emerson 1976). Aisha likely was exchanging her symbolic prestige for material offerings. But digital broadcasts were multidimensional. For instance, her tweets also offered the real-time updates teens were expected to offer each other throughout the day.

¹⁴ The *instantaneous* expression of gratitude could have freed Aisha from the entanglements of a more protracted gift-giving relationship. Bourdieu suggests that instant "exchange" frees people from the moral obligations associated with gift-giving. He argues, "In every society... if it is not to constitute an insult, the counter-gift must be *deferred* and *different*..." (Bourdieu 1977: p5-7). Aisha did respond with a *different* counter-gift: a Twitter shout-out. Usually, though, this happened as soon as she received something that made her happy. Per this interpretation, Aisha was "[betraying her] haste to be free of an obligation... and thus [revealing] too overtly [her] desire to pay off services rendered or gifts received, so as to be quits" (ibid). Again, however, Aisha was also using her tweets to express her happiness, and update her friends about her activities.

social obligation to the somewhat ‘disposable ties’¹⁵ who hooked her up; she saved her loyalty and generosity for her group of best friends.

Aisha was the most skilled at sourcing financial goods from her peer group—she was also likely the neediest—but all the girls relied on their friends for money or material resources at times. And, these goods always brought the girls more than material help. They also brought inclusion, dignity, and agency. Though Aisha sometimes downplayed her feelings, she was moved when her friends helped her out. It wasn’t just frozen yogurt or subway fare. It was the fact that people cared about her, and cared that she had enough. She couldn’t be that bad.

Boys

In the girls’ broader peer group—which included some classmates, siblings, cousins, and neighbors—the boys, on average, were a few years older. As a result, boys often had more financial independence, as well as access to cars and alcohol. Some of these perks filtered down to the girls.

The boys worked jobs that the girls avoided. This included working nights as a security guard on the campus of a local community college, or driving for Uber. Boys also tried their hand at entrepreneurial ventures, like when Joanne’s brother Vincent used his National Guard experience to sell personal training sessions to neighborhood teens for five dollars; or when Aisha’s classmate DJ boasted, “I sold mad live animals this weekend,” claiming to have bought and re-sold kittens from the kill shelter.

Some boys made good money, like Ty, the most renowned NC “tycoon,” who had two Instagram accounts; one business, one personal, both with thousands of followers. Tall

¹⁵ Desmond 2012

and thin with deep brown skin, Ty was a couple years older than the girls. Like Aisha, he walked with a light confidence. Also like Aisha, a hint lingered of some softness beneath. The girls had known Ty since grade school, where, as Joanne recalled, he was “an angry child.” But Ty mellowed as he grew, and channeled his energy into his company, *Galaxy Ink*, which sold clothes he bulk-bought online. *Galaxy Ink* shirts and caps, splashed with Ty’s logo, were all over NC. After a couple of Ty’s friends had children, he sold *Galaxy Ink*-branded onesies. He swung by Odette’s home one afternoon with his heavy camera, a large printed backdrop, and some Teddy Graham to coax her baby nephew into modeling.

Ty had another line of revenue: parties. He rented bars or hotel rooms to throw events for local teens, who paid five or ten bucks for entry. Ty booked friends with DJ skills and social media buzz to bump up numbers. The girls paid their way into Ty’s parties, though he charged them half what he charged boys, using their bodily capital to attract more male partiers.

Boys typically had more money, but girls often had access to it through social and romantic relationships. This strategy was favored by nineteen-year-old Odette.

There was a lot of Odette. She had a big heart, loud voice, generous curves and a thick tumble of hair. Sometimes she wore it in thin braids that traced the round of her head. Sometimes a crown of tight curls haloed her face. Warm and spirited, she was quick to intimacy with friends and boys alike.

Odette shared anything she had: a carton of juice, a spritz of her new drugstore perfume. And, when she wanted something, she asked for it. One afternoon in May, Odette’s younger sister, Maude, turned eighteen. A group of us went bowling to celebrate, claiming the sidewalk as we walked the mile from the projects. At the alley, four teens sat

out the game, cheering from the sidelines and taking photos; there wasn't just the game to pay for, you also had to rent shoes.

After the game, we split into two tables for dinner at the adjoined café. I sat with Odette and her best friend Stephanie, eating our family-basket of French fries and chicken wings with one hand and holding cell phones in the other. Stephanie and Odette had the type of friendship where they could look at each other and laugh. Now nineteen, they'd been close since they were small and skinny and had all sorts of dreams. At the table, they sat in contented calm, scrolling Instagram and tilting their screens to each other between bites.

Odette narrated as she swiped: "I got twenty-four likes on this photo... This Ghanaian guy is obsessed with me! He likes all my pictures, but I never met him... Mmm these couture gowns, I love fashion!" Then, she snapped her head up and turned to the vending machine. She walked over to the guy feeding smoothed green bills into its mouth, and returned, moments later, waving a five.

"He gave me money, so this is our dinner," Odette said, slapping the note onto the linoleum.

"How'd you do that?" I laughed.

Stephanie jumped in: "You gotta know a lotta people, know the right ones who have money, treat them nicely, and then it's all about timing. You see 'em 'bout to pull some money out, they can't lie and say they don't have money when they're right there with it!"

Odette nodded and said, "I was like, 'Hey wassup, you have money?' And he's all like, 'How much you need?' And I'm like, 'Oh, you can just give me five dollars.'"

We laughed at the turn of phrase, and Odette said, "I know! It's just like reverse

psychology!” She continued, “You need to do the right amount though. The right amount or nothing.”

Seeing cash in hand, Odette made the boy share with a situational and interactional obligation. The materiality of the money eliminated the acceptable excuse for withholding: being broke.¹⁶

Typically, the girls shared things with one another, or helped pay for things. I rarely saw cash change hands between girls, however. Boys were more often relied on for money, an exchange which hinged sometimes on the suggestion of romance.

Romance consumed Odette, who daydreamed about boys and love from the apartment she shared with her parents, her sister, Maude, and her young cousin. Charity was a mentally-disabled seven-year-old, sent to Cambridge when her parents in Haiti couldn’t get her care. She liked cartoons, often nursing a bowl of cereal for dinner on the plastic-covered couch in front of her favorites. Charity was the only member of the household with whom Odette didn’t clash.

One afternoon Odette and Maude sat out on the steps outside their apartment, with the other three girls in their clique: Stephanie, Nicole, and Rosalie.

“Aquariuses are so moody,” Stephanie said to Odette, noting her best friend’s dipped energy.

“No!” Odette said, looking up from her cell phone.

¹⁶ In *Random Family*, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc describes this logic: “Sometimes Coco spent down her money just so she could be the one to use it, which allowed her to maintain her integrity. ‘This way if the girls in my house come to ask me for money, I tell them *no*, and I ain’t lying,’ Coco said. Drinking men were employing a similar logic when they bought beer, bottle by bottle, at the corner store: better that way than a six-pack, even though the single bottles cost more. Otherwise, you either shared your beer or got the reputation of being greedy for refusing your friends” (LeBlanc 2004: p146).

“Yeah, Odette, we got the stories to prove it.” The girls laughed, and Odette’s lips drew together.

“Shut up.”

“You’re like, bipolar,” her sister, Maude, poked.

“No, I am not,” Odette said. “It’s just because I’m fucking depressed having to be in this house!”

Odette was not close to her parents. Her father worked long shifts at a dry cleaner an hour away. Her mom spent days in the kitchen, often sat on a stool, peeling vegetables into a silver bowl, and speaking with family in Haiti on a phone perched on her shoulder.

Odette never felt close to her mom, and had hunted other mother figures since childhood. As a girl, she had called an aunt back in Haiti, “Mom,” and, in Cambridge, she had sought other adult women to look to and lean on. “My mom had a close friend across the street,” Odette explained. “She called me her daughter, and I called her my mom.” After that, she said, “I was cool with Nicole’s mom, and Vincent’s mom I was close to. You can see the pattern.”

Moreover, Odette envied her sister’s closeness with their mother. “My mom says she doesn’t have favorites, but she does,” she said. Odette felt that as the youngest, Maude got special treatment, though the two were close in age. “My mom would always clean Maude’s room and organize it. Mind you, we’re only one year apart. She’s like, ‘You’re older,’ and I’m like, ‘Only by a few months!’”

Odette felt caged by her parent’s old-fashioned expectations. They wanted her in, but she wanted out. They wanted demure, but she made looking and feeling good a priority. They sought compliance, but Odette was all hustle and hope. As she grew, so did her need

for independence, which intensified conflict at home. Boys, on the other hand, felt nice. Odette piqued the interest of a string of suitors, who were drawn to her kindness; her silhouette; her reckless, indomitable optimism; or the way she walked like she knew they were watching. The attention felt something like power. Odette liked being wooed with dates across the city. She deserved it, she felt. Each boy felt like vindication for the last one who had hurt her. Each made her more resolute not to get hurt again, and she yearned for a man worthy of her ample love.

To Odette, spending was one yardstick that could measure boys' intentions: open wallet, open heart. "At the end of the day," she said, "If you feel like he doesn't really care, make him spend his money."¹⁷ Boys, moreover, often spent not just on a girl he liked, but on her friends. In this, Odette saw opportunity, like when she watched her sister, Maude, inspect her own splayed hands just before her bowling party.

"I need someone to take me to get a mani-pedi for my birthday," Maude said, pushing at her cuticles.

"Have Richard do it," Odette said nonchalantly. Richard, an older guy, had been texting her for a few weeks.

"He would do that?"

"I'll tell him to do it for you," Odette said, cheered both by the chance to treat her sister and by the idea that Richard might show himself to be serious.

But her strategy was not failsafe, like when Odette tried to get money from her friend Nicole's long-term boyfriend. Odette wanted to borrow \$150 for off-campus

¹⁷ Ray (2017) also met young women who believed they could gauge a man's devotion and commitment through his willingness to spend money on gifts and dates.

housing, and she knew Junior could get it. Junior was older, and involved in what the girls called, “that life.” He’d done time for dealing, and usually had cash on hand.

As Odette strolled through NC with her friends one afternoon, Junior drove to meet us, stopping his car in the middle of the road. Nicole kissed her boyfriend through the open window, and Odette hopped into the passenger street. Maude narrowed her eyes: she had never approved of Junior or his relationship with Nicole.

Junior peeled some twenties off a wad pulled from his jeans, and passed them through the window to Nicole.

“Thank you baby,” Nicole cooed.

Junior reached out and pinged the flimsy strap of her short, khaki romper.

“You should change outta this,” he said. “Don’t y’all think she should cover this up more?” he said to us.

“No, it’s fine,” Nicole replied, hard-edged, half-smiling.

Rosalie, sixteen-years-old and the baby of the group, hopped into the back seat.

“Can I get some?” she angled, grinning.

Junior peeled off and folded some notes, turned to the back, and held out the cash.

Rosalie dropped her jaw and snatched the money.

Meanwhile, Odette, in the passenger seat, scooped a handful of quarters around the hand brake. “I should take his change,” she mused, before replacing the coins, saying, “Oh, he probably needs it for tolls and stuff.”

“Here, you can have these instead,” Junior said, tossing her a small tin of fruit-scented cigars.

Odette nodded. Then she rolled up the windows of the car for privacy as she made

the real ask. Junior didn't come through with the \$150 that she wanted. She hoped he would, because his girlfriend was one of her best friends. But he hedged. Instead Robenson, a close male friend and admirer, later lent Odette the money.

Odette was usually skilled at managing boys and their money. She even leveraged unreciprocated romantic interest, setting certain boundaries so she could get things she wanted without expectations for 'payback.' "It's just that, these guys wanna pay," she explained. "If they're like, 'Can we go grab something to eat?' I'll go, but after that I'm going home, like deuces. Movies, I wouldn't do that. No intimate typa setting things."

Other girls were more wary. When Aisha was asked out by a guy she found cute, she said, "I'm going of course. But damn, I'm scared. I always feel like when they take you places they think that you owe them stuff. I went to the movies before with a guy. He bought the tickets. You *know* I don't buy snacks, but that day I was like, 'I'm getting us a popcorn, large!'" Aisha thought that spending money herself could reset the balance.

In NC, boys had deeper pockets. Their money often flowed to individual girls due to gendered expectations about spending on social or romantic connections. From there, money could filter into the girls' cliques. Sometimes the transfer of material goods mapped onto to romantic intimacies. Sometimes it didn't. The girls could exploit this ambiguity, but, at times, they were left feeling vulnerable.

Bypassing Money

Having Fun

As well as spending wages and money sourced from peers and boys, the girls had ways to have fun, feel good, and get around without needing any money at all.

Brittani was a slim seventeen-year-old with light brown skin. She dressed comfortably, in jeans and a hoodie, and didn't put creams and make up on her face like some of the girls at school. Brittani was soft-spoken and gentle; shy around strangers but playful with her friends. She was an only child, and lived with her mother—who had also grown up in Cambridge—in a Section 8 apartment, down the street from Jefferson Park.

Brittani and her mom were close, and the pair had struggled through hard times. Growing up, Brittani knew her mom felt guilty that she couldn't give her daughter money to buy things she might like. But Brittani remembered others usually had it worse. "Aisha didn't really always have money," she reflected. But the friends had learned together how to get by. "There was always something to do that didn't involve money," she said.

As teenagers, the girls were among the first generation of digital natives, and the internet offered unlimited free fun. Girls laughed daily over viral videos or memes, bonding over being 'in' on the joke, and sometimes recreating their favorites. Online, they also found music, movies, and TV shows, which they could enjoy for the cost of a few ads on streaming sites, or they could pirate.¹⁸

But a hustled movie played on a computer screen did not free the girls from demands and distractions at home. For that, there was *Entertainment Cinema*.

Entertainment Cinema was a drab, dated theater set back from a strip-mall a ten-minute walk from the projects. The projectors flickered and sometimes cut out, and the speakers mixed loud booms with moments of lost audio. Inside, girls' sneakers gummed on sticky carpets. Rosalie complained, "it be smelling in there. It be smellin' like pee." But,

¹⁸ Free access to media products online was arguably democratizing. Being 'hip' to the latest pop culture, particularly music, is an important pathway to status for adolescents (Carter 2005), and the internet removed the cost of access that had been prohibitive for earlier generations of teens.

week after week, the girls hiked happily to the theater, making quick work of a steep shortcut through trees and trash down the grassy side of a four-lane parkway. Even in the dark, the girls knew where a piece of metal pipe jutted from the soil and where the stones were loose; where shoes might slip and where branches hung low. The journey ended with a five-foot jump from the wall to the parking lot below. Some teens crouched on the edge and pushed hesitantly off; others brassily leapt.

The shortcut had been trampled over many years by the feet of kids going the same way. *Entertainment Cinema's* appeal hinged in part on its staff: mostly local teens, who could usher in their friends for free. Aisha showed me how it worked one Friday night as we strode into the lobby. She steered us away from the counter and straight to the guy tearing tickets in a smart polo shirt.

“Hey, Marshall,” Aisha said.

“What’s up, Aisha?”

“Which screen is *Haunted House*?”

“Screen 4. Take the elevator so the manager doesn’t see, OK?” She hugged him and told him he was great, and then we scuttled on back.

For a time, Aisha’s brother, Daniel, worked at the theater, too. He had harsh words for Joanne when she bought her own ticket to *The Hunger Games* with her newly cashed paycheck. As Joanne walked up to the barrier Daniel manned, he motioned to wave her through. When she held out her printed card, he frowned.

“You... paid?” he balked, hands on the hips of his uniform.

“We paid,” Joanne said assertively. “Oh my God,” Daniel said. “You *paid*?”

Joanne shrugged and looked down, saying, “I wanted to be a good citizen. I’ve seen

so many free movies here.”

“I’m disappointed,” Daniel said. “You broke the rules!” He tore the tickets and pointed us to the screen.

Entertainment Cinema was also approved by stern parents, so even curfewed girls could typically wangle a few hours out for a movie. Sometimes parents needed coaxing, like the time Odette went to “rescue” her best friend Stephanie.

Stephanie, a thoughtful, funny eighteen-year-old with doe-eyes and light brown skin, lived with her mom, Tamara, and stepfather in JP. Stephanie’s older brother had moved out a while back, and her older sister had been kicked out by Tamara the previous year. Tamara, who worked at the New Balance clothes factory, was firm on curfews. As a child, Stephanie was not allowed out. She gazed through the window at the neighborhood kids darting about and chasing each other. Odette noticed a strange girl peering down. “She was locked down,” she remembered. “We would see that girl looking at us out the window, and be making fun of her.” But before long, Odette felt sad for the girl stuck indoors. Odette started waving up at her, and one day, she recalled, “We was like, ‘Just come down!’” Stephanie risked it. Tamara knew Odette’s dad, it turned out, and Stephanie could keep playing. As Odette said, “From there on, it’s like history.”

But Tamara was still strict, and often kept Stephanie in on the weekend. So when Odette wanted to see a movie with her best friend one Friday night, she decided to intervene. I walked with Odette into Stephanie’s apartment, where Tamara sat on a low chair in a long, black-and-white-striped jersey dress. Odette hugged Tamara.

“Hey sexy!” Odette beamed.

Tamara smiled, skeptical, waiting for whatever request had spurred this visit.

“So,” Odette paused. “We wanna take Stephanie to the movies,” she said, a plea wrinkling her brow. Stephanie’s mom shook her head and swatted the air.

“Please!” Odette continued. “We’ll bring her back to the door. Right here!” Tamara mulled, and Odette sensed an opening. “The movie finishes at ten, and we’ll come straight,” she said. “Please!”

With a nod and a reluctant, “Okay,” Tamara sent Stephanie scampering to grab her coat.

The girls giggled along the main road and down the short-cut. In the theater, we marched straight up to the chubby white man working the ticket stand. He closed his scuffed paperback and smiled expectantly. Odette smiled back.

The man raised his eyebrows.

“Oh,” Odette chuckled. “We want to see *Red Dawn*.”

“Ok...? Your uh, your tickets?” he asked, making a tearing gesture.

Odette’s face dropped. As she rummaged for a face-saving answer, the ticket man rubbed his beard and leaned close, murmuring, “Or um, who sent you?” His gaze flicked to the customers behind us.

“Oh!” Odette said, lit up again. “We’re with Damba.” Her cousin was not on shift, but he worked a couple days per week at *Entertainment Cinema*.

“Oh that’s cool!” The man said. He stood aside, and beckoned us through. Just say Dam’ sent you, and you’re cool.”

Getting Around

Jefferson Park was minutes from the final stop on a subway line that crossed Cambridge and Boston. But the girls didn’t always have money for train fare. They spent

a lot of time walking—through sweaty summers and New England winters—and waiting for less costly buses.

As high-school students, girls could buy discounted subway passes, but for most, the markdown was not enough. Girls with passes had a certain value. Odette's sister, Maude, bought a pass, and her pass meant a free ride for her friends, who could pile in behind her once her card opened the barriers.

The girls had other techniques when no one had a pass. The first time I rode the T with Stephanie, I reached for my wallet as we entered the station. Stephanie pushed my hand down. "Oh honey, this is America! We don't pay!" she said. Then she dangled her purse through the barriers, tricking the machine into thinking somebody was trying to exit. The plastic swung open, and we walked through. As a last resort, the girls occasionally bundled through open barriers behind strangers.

Sometimes gate guards sat watch over subway stations, which stopped the girls tricking the barriers or piling in behind friends or strangers. Gate guards could limit the girls' mobility, and they tried to learn which stations were staffed during which hours.

All the girls resented spending four dollars on a roundtrip, and some straight up couldn't. When Aisha couldn't pay for public transit, she made a virtue from necessity, and bragged that she didn't travel for friends or boys. For a few weeks, Aisha texted a boy from Church until he tired of the distance. "He lives in Boston," she said, "and you know I would never travel to go to a boy's house. It's not how I am... I don't care if you're sitting next to God. I ain't taking that train to nowhere."

When Aisha needed train fare, she turned sometimes to her friends. One evening she hung out at *Dunkin Donuts* until her friend Jordon got off work. They walked to

Harvard station, where both entrances had gate guards. Aisha pulled a crumpled dollar bill from the pocket of her denim shorts, and smoothed it against her thigh. She turned to Jordan, who met her gaze. He pulled a sandwich bag of change from his backpack.

“Can you believe he gets to take that whole thing home?” Aisha said, nodding at the contents of the tip jar in his hands.

Jordan dug for silver among the coppery rubble, and passed her what she needed.

“He’s the greatest guy ever,” Aisha said, as she strolled through the barriers.

On the train, Aisha ran into Marc, a friend from the neighborhood. Marc wore a shirt and tie, and dress shoes that shined under the overhead lights. “How comes you all dressed like that?” Aisha asked.

“Work.”

“Where you work?”

“The convention center.”

“Ooooh, you fancy!” she said, running a playful hand near his satin vest.

“Get up out the hood!” he smiled.

“Get a car,” she teased, adding, “No suh, no suh. I’m just kidding.”

“Look at this,” Marc said, not missing a beat. He flashed some plastic. “It’s a free Charlie card.”

“No. Way.” Aisha said, grabbing at it. “It’s like a pass?”

“I can put whatever I want on it,” he said. “Weekly, monthly, whatever. Work pays.”

Aisha looked up round mouthed. She traced her fingers around its edges, and murmured, “Damn. Wow.” Marc snatched it back with a smile. He had won that round.

When Aisha didn't have travel money, she leaned on others to help her out. As well as her friends, she had a "favorite T man" who worked at Harvard Square and let her ride free after basketball practice, when the bus came only once per hour. She also used her storytelling skills and improvised, when she needed fare to get to school. On those days, Aisha explained, "I'd literally have to beg people on the bus. You know, you start pretending: '*Oh my God. I don't have any coins. I'm so sorry.*' When you're tapping," she said, miming patting her pockets. "Strangers would be like, 'Girl, I'll just pay for it. It's just a dollar.'"

Aisha used her talents one Thursday night when she went to a poetry slam downtown with Joanne and Najma. After the show ended at 10 p.m., we strolled through soft spring drizzle to Symphony station, where the girls expected unmanned barriers. As they bounced down the stairs, they saw a woman in an MBTA uniform, and paused.

"Shit," Joanne whispered to the huddle. "Can I borrow a dollar?"

Nobody had any cash. "I don't even have my ATM card," Joanne said. Nor did anybody else. Joanne felt a migraine coming on, and the cramp she got in her leg when she hadn't eaten for a while.

I found an expired, foreign debit card in the old purse I had brought out. Aisha grinned.

"Give it to me," she said. Her friends looked up, intrigued. Aisha passed her own ticket to Joanne, who frowned, confused. "Come!" Aisha instructed, and the girls followed.

Aisha shyly approached the guard. In a thick and affected Ugandan accent, she mumbled, "Um, hello. I am so sorry but I just arrived in this country... I only have this old card and it won't work on the machines..." She raised her soft sentences into questions. "I

am so sorry.”

We stood, barely breathing. The lady nodded. “Okay,” she said, opening the gate to let Aisha through. Everybody else used tickets, with Joanne using the one Aisha had slipped her. The girls walked to the back of the platform before releasing the tension with squeals and praise. Switching back to her normal accent, Aisha stomped on the spot as she said, “You ain’t never come up with nothing ‘til you’re broke!” Aisha appreciated being able to do the favor for Joanne, and she got everybody home that night.

In the Fall of her senior year, Aisha decided to run for Homecoming Queen. Her friends took to Twitter and Facebook in support of her candidacy, and helped her bake campaign cookies to hand out at school. Aisha asked for votes wherever she went: in school hallways, and at basketball practice, where she jumped onto the low wall that edged the court and waved regally, calling out, “Vote for me for Homecoming Queen, yo! African Queen walking right here!”

The King and Queen would be crowned at the Homecoming game, with a dance the following night. Aisha needed a dress, and she took her cousin, Leisha, to the mall to help her shop.

We met at the train station. Aisha’s hair, often shaved or cropped, was styled into braids that fell her lower back. Her friend Esther was a talented stylist, and never charged too much.

“It looks gorgeous,” I said.

“No. It’s ugly,” Aisha said, deflecting praise as she often did.

At the mall, Leisha pulled a crisp hundred from her purse. Leisha was visiting from

Uganda, where a friend had given her the bill and asked for an American dress for an upcoming wedding.

We breezed through three stores. Aisha, discerning, strode through aisles and around displays, squinting as she sized up fabric and fit. She ran her hands over dresses, feeling textures, seams, and weight. Some glinted as they caught the light, knocked by Aisha's quick gait.

"I like this a lot," she said, pulling one from the rack. She wrinkled her face as she peered closer. "It looks cheap. And it costs so much anyway!"

Aisha replaced it and grabbed another. She beamed as it twirled on the hanger.

"Oh my gosh, look at this one!" she said. Aisha held the dress against herself and looked down, imagining how it would fall on her body.

She pouted and fumbled for the price tag, flipping it in her fingers.

Aisha saw the numbers and pursed her lips. Then, with a slight shake of her head, she hung the dress back on the rail. As she walked on, she clutched the hem and pulled it with her for a few steps. Aisha let it fall, then went to sit on the floor beneath a clothes rack, burying herself among hanging skirts. She propped her head on her bent knees.¹⁹

"I'm bored of shopping," Aisha said. "Let's go now."

Aisha marched a few paces ahead of Leisha and me. By the escalators, Aisha turned back and smiled, narrowing her eyes.

"With that hundred, she could buy us all a dress," she said. Leisha shrugged.

Aisha's mood lifted by the time we caught the bus home. She told us about a dress she had seen at Buffalo Exchange, a consignment store in Somerville—pink, satin, short-

¹⁹ See e.g., Chin 2001 for how social inequality can operate through sites of consumption

but-not-too-short—and said she'd go back for it.

"I don't have enough money, though," Aisha said. "I only have eleven dollars, so I need eight more."

"So—you're not gonna get it?" Leisha asked.

Aisha chewed her lip. That wasn't the response she wanted. "I mean, can't I borrow some or something?"

Leisha's brow creased. "It's not my money, Aisha. I can't do that."

"I mean, it's not like I'm not gonna pay you or something," Aisha said.

"I know, Aisha, but... it's, it's not mine!"

Aisha, whose peers usually helped her out, had to think fast: "I can pay you back next week from laundry money," she said. "My mom is going to give me ten dollars for the laundromat. If I give you money from that, is it okay?"

"Um, yeah."

A week later, the pink satin dress lay on Aisha's bedroom floor, among her bags of clothes. First, though, was the Friday night game.

It was bitter for mid-October, and Joanne and I sat close on icy bleachers whose metal numbed the backs of our thighs. Aisha trembled as she crouched between us.

"It's cold isn't it!" I offered.

Aisha looked up. "I'm scared," she said, almost repentant.

"No, don't be scared," Joanne lulled, and rubbed Aisha's back the way she soothed her siblings.

At half-time, the MC called the candidates for Homecoming Queen to the field. First, he summoned Kiara, Aisha's friend from the neighborhood. She hugged her fellow

cheerleaders and tightened her pink hair ribbon before strutting down. Then Lil, a senior with white skin, dark hair, and red lipstick joined Kiara. Finally, the MC called Aisha. As her name boomed through the speakers, she exhaled hard, as if to force out the jitters that were making her hands shake. As heads turned toward her, she flashed a smile and climbed nimbly down the bleachers, marching down the field like it was a fashion runway. As she walked, she paused every few steps to drive up the drama. The cheering crowd grew louder and louder.

The three girls nodded civilly at one another. In the bleachers, Joanne fidgeted as her classmates roared in anticipation. The MC stalled, and Joanne gazed straight at Aisha.

“The winner...” called the MC, “of Hooomecoming queeeeen, is....!” He paused, teasing the eager crowd.

“*Aisha!*” he yelled into the mic, and Joanne jumped to her feet. Aisha’s face cracked into an open-mouthed grin as she hugged Kiara and May. Black and silver helium balloons swam up into the cloudless dark.

“Yeah, Aisha! Wooooooh!” Joanne yelled, stamping and clapping. She hoped her best friend could hear.

Aisha ducked at the knees, accepting her plastic crown and a bouquet wrapped in white and green paper. From the pitch, she smiled out at Joanne and her friends. Smiling right back were the girls who had shared their belongings with her; who had fed her when her fridge was empty; who cared that she had enough, and made her feel valued.

There was so much clapping, so much noise.

Aisha wore her crown all weekend. It was a nice thing, this status objectified. Seven years earlier, she had come to Cambridge, “with no clue what America was gonna look

like,” she remembered. She expected “heaven, with a lot of candy.” When things weren’t so rosy, her girls had long helped her out. Aisha was thankful. Through her teenaged years, Aisha, like most of her friends, leant on her peers to meet various material needs. In doing so, she got economic and emotional goods that minimized the social costs of her family’s poverty.

Poverty brought the girls multiple hardships. As minor children of adults living in public housing, they did not have to struggle to stay sheltered, nor, mostly, clothed or fed. But their age amplified other dimensions of poverty, like worries about status, or fitting in. Poverty could mean being left out: being unable to join activities, or feeling trapped at home when the train cost too much.

The girls wanted money for consumer goods that made them feel happy and autonomous, and that helped them play on the field of high-school cool. They also wanted access to social activities, like concert tickets or ice cream sundaes.

Different logics of giving, getting, sharing, and exchange helped the girls meet their material needs. They earned money from jobs they helped each other find. They got cash and other goods from peers, including close friends, acquaintances, and boys. They shared what they had. And, they worked to manage without money by finding ways to have fun, get around, and claim status for free.²⁰

²⁰ The girls did not need that much money. But even modest sums could match what the underground economy could offer, limiting its appeal (Levitt & Venkatesh 2000). This is not to suggest that without a resourceful peer group they would have turned to illicit means. As Mary Patillo-McCoy explains, “Gang membership and selling drugs are almost nonchoices for most... teenage girls” (Patillo-McCoy 1999: p144). Girls are rarely “consumed” by the ‘street,’ she points out, though they can be “consumed through their association with consumed young men” (ibid). Some of the NC girls did profit from “street” work of boys they knew or dated, though they were themselves uninvolved. Leaning on boys could bring personal and legal risks. But other strategies

The girls were dogged and inventive when it came to getting what they needed. Sometimes this meant learning to hustle, as when Aisha made the gate guard at Symphony station let her through. Through hustling, the girls expressed ingenuity and claimed esteem. In the underground economy of Chicago's Robert Taylor homes, Sudhir Venkatesh discovered that, "money-making schemes gave residents a sense of belonging and respect."²¹ In fact, he argued, "in some respects the cultural valence of hustling overrode its material significance, given that most underground ventures provided minimal earnings."²² For the residents Venkatesh met, money-making was not just about money; rather, it brought social and emotional validation.

For the girls, too, material goods met important emotional needs. Money brought dignity, status, and participation as much as it eased financial hardship. These things were vital. Economic sociologists have long pointed to the extra-economic meanings of money. As Karl Polanyi argued, "[man] does not act so as to safeguard his individual interests in the possession of material goods, he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets. He values material goods only in so far as they serve this end."²³

had drawbacks, too: sneaking onto the train was technically illegal; other sources of cash could be unreliable.

²¹ Venkatesh 2000: p106

²² Venkatesh 2000: p106. For residents of the Robert Taylor Homes, for whom hustling had been glamorized by movies, hustling was "more than a blind adaptation to poverty; it was also a cultural practice through which individuals developed a sense of who they were in relation to their local community and to the wider world" (2000: p83-84). Money making schemes had an important social and emotional role, in addition to their generation of needed financial resources.

²³ Polanyi 1944: p46. Sociologist Randall Collins has also argued that socioemotional motivations determine people's pursuit of material goods. He suggests, "The material market is motivated by demand for material goods because material resources are among the ingredients needed to produce intense [Interaction Ritual] experiences" (Collins 2004: pXV). Interaction Ritual experiences, he explains, can charge individuals with positive emotional experiences, and, for Collins, the pursuit of these positive emotional valences drive social organization and daily life. As he writes, "the entire social-interactional marketplace for IRs is what drives the motivation to work, produce,

When Aisha got a free frozen yogurt, she was included in a group activity. When Odette was taken to dinner, she felt desired. These gifts—which the girls repaid with other types of capital²⁴—brought a swell of status. The girls felt wanted, and cared for. Feeling valued is a key developmental needs for adolescents, helping them grow into competent, independent adults.²⁵

Moreover, material transfers were themselves motivated by social and relational obligations, and driven by things like loyalty and affection. This was true when Joanne paid for Aisha's pancakes at iHop, and true when the girls bought *Galaxy Ink* shirts from Ty. Broader codes of meaning around things like friendship and romance guided economic flows between the young people.

Through these codes and their logics, peer networks met needs unfulfilled by adults. Parents rarely had enough money to give their children the cash they craved. Nor could they bestow social status. Peers offered both. The girls' persistent and creative techniques to mitigate material hardship helped them feel like they had enough. More, they made the girls feel like they were enough.

invest, and consume in the material market" (ibid).

²⁴ This trade in different types of goods left no expectation that money 'balanced out' in the long run (cf. Liebow 1967).

²⁵ E.g., Jackson & Rodriguez-Tome 1995; Hatch & Wadsworth 2008; Giordano 2003

3—Bored: Social Support

“Can’t you make the birds shut up?” Najma asked Joanne, side-eying the canaries. In the corner of the kitchen, the two yellow things shrieked from their wire cage. They flapped their wings and chomped on their coop’s metal bars. Over time, their beaks had gnawed most of the white paint clean off.

Joanne was used to fading out noise. “I’ve learned how to zone out and read a book in the middle of the party,” she once explained. “It’s useful because of all the noise. It’s a life skill when you live in the middle of this. This family.”

But the din got to Najma this Saturday night, and she exhaled slowly.

Joanne shrugged.

The girls finished the Burger King sandwiches Vincent had brought home, and Joanne stood to make dessert. She split a chocolate brownie into three paper bowls, and topped each with two scoops of vanilla ice cream.

Earlier that evening, Joanne, Najma and I had put up two bucks each for the snacks in *Foodtown*. “I hate buying food from here. It’s such a rip off,” Najma had grumbled, in line with customers holding six-packs and bags of chips. But the next nearest store was fifteen minutes away, and it was raining.

We ate at the kitchen table with plastic spoons. Energy was low. It was dark outside, and a thick mist veiled the surroundings. The gloom felt close, as did the sense of a Saturday night squandered.

Joanne’s kid siblings chased each other through the house. Najma narrowed her eyes. She had come here to escape the noise of her own baby nephew, and five-year-old Madeleine’s frantic star-jumping put her on edge. So did seven-year-old Evens, bouncing

and yelling, “Knock knock! Knock knock!” He had a book of jokes in hand, but couldn’t make anybody ask, “Who’s there?”

“Let’s go upstairs,” Najma sighed. She pressed the heels of her hands into her temples, keeping her fingertips, oily from dinner, off her straight, dark hair.

Najma hoped the boys would have something to do. Vincent was chilling in his room with his friends, Marc and Alvin. Upstairs, Najma sat on Vincent’s bed, readjusting her weight as she sank into the spots where the mattress sagged. Joanne lagged back at the door, frowning at the boys’ bong.

“Why you being so awkward?” Alvin asked.

“This is not awkward,” Joanne cut back. “I just don’t wanna breathe that.”

As Marc rolled two joints for later, two-year-old Sandley toddled in, knees and elbows poking through faded flannel.

“Oh shit,” Vincent said, ferrying his little brother back outside and closing the door. He pressed a rolled-up towel against the bottom of the door to trap giveaway fumes. Carole was on a late shift at the hospital, but Vincent and Joanne’s stepdad was watching TV in his room next door.

Joanne and Najma peered at the boys, expectant. But the boys had no plans either. Vincent opened his laptop and played a movie he’d downloaded. But the sound was tinny and wouldn’t travel.

“This movie is not entertaining,” Najma said. She turned to watch Marc shoot strip club patrons in *Grand Theft Auto*, playing on a small TV above the dresser.

Outside, a train thundered by. Najma turned back to Vincent’s movie. She peered out the window. She looked at Joanne. Then she gazed up at the ceiling.

For the girls, not having money was boring. Long evenings unfurled after school let out at 2.30 p.m. Some of the girls' classmates from wealthier neighborhoods had schedules packed with extracurriculars. These hobbies broke up afternoons and evenings.¹ Some of the NC girls worked after-school jobs, and others joined Workforce, an afternoon program run by the Cambridge Housing Authority. But many days, they were alone for the nine or ten hours between the school bell and bedtime. While their middle-class peers often fought for downtime, the NC girls had to find things to do. They practiced time management: not learning how to plan, prioritize, or delegate, but rather waiting for time to pass, moving it along when possible.²

Boredom was the girls' most common complaint. The heavy lethargy left them weary and beat, even while they itched with restlessness.

More than a felt threat to wellbeing, boredom has also been linked to a range of risk behaviors and negative outcomes. For instance, studies find that boredom associates with drug use and unprotected sex among teenagers. It ties, too, to low grades, and to dropping out of high school. And, studies connect boredom with impulsivity, deviance, and a disregard for rules.³

As well as quantitative studies that identify these correlations, ethnographers have shown how unfilled time—and the monotony of cash-strapped daily lives—can lead to

¹ Lareau 2003: p44-5

² As Herbert Gans noted in his study of poor adolescents in Boston's West End, "In the adolescent peer group... life alternates between killing time and searching for action" (Gans 1962: p65)

³ E.g., Johnston & O'Malley 1986, Arnett 1990, Maroldo 1986, Robinson 1975, Watt & Vondanovich 1992, McGiboney & Carter 1988; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles 2005

‘trouble making.’⁴ This idea traces back to some of the earliest sociological ethnographies. For instance, in *The Jack-Roller*, Clifford Shaw’s case study of a young man’s legal troubles, the protagonist, Stanley, explained: “shoplifting experiences were alluring, exciting, and thrilling... At first I did not steal for gain nor out of necessity for food. I stole because it was the most fascinating thing I could do. It was a way to pass the time... I wanted something more exciting. I liked the dare-devil spirit.”⁵

Other studies of young people growing up in poor neighborhoods find similar things. For instance, Sudhir Venkatesh spent time in Chicago’s Robert Taylor Homes, where he found that, “In order to ‘fill the empty time,’ small groups of truant youths... engaged in various types of mischief and petty crime.”⁶ Venkatesh found that many residents of the projects themselves blamed local “delinquency and organized gang activity” on “the general idleness of the youth populace.”⁷

Sociologists of emotion help explain why petty crime can have a seductive thrill for young people. Jack Katz, for instance, argued that “deviance” offers moments of melodramatic intensity and game-like fun. Katz suggested that among the petty thieves he studied, the intensity and fun mattered more than any economic gain from stealing. “In a literal sense,” Katz wrote, “successful thieves were being thrilled: they shuddered or shook in elation, often to the rhythms of laughter.”⁸ Such thrills are powerful, and this power

⁴ E.g., Gans 1962; Sullivan 1989

⁵ Shaw 1931: p7

⁶ Venkatesh 2000: p29

⁷ Venkatesh 2000: p30

⁸ Katz 1988: p65

helps explain why unstructured, unsupervised socializing with peers is a major situational predictor of problem behavior.⁹

All teens get bored. And teens from all backgrounds rebel. As Mary Patillo-McCoy noted, “Adolescence is color-blind in its demands for excitement and its propensities to test boundaries.”¹⁰ But the risks of teenaged thrill-seeking are not so evenly shared. Poor young people and youth of color are much more likely to be penalized for misdemeanors and petty crime, which can set in motion longer term downwards trajectories.¹¹

Neither is exposure to boredom equally distributed among young people. Teens with less money more often find themselves faced with swathes of empty time. This was clear, at times, in the classrooms of Cambridge Rindge and Latin, the city’s single high school that the NC girls attended.

CRLS taught its 1,800 students in a well-resourced, recently renovated building. The school had ample city funding, and a better teacher-per-pupil ratio than the average public high school nationwide.¹² CRLS’s motto, “Opportunity, Diversity, Respect,” spoke

⁹ Maimon & Browning 2010; Osgood & Anderson 2004; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles 2005. Herbert Gans shows this ethnographically, too, noting that among the adolescents he studied, “‘Action’ generates a state of quasi-hypnotic excitement. This state may be achieved through a card game, an athletic contest, a fight, a sexual adventure, or through an attack on the adult world. Whereas most of these attacks are in the nature of petty mischief — taunting adults, stealing fruit from a push cart, writing angry exclamations on public walls, or breaking windows in an empty building — some are more serious, and are defined by the adult world as delinquency” (Gans 1962: p65).

¹⁰ Patillo-McCoy 1999: p206. Katz, too, pointed out, “The initial experiences in sneak thefts of poor, working-class, and middle-class youths, alike, appear to be more clearly projects in constructing sneaky thrills than efforts to satisfy previously defined material needs” (1988: p79).

¹¹ E.g., Rios 2011; for a review see Rosich 2007

¹² The district had a per pupil expenditure rate of \$27,163 in 2014, more than almost any other district in Massachusetts. The school had a student to teacher ratio of 10:1, against a nationwide average of 16:1. CRLS sent four out of five students to college (including public and private colleges), and the rate of college attendance among low-income students (79.6) differed only fractionally from the school-wide rate (80.9) (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and

to a student body that was majority-minority: sixty-two percent of students were members of racial minorities, the largest group being African-Americans, who made up thirty-two percent of the student body.¹³ The school was also socioeconomically diverse, and forty-five percent of students received free or reduced-price lunches.¹⁴

On the first day back after Spring Break, Maude, then a junior, walked into class with Stephanie, a senior. They were taking STARS, a non-academic, community service-based elective for upperclassmen. Ms. Flores welcomed the girls, who took seats in the circle of chairs. Each week in STARS, one student led ‘check-in,’ an ice-breaker activity for the start of class. It was Maude’s week. For their own check-ins, other classmates had planned games, like 7-Up, or taught songs from camps they had attended. But that wasn’t Maude’s style. Maude was calm, not effusive, and she gazed at her peers with a bemused curiosity as they bounced around school, fueled by excitement and sweet things from the cafeteria. Maude operated at a constant, and was less prone than her friends to fluctuations in mood and energy.

From her chair, Maude crossed her Ugg boots. She told the room that for check-in, they should go around the circle and say what they did over break.

Some students perked up at the instructions; others slouched down. Some needed coaxing, like Darrell, a 17-year-old African-American boy who liked to spend class

Secondary Education 2018; Cambridge Public Schools 2018; Institution for Education Statistics 2018).

¹³ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2018. Citywide, 66.6% of Cambridge residents were white (United States Census 2010)

¹⁴ Free lunches were available to students from families earning up to 130% of the poverty line, and reduced-price lunches were available to students from families earning more than 130% but less than 185% of the federal poverty line (Cambridge City Government 2018).

whispering with his friends. He also liked to smile at the girls, and they smiled back at his long eyelashes and lean build. He sometimes hummed and clapped and filled his cheeks with air during circle go-arounds, or tapped his sneaker against his chair leg. When his turn came, he didn't say what he did over break. He pulled his hoodie up to his mouth.

"How was your vacation?" Ms. Flores nudged, earnest.

"Boring," he said, looking at his lap.

"That's it?" she pressed.

"Yup."

"Why was it boring?"

"'Cause," Darrell said. "It just was."

Ms. Flores paused. "Mkay." She conceded and looked to the next chair. Melanie, a wide-eyed white girl, was playing with her shoulder-length curly brown hair.

"Okay," Melanie smiled. "I went to Vermont, and I stayed on my cousin's sheep farm. It was really awesome." People cooed in intrigue.¹⁵

Next was Lillian, a white girl with dyed red hair who was often the first to volunteer when staff needed help. "I planned out my whole summer," she said. "I really hope it all works out! Oh, and I got into college, too!" The class clapped.

Classmates from wealthier families were more often able to leverage material resources into time-filling opportunities or activities. For the girls, however, and some of their school friends who also lived in NC, being broke often meant being bored.¹⁶

¹⁵ Julie Bettie (2003) discusses how wealthy and white students can inflict—even unintentionally—class injuries on their peers.

¹⁶ Annette Lareau (2003) shows how many affluent parents spend considerable sums on after-school activities and opportunities for their children. Access to more informal time-filling activities also often depended on having money, leaving less wealthy students with more free time.

Boredom taunted the girls. They leaned on each other to keep it at bay. Some psychologists describe the capacity to self-entertain as a skill to be cultivated by individuals.¹⁷ But the girls found social solutions to boredom, collaborating to fill their time and maximize fun. They together generated moments of elevated emotional intensity, which not only passed time, but also made it memorable.

This chapter shows how the girls passed their time. It first explains when and why they encountered boredom. Then it reveals how they sought and judged plans, and finally, it shows how they built fulfilling social lives. Social media was often a key tool for the girls. They consumed and produced digital content to pass time alone, and used social media when they were apart to extend interaction. But the girls' techniques for battling boredom left them less practiced than their more affluent peers at managing intense 'time realities.' The girls' constant online contact stopped them feeling alone, but left them without the skills honed by their wealthier classmates in their after-school hours.

Boredom as a Social Problem

Boredom was a social problem, which the girls faced because of their age, their limited disposable income, their family commitments, the weather, and more. Many of these factors converged on the last day of school before the summer break. Odette wanted to celebrate with her sister and best friends. But the clique didn't all have the cash for food or a Frappuccino. They were also too young for a club party in Boston that night, and anyway, Stephanie had to stay close to home.

For a few hours after school, Odette and Maude sat on the steps outside their

¹⁷ Czikszentmihalyi 1990; Polly et al., 1993

apartment with Nicole and Rosalie. The girls hung out and pondered plans.

It was the last Friday in May, airless and sweaty. The girls sat on the bunched fabric of their dresses to stop the stone scalding their thighs. It was too hot to be inside, not to mention the noise. Nicole combed Rosalie's hair as we waited for Stephanie. When Rosalie yelped or flinched from the comb, Nicole scolded her in Creole.

At twenty-one, Nicole was the oldest of Odette's clique, and the mother figure of the group. Nicole was sleek and polished; beautiful, with womanlike poise and composure. She had an authority, too. Sometimes, she set her gaze like granite and made people wonder what they had done wrong. Sometimes, she wore a saccharine smile, both polite and displeased, that made even adults hold their tongues.

Like many young people in NC, Nicole had known trauma. One of her step-brothers, John, had been hurt in a shooting, and a year later, her other step-brother, 'Sparks,' was shot and killed outside a local pizzeria.

Nicole tried to support her friends as they had supported her. She was nurturing and maternal, and most protective of Rosalie, a shy and quiet sixteen-year-old. Nicknamed 'Yung Twig,' baby-of-the-group Rosalie hid her skinny frame under baggy North Face hoodies.

Out on the steps, the girls were calm in one another's company. And, up on the stoop, they could see out over the neighborhood. Kids ran around or sped by on micro scooters. Older folks sat on benches, squinting into the afternoon. Music drifted from different directions: the soft hums of Haitian kompa came from one window, thudding hip-hop from another. The girls pointed to each passing car, and discussed its driver: news, rumors, relationships.

At the foot of the steps, Rosalie's brother, Leon, played catch with a timid kid. Leon, nineteen, was a year younger than his brother Bryan. All three siblings were tight, but Rosalie idolized Bryan. He was the first-born, the leader. She loved the time they spent together, and she loved how he looked out for her. He hadn't been around as much recently, and she missed him.

"Come on, little man!" Leon encouraged his young ball buddy.

Stephanie walked up, in a long jersey dress that clung.

The kid put out his arms to catch, but Leon didn't notice. His gaze had followed Stephanie, and the girls cracked up laughing at him.

"I'm done. Look at Leon!" Maude joked.

Busted, he smiled.

Up on the steps, Lourdes had joined her sisters, Odette and Maude, and their friends. Leon turned to Lourdes, and said, "You're still my baby!"

"Uh uh!" Lourdes balked. "I don't do Haitian on Haitian. I keep telling you that. Look at you, all skin and bones!" she teased.

"I been in the weight room!" he tried.

"You're like one of them, you know, Ethiopian kids!" Maude piled on.

"Yeah, one of them feed the children shit." Lourdes said.

"Wait, who's that?" Rosalie interrupted, as another car pulled into the circle.

"It's Ernest," Maude said.

"Oh yeah," Rosalie nodded.

"Does he have the 2012?" Maude frowned. "I thought his car was older."

The girls passed some hours bantering and trading gossip. Odette shared her plans

for the summer: she hoped to get a job at the youth center, and also work with a cousin on something fashion related, and then travel, maybe to Miami, or Jamaica.

After a while, boredom seeped through the chatter.

Growing weary and agitated, Nicole and Odette thought a change of scene might lift spirits. Once they roused the group from its lassitude and got everyone to their feet, we walked from the projects with no destination in mind. We wandered down the main road, where a confetti of blossoms littered the gutter. The pink buds browned and curled in the sun. We dragged our feet, scuffing our sandals along the sidewalk and shuffling in the pressing heat. We breathed the sharp smell of scorched dry tarmac. Two cars honked as they passed, and the girls smiled at one another, straightening their shoulders. Walking five abreast, taking up space, the girls felt “squadded.”

But the street soon lost its appeal as sweat rolled down our backs. The girls looked around for options, and Nicole nodded over at pizzeria they sometimes visited. She swung open the door and peered in. “Is it air conditioned?” she asked. Feeling the answer on her skin, she turned on her heels. “Nope! Okay!”

The two men behind the counter blew kisses at Nicole as she left. One shouted, “Hey, come back, baby!”

“No, it’s okay. Thank you,” Nicole replied, her tone courteous but edged with warning.

The men stared after her.

The girls stood in the parking lot. They wiped their heads with the backs of their hands and glanced around for somewhere to go. They turned to the laundromat, next door to the pizzeria, and then looked at each other. We trooped in. It was air conditioned, and

the girls spread over the benches, ignoring glares from customers folding clothes. No one had money for pizza anyway.

“Oh man, that feels so good!” Maude moaned, as the artificial breeze prickled her arms with goosebumps.

Nicole looked around the laundromat and shook her head. “Ugh, I needa get some money,” she said. She pulled herself up backwards to perch atop an empty dryer.

“See, that’s why I need a sugar daddy!” Odette nodded.

Rosalie looked up, “Yeah, I need a sugar daddy!”

“Okay, girl, no! You’re like twelve,” Nicole castigated.

Rosalie bowed her head back down and smiled.

An employee timidly scanned the six of us. “Um, are you guys waiting for something?” she asked.

“We’re waiting for *someone*,” Nicole improvised. She flashed a gracious, synthetic smile.

The woman looked away, unnerved. Then she mumbled, “Well, I, um, don’t know if you can stay. I might get in trouble.”

The girls knew this lie. They, too, marshaled imagined adult authority to challenge one another.

“We’ll be quiet,” Odette offered, and her ostensible compromise foreclosed a reasonable response. The woman shuffled away but returned a few minutes later, blown back by a small gust of confidence.

“Customers only,” she said. Nicole pursed her lips. The girls reluctantly obliged, and started pacing the sidewalk once again.

On the last day of school, the girls couldn't find a way to celebrate. They didn't have money to buy food or drink, and therefore access to a space where they could socialize. Hanging out in someone's apartment was unappealing: too hot, and too little privacy. Shopping wasn't really fun without money, and often security guards made them feel unwelcome.

Lacking control or ownership over space, the girls often bounced around town looking for something to do. This could make them feel frustrated, excluded, and, above all, bored.

Pursuing Plans

Boredom could best be overcome collaboratively. Time sped up when lost in giddy laughter, and slowed down on a lonely walk home.¹⁸ Yet even the company of best friends could feel flat when all there was to do was sit around and talk. So the girls worked jointly to generate moments of emotional intensity or heightened fun.

For the girls, having 'something to do' was of top priority, and they ardently scoped out plans. Sometimes, just making plans could be thrilling, even if their ideas never materialized. One summer, Odette—always imaginative—planned a vacation with her friends before some left town for college. She picked Martha's Vineyard, a Massachusetts island with sandy beaches and colonial charm. "The ferry only costs a dollar!" Odette said. "I can bring pasta from home, so it won't cost nothing. We'll get napkins and all that stuff from Family Dollar." On a group text chat and in person, the girls discussed the guestlist, debating which boys to invite. In the end, for no clear reason, the plan-making fizzled. The

¹⁸ Sociologists and psychologists have considered the phenomenology of time, and how people can manipulate their experience of it (e.g., Flaherty 2000; 2010).

girls never went to Martha's Vineyard. But they passed time lost in the excitement of thinking about it.

Though planning could be fun, *doing* was better. The girls embraced most activities that let them spend time together. On Maude's birthday, some of the girls trooped across Cambridge to a liquor store they thought would not card them. They could have done what they usually did—ask an older brother, cousin, or friend to grab a bottle from Foodtown—but their trip gave the girls a goal-oriented activity for almost two hours.¹⁹

There was a hierarchy of plans. Parties—loud, crowded, absorbing—sat at the top. Unfortunately for the girls, parties at bars were often age restricted, and events just for teens could be costly. House parties were the best option, but those in neighboring suburbs required transport: either somebody with a car willing to drive, or a rental. And, parties could have further conditions of access that could keep the girls out. Specifically, they worried that other girls would gatekeep entry. One summer night, Odette, Maude, Nicole, Stephanie and Rosalie gathered in the playground across from JP.

“You tryna go somewhere tonight?” Maude asked me as I arrived.

“Sure. What is there?”

Maude and Nicole looked at one another. Nicole frowned.

“My friend's mom works for MIT. I think there's an MIT party.” Maude said.

Nicole shook her head.

“Or there's a hotel party, in Waltham,” Maude offered.

“Would we have to pay for that though?” Nicole asked.

¹⁹ This idea appears in other ethnographic accounts of young people's daily lives. For instance, Ranita Ray writes, “Many days could go into planning a night out, as if planning was also part of the enjoyment” (2018: p208).

“No, but you know the girls will be aggy as fuck,” Odette pointed out. “Like, ‘You can’t come in.’ You know what girls are like. We only know the boys, and the girls will be like, ‘No.’”

The girls debated, and decided not to risk the journey.

The best-case scenario was a party thrown by a friend in the neighborhood. One Saturday, Stevenson, the girls’ neighbor and buddy, had a party at his apartment. The girls were among the first to arrive, hoping to squeeze the most fun from the night. They stood in Stevenson’s empty living room; to make a dancefloor, he’d pushed the furniture into the kitchen.

Within two hours, sweaty bodies spilled from Stevenson’s home into the corridor. Outside the block, a roiled crowd of young people—some from towns twenty miles away—clamored to get in. Stevenson tried to hold back the crowd. When a girl stumbled down drunk, he called, “Who’s with this chick? Who’s taking her home?” and in the muddle, a female guest took his place as bouncer. She pointed into the hot throng, welcoming certain guests: “You can come, I know you, and you! Oh and you, I like you!” The chosen ones elbowed through the pack and ran up the stairs. Stevenson shook his head as he watched.

The girls could have access to fun blocked by their lack of money, their access to transport, their age, or the whims of party hosts. So, they had to find different ways to let loose and experience intensity.

Social Media: Passing and Playing with Time

On social media, the girls were connected to one another and to hundreds of their peers as contacts, followers, and friends. They used this connectedness to deal with

boredom, both when they were alone and when they were together. When girls were alone, they passed time communicating with each other, as well as consuming and producing social media. When they were together, social media gave an engrossing focal activity, and also let the girls play with time to stretch out fun.

Passing Time - Alone

The slowest and most stubborn hours were those spent alone.²⁰ But time without friends was inevitable. “Trap” parents could set curfews. They could also keep girls in out of fear for their safety, as a punishment, or because they needed help at home. Weather could keep friends apart, as could jobs, when girls worked shifts alone across the city.

Cell phones let the girls feel connected when they were alone. Girls kept in touch with their friends morning to night, having conversations with no clear start nor end, and that drifted from platform to platform. Stephanie could send Rosalie a Snapchat to respond to her Instagram post, which Rosalie might answer with a text message. Often, the point was less the content than the contact and the connection.²¹

In addition to their ongoing conversations, bored teens also sought engagement with Tweets or Facebook statuses saying things like, **who’s up?** or **lms [like my status] if you want to inbox / text**. Interaction ‘games,’ like “Like My Status” on Facebook, fostered interaction trades. Senior, Lila, for example, snowed-in and lonely one evening, posted on Facebook: **LMS for a 2013 confession and a <3**. Seventy-nine people liked her status, and

²⁰ As Liebow observed, “The comparison of sitting at home alone with being in jail is commonplace” (1967: p31).

²¹ These communications were often what linguists and anthropologists have called “phatic.” Phatic communication works primarily to cement and reassert social bonds, rather than to convey information (following Malinowski 1923; see also Makice 2009). Utterances like small talk and pleasantries are often phatic, and serve primarily a social function.

in exchange, she visited each liker's profile, commented a heart emoticon—<3—beneath one of their photos, and sent them a private message.

The girls also joined in with digital rituals. This included responding to trending hashtags on Twitter, when they posted their own answers to hashtags like, **#15factsaboutme**, **#waystoruinarelationship**, **#dontwifeherif** and **#tweetyourshoesize**. There were also daily rituals that spanned social networks. For instance, on Thursdays, for **#throwbackthursday**, girls scrolled through their phones for an old photo, which they uploaded, sometimes stitched digitally into a collage with a new photo using a free app. If they missed Thursday, they could post the next day: Friday was **#FBF**, Flashback Friday. Other days had themes, too: **#MCM**, Mancrush Monday, when girls posted photos of boyfriends or celebrities they liked; and **#WCW**, Womancrush Wednesday, when girls uploaded photos of famous women, or platonic but loving posts about their friends. One week, Nicole posted a photo of Odette—in a monochrome outfit topped with an edgy black hat—with the caption, **Meet my WCW but that's erryday though. Shawty bad like a bag of money**. Plotting these posts ahead of time could pass some time, too.

Digital rituals could bring virtual collective effervescence. Joining hashtags and sharing memes—with their common focus of attention—the girls felt part of something bigger, which theorists since Emile Durkheim have explored as central to group membership.²² Digital rituals stretched collective effervescence over space, but not over too much time, as Twitter trends and viral memes or jokes mostly flared up fast and then fizzled. Being 'hip' to the latest online thing was an elevating feeling, one that replaced a

²² Durkheim (1912) first systematically outlined the role of rituals and collective effervescence for fostering social solidarity and smoothing social functioning. Interaction theorists like Erving Goffman and later Randall Collins built on his legacy, showing how small group encounters and interaction rituals promote group membership and structure social order.

sense of isolation with a moment of engagement and community membership.

Perception of an Audience

Beyond keeping in touch with friends, seeking engagement, and joining digital rituals, the girls also uploaded posts and broadcasts to their hundreds, or thousands, of followers.²³ All day long, girls broadcast things ranging from photos of food, to music they were enjoying, their outfit for church, the length of a shower, and more.

One reason teens enjoyed sharing updates was because they had, at all times, a peer audience. This audience depended on two things: publicity and reciprocity.

First as *social* media, life online was publicly performed and publicly seen. All social networks were public; some, like Facebook and Snapchat, only to approved contacts, and others, like Twitter, to anybody on the platform.²⁴ This publicity transformed opinions into expressions; thoughts into statements. This is what made Tweeting more engaging than journaling, or drawing cartoons on Snapchat more social than doodling with pen and paper.

The other key component of the girls' digital audience was the reciprocity that governed interactions. Teens were expected to be attentive audience members, who viewed and engaged with one another's posts. Sometimes, when Aisha told a story involving something about which she had Tweeted, she studied her friends' faces for signs of recognition. "You didn't see my tweet?" she'd chide if she didn't see nods and smiles. But mostly, her friends did see her tweets, and her Snapchats, Instagram pictures and Facebook

²³ As boyd explains, people maintain connections by "keeping each other up-to-date about social happenings and relationships" (2014: p144).

²⁴ Some girls "protected" their Twitter accounts, though this was not common. Some adults are alarmed by teens' seeming disregard for privacy online, as well as their sharing of intimate information. But younger people tend to see privacy differently. As danah boyd points out, "It's not that every teen is desperate for widespread attention; plenty simply see no reason to take the effort to minimize the visibility of their photos and conversations" (2014: p65).

posts, just as she saw and interacted with theirs.

Being an audience member consumed several hours of each day. Some media scholars and writers have critiqued the pressures that young people, and girls especially, can face to be tirelessly alert to one another's uploads.²⁵ And for the NC girls, keeping up could be a demanding task. But doing so also meant that nobody could get too bored, or feel too alone.

The girls' audience meant that each post promised two distinct moments of engagement: the expressive and the interactive. The first, expressive, moment, came when girls grabbed their phones and crafted broadcasts to share with viewing peers. They chose photos; wrote captions; brainstormed hashtags, emojis and more. This process could be consuming, and draw them into a state of 'flow.'²⁶

The second, interactive moment, came when friends liked, Retweeted, commented on, or otherwise responded to broadcasts. Together, these two moments made could make solitary acts social, and make passive acts active. Maude, for instance, liked to live-Tweet her thoughts when she watched her TV shows alone. She also blasted out Snapchats through evenings spent babysitting her niece and nephew. The expression entertained her, and the interaction absorbed her again.

This dual dynamic helps explain why the girls shared so much, including Tweets like:

Why does my sister always have to come in my room wtf go away

I can't find my hair tie but it's probably under all my clothes on my bed - ___ -

²⁵ Sales 2016

²⁶ Czikszentmihalyi 1990. boyd (2014) reframes the adult perception of teens' "addiction" to social media as an instance of "flow."

I'm hungry but not enough to go get food lol

My nails have really grown so much

I gotta be in a certain mood for certain cereal

I wanna put makeup on but idk which colors to pick Lol

Girls felt engaged by self-expression, and engaged by the interaction.

NC teens used several social networking sites, and they shared different things on each. Teens had a set of norms about the proper use of each site—norms that were mostly tacit, unless they were broken. One evening Najma scrolled through her phone and scowled, saying, “I hate it when people use their Facebook like a Twitter.”²⁷ Najma meant that Facebook posts should be fewer in number, if individually longer and more meaningful. Twitter, on the other hand, was for each passing thought.

The girls found that the length cap on Tweets made Twitter perfect for sharing unlimited updates. Twitter, however, took a different view, and limited each user to 100 tweets per hour, or 1,000 per day. When teens hit these limits, Twitter temporarily blocked access to their accounts. Teens called this “being in Twitter jail,” and they announced their quarantine on other sites. When Maude was blocked after live-Tweeting Beyoncé’s half-time performance at the Superbowl, she wrote on Facebook, “**Im In Twitter Jail Because Of All My Beyonce Tweets & RT :(**” to redirect and continue her conversations.

Passing Time - Together

When the girls hung out, they used the same social media in different ways to keep

²⁷ Much of social interaction face-to-face depends on just such tacit norms. Microsociologists, including scholars following Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective (1959, 1966, 1967) and Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology (1967), have shown just how much of our day to day socializing hinges on unarticulated, taken for granted assumptions about how interactions should proceed. For the girls, interaction online was governed similarly by shared—mostly unspoken—ideas about proper use on each platform.

time moving. They pored together over peers' posts and timelines, using broadcasts to carry on conversations like the ones they had on the last day of school. Just as the girls expected to know who drove each passing car, they kept tabs on digital goings-on, too.

The girls shared drama over passed-around phones. They laughed about online beef, as earlier teens might have goaded from the sidelines of a fight.²⁸ Together, they scrutinized broadcasts and judged relationships, trying to decode posts and other signals of intimacy: *Why did Jade unfollow Rochelle on Instagram? And why are they still Facebook friends?* The girls drew on their digital idioms of practice to explain what they saw.²⁹ These codes let them uncover information infused subtly into messages.

Girls passed hours scrolling together through peers' profiles, hunting for updates. Everybody spent time "twatching"³⁰ and "creeping" online, but it was a skill. The girls were careful to leave no digital footprints—for instance, by accidentally clicking on or liking an old post.

The girls also scrolled through their own social media feeds when they hung out. They swiped their own screens as they sat around together in a bedroom, on front steps, or

²⁸ Social media was also a fertile ground for the start of drama. As senior Valentina once explained, "You can't put anything as a status. Like, it could be about pie, and people would still fight about it." dana boyd confirms that for many teens, "inciting drama is a source of entertainment," and, relatedly, "a practice to relieve boredom" (boyd 2014: p138). boyd and Alice Marwick define drama as a "performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media" (Marwick & boyd 2014). Nancy Jo Sales also reveals the various ways in which drama starts among teenage girls as a result of online behavior. Unliking posts, or sharing a message sent by somebody else were among the most frequent catalysts (Sales 2016: p133). Other researchers have looked at how social media is a platform for the provocation, expression and magnification not only of gossip and squabbles, but also of lethal gang beef (e.g., Patton et al 2016; Lane 2018).

²⁹ Gershon 2010

³⁰ Derived by amalgamating the terms 'Twitter' and 'watching,' to 'twatch' is to attend closely to the virtual behaviors of others, with or without their knowledge of the surveillance.

at an iHop table. They drifted in and out of conversations with absent others.

Classical theorists of social interaction, like Erving Goffman, would consider this a type of “external preoccupation,” which indicated an “alienated interaction.” Goffman thought an interaction flawed if someone gives their “main concern to something that is unconnected with what is being talked about at the time and even unconnected with the other persons present.”³¹ Among the girls, however, the reverse was often true. The freedom and comfort to keep using their phones, and casually talk to absent friends, was a sign of closeness. For the girls, this ‘distance’ was in fact intimacy.

As they scrolled, girls flashed their screens to share content—photos, videos, Tweets—and invite comment. Goffman argued that in a healthy conversation, “[messages] not part of the officially accredited flow are modulated so as not to interfere seriously with the accredited messages.” This was because “interruptions and inattentiveness may convey disrespect.”³² But when the girls gathered, this choppy flow of attention offered unrelenting stimulation. Sometimes the girls did more than just share; when Vine—the social network with looping seven-second videos—was hot, the girls sometimes found inspiration and got creative. As Brittani explained, “We’ll watch a Vine and then we’ll talk about it, and we’ll try to replay it by acting it out and just laugh about it for hours.”

The Life Course of a Photo

Alone or in groups, the girls—like teens everywhere—loved taking photos of themselves. One afternoon, Aisha opened my laptop and clicked straight on ‘Photo Booth.’ “We should take photos!” she said. Aisha took dozens of selfies, playing with the built-in

³¹ Goffman 1967: p117, p167

³² Goffman 1967: p35 - 36

filters that changed the images like a fun house mirror. She liked the big eye filter best. Aisha then scrolled through the pictures, quickly deleting most. She adjusted the light and color of the ones she liked, threw on some filters, and uploaded her favorites to Facebook.

“This is what we used to do, back in the day, you know,” she said.

“What is?”

“We would go to the Apple store in the mall, me and Brittani, and we would take photos. Literally that’s all we would do.”

Taking photos was fun and free, something to do when time was slow to tick along. The girls’ audience brought an interactive moment of engagement, but, often, just taking photos could be consuming.

One June evening, Odette, Maude, Nicole, and Rosalie waited for a party to start. They stood outside the bar Ty had rented, leaning against the wall. They had been waiting for hours, and they were getting tired. Earlier, they had lounged in Odette and Maude’s kitchen, killing time until the party talking about boys and helping each other with make-up. As lethargy threatened to creep into the kitchen, the girls decided to head over early.

The girls’ friend, Samia, drove the girls to the bar. As they pulled into the empty car park—among abandoned lots, an automotive junkyard and beat up buildings—Rosalie grimaced at the view from her window. The girls had never been to this bar, and the street was eerie and dim. Still, the girls hopped hopefully from the car and peered through the bar’s glass doors to watch the staff set up.

Over the next hour, cars full of other teens crawled by. Most drivers saw the empty venue and sped off. Eventually, Ty saw Nicole through the glass, and came to tell the girls the DJ would be an hour late.

Nicole was sour. “What is going on?” she said, snapping her fingers.

Ty approached, voice firm but quiet. “Don’t snap your fingers at me,” he whispered, making the girls strain to hear him. “Y’all ain’t even supposed to be here,” he added, looking past Nicole at the others, who were mostly underage.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Nicole said, soft now. “You want a hug? Ok, come here.”

Ty returned to the bar, and the girls stood still, leaning against the wall. Some slumped into the nearby metal chairs that seated daytime diners. Energy dipped, and dragged the mood with it. As the plans risked being abandoned,³³ Nicole spun around, suddenly upbeat. “I guess there’s nothing to do but take pictures!” she said.

Nicole didn’t mean a quick selfie. Instead, she started a group activity that filled fifteen minutes. First, she chose a photographer, passing her cell phone to Odette. Then she skipped down the steps and into the parking lot, scanning for a backdrop. She posed, angling her elbow, cocking a knee and tilting her chin. She shook her hair loose, and with a slight arch to her back, called, “Ready!” through her smile. Odette took several shots, some with flash and some without. Drawn in, her friends pushed off the brick wall for a closer look, and some shouted ideas for how Nicole should pose. She tried new stances and facial expressions: hands on hips, bent forwards laughing, pouting.

“Alright girl,” Odette said, handing Nicole the phone. Both girls rejoined the group, and Nicole scrolled through the photos. She deleted those she didn’t like, then asked for input from her friends. Choosing a favorite, Nicole cropped the image. Then she opened

³³ It risked quickly becoming a failed interaction (Goffman 1967); the teens were too tired and bored to do the work necessary to preserve it.

Instagram, where she slid her finger left to right on the screen to adjust the light and color. She tried different filters. Finally, she mulled a caption, swiping through emojis. The post ready, she uploaded the image to Instagram, and shared it to Facebook. The other girls—phones in hand—refreshed their feeds and liked her photo, commenting with words and emojis below. For the next few minutes, Nicole watched the likes tick in. Sometimes she clicked through onto likers' profiles, noting from their uploads what they had been up to, and, in some cases, "liking back" a photo. After the first rush of likes, Nicole checked Instagram less often, only every few minutes, throughout their night at the bar.

Nicole used the publicity and reciprocity of social media to make a focal activity for her friends. The energy and shared focus stopped the evening deflating. Taking the photo—posing, reviewing, selecting, editing and uploading—was just the first step. The ensuing interaction prolonged the engagement.

Playing With Time

Social media did not just help fill empty time. Rather, the girls used it stretch out 'full' time, too. They harnessed their audience to amplify fun and maximize intensity, beating back boredom for as long as possible.

Making A Moment

One Friday evening, Stephanie, Maude and Rosalie hung out indoors as ice laced the windows. Stephanie cooked pasta, while Rosalie sat with her phone. Maude browsed Twitter, commenting aloud on the Halloween costumes worn by celebrities she followed: *"Did you see Kevin Hart and his girlfriend? Oh God, Kim Kardashian thinks she's cute."*

As we ate, Stephanie said, "We need to go out!"

Maude looked out the black night and balked. "Where you tryna go? It's cold!"

“I don’t even care!” Stephanie said. “Let’s go walk around!”

“Let’s go downtown!” Rosalie suggested, snapping her head up from her screen. Maude was outnumbered.

They pulled on woolen hats and puffy coats and walked into the moonless dark.

The girls took the unlit shortcut from the back of the projects to the main road, silent in the cold. A car drove past us and braked sharply. The girls froze and grabbed out at each other.

“Oh my God, I’m mad scared,” Maude whispered.

“Pretend to be calling your Mom!” Stephanie said. Maude fumbled for her phone, fingers icy and slow.

Then the driver yelled from the window, “What’s good!” It was Ritchie, a friend, and the girls crowded around the car, laughing with the release.

Ritchie and the girls probed for prospective plans.

“Where you going?” Maude asked.

“I don’t know yet. I’m a find something.”

“Can you bring us?”

“I don’t know where I’m going!”

Ritchie gently ignored Maude’s request that he take them for a ride around the neighborhood, and went on his way.

They walked to the subway station, where they tricked the barriers and boarded without paying. They sat in a line of consecutive seats, across from a young white woman who repeatedly looked up from her book.

At Harvard, the girls left the train and wandered. Rosalie said she was cold and took

big strides with her thin legs to keep pace. Stephanie played Drake's *Crew Love* out loud from her phone. The girls sang as they walked, hands plunged deep in pockets.

They passed busy cafés, bars, and restaurants. They passed buzzed groups of students. Then they came upon a hotel, with glinting lights draped around its entryway and through the bare branches of trees.

"I didn't know there was a hotel right there. We should go in to get warm," Rosalie said.

Maude said, "They'll be like, 'We don't want you.'"

"Yeah, you probably have to like, check in, and stuff," Stephanie seconded.

Rosalie shrugged. A swarm of groomed white teens in formalwear romped around the hotel's concrete plaza, taking a break from a function inside. A group of girls, about 13-years-old, with straightened hair and pearl chokers, teetered by on high heels. Maude, Rosalie, and Stephanie dared one another to ask what was going on.

"I'll go, but I'm scared," Rosalie said. She chose a pale girl with dark hair and bare legs, blotched from the chill.

"Excuse me, what's going on in there?" Rosalie asked.

The girl looked Rosalie up and down and glanced at Maude and Stephanie standing a few feet back. "There's a Bar Mitzvah," she said, without eye contact. The girl turned on her kitten heels and rejoined her friends.

"Oh, okay thanks," Rosalie mumbled to her back.

Maude walked to Rosalie. "She probably thought we was gonna try and crash it," she said.

The girls gave up on Harvard and walked back to the T. They rode a few more stops,

to Downtown Crossing, an area south of Boston Common packed with shops and offices. But late on a Friday night, streets were silent. Without the stir they expected, the girls were once again subdued, and they walked with no destination.

Maude had been happy at home, where there was Wi-Fi and food. She protested having to “walk a marathon.”

“Where we going, though?” she demanded. “There ain’t nothing up there!” She pointed to the dark distance.

Stephanie shrugged, and the girls shuffled through the lifeless business district. Offices were closed and stores were shuttered. The girls dragged their feet down a dirty alley, wordless.

Then, they stumbled suddenly onto a bustling street, lit by the bright lights and colorful shine of two theaters, as well as the glow of a sumptuous—and noisy—Macy’s Christmas window display. The girls grinned. Couples and groups wove around them, and the street thrilled with life. The buildings felt high and close and the girls looked up at the sparkling night.

“It’s like New York here!” Maude marveled. The girls spun, taking in the glitz with eyes and then with cellphone cameras.

“Word!” Stephanie agreed. They rambled, brushing up against the neon and the opulence, taking entertainment from these places, though not in the conventional way.

Stephanie’s mom called, and told her to get home, so the girls headed back to the train. They walked once more in silence, this time from focus as they posted their photos to Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. They bundled through the barriers behind unsuspecting customers, and took more selfies on the ride, using the seats, doors and poles

as props.

Maude tweeted, **best night with these girls >>>>**

Stephanie tweeted, **Fun filled night w/ @Maude, @jasmin, @Rosalie Lovin the crew**

Rosalie, earlier vocal in her complaints, replied, **WORDDDD lol**

The girls retweeted, liked, and commented on one other's broadcasts. Working as an interactive team, they used their bond of reciprocal dependence to affirm their claims to fun.³⁴ They changed an uneventful Friday night spent pacing the streets into an event: packaged, shared and communicated with each other and their peers. They used the gaze—whether real or imagined—of their online audience to create, portray, and, crucially, *experience* drama. Through social media, they made a moment of real emotional involvement, crafting something from nothing.

The girls did the same thing the night they met at the playground and debated hitting up the MIT party or the Waltham hotel. In the end, they sat around until 1 a.m., when two more friends, Marie and Natasha, rolled up. Natasha had a car, and Nicole convinced her to drive us all to Central Square, where the girls could buy some liquor.

Natasha, Marie, and the six of us—Nicole, Odette, Maude, Stephanie, Rosalie and me—approached the car.

“Are these windows tinted?” Maude wondered. They weren’t.

Natasha flinched in the driver’s seat as seven people piled into her little red car. Marie sat shotgun, and the six of us climbed into the back: one girl on the lap of each person on a seat.

“Is this gonna work?” Natasha said, turning to face us.

³⁴ Goffman 1959: p82

“We’re gonna get stopped, nigga,” Marie said from beside the driver.

“What if we see police?” Natasha asked.

But there were no other plans. Odette and Maude, determined to go somewhere, even for a little while, swore it would be fine. After a final glance back, Natasha turned the key.

The car groaned like a pained thing, and grumbled out of the parking lot. Its metal undercarriage screeched as it snagged on the concrete speed bumps that Natasha took at 5 miles per hour.

Out on the main road, Marie hooked her music up to the speakers. In the car, talk grew loud and frantic about different things: what alcohol to buy, which party to try, gossip about kids at school.

We pulled up to Central a few minutes later, and found that liquor stores had closed for the night. The girls noted this with a nod and a shrug. They had still left JP. Natasha drove us back to North Cambridge, stopping for ten dollars’ worth of gas from a dingy station near Fresh Pond. The two men pumping the night shift looked at eight girls in a car and chuckled.

Minutes later, we returned to the playground where we’d spent the previous few hours. Girls played songs on their phones and swung on the swings. I sat at the picnic table, and opened Snapchat, watching the videos the girls had sent to their contact lists during the drive to Central. Between the raucous talk, the throbbing radio, and the rhythmic flash of streetlights, it looked like a wild time. The girls had captioned their videos with messages like, **Turn upppp**, telling their audience this was a fun Saturday night. This was not a digital deception; it was a fun Saturday night. The audience helped elevate the evening, changing

the nature of the experience, making it grander and more real in the witnessing. The audience helped make a moment.

Magnifying Moments

The girls also used social media to maximize fun from celebrations, parties, or events. They used their audience to build up to things they were excited about, like when Maude Snapchatted a daily countdown to her birthday. Girls also broadcast during and after events to stretch their lifespan.

Aisha loved iHop. It was her favorite treat. When I walked with Aisha and her cousin Leisha to iHop one weekend, she tweeted her excitement on the way. As we ate, she took and uploaded photos—of our food, of Leisha’s whipped-cream-topped hot chocolate, and of herself posing with bottles of syrup. She tweeted more once we had left. This digital onslaught, rather than a distraction, helped Aisha exploit the rare fun. She placed the cheapest possible order—two pancakes for \$3.20—an option unlisted on the menu that she dubbed, “the Aisha special.” She counted out the cash in silver and bronze, scrambling to retrieve three pennies that fell from the counter. With her broadcasts, Aisha built up and prolonged the meal, using the publicity of social media to stretch its time horizons beyond our hour-long stay.

Similarly, the week after Thanksgiving at Joanne’s house, one of her aunts made a nine-minute slideshow with dozens of photos taken through the evening set to two songs that had been played that night. The montage was shared over Facebook, and guests watched and commented and relived the night. Social media meant fun could be lived, relived, magnified, and stretched.³⁵

³⁵ Sociologists have studied the power of story-telling for giving events meaning and for fostering collective identity (e.g., Polletta 1998). The girls were undertaking a sort of digital story-telling by

Alone Together?

The young women were kept in by their parents when they set curfews or needed help at home. They were kept out of certain places for being too young or too broke. The daily grind of boredom was a social problem, and it had social solutions. Connection could fill the long hours that loomed after school, and interaction could create emotional intensity to break up monotony.

The girls aggressively pursued face-to-face plans, but mostly, they relied on social media for connection and interaction. When they were alone, girls passed hours drifting through a sea of content; trawling friends' feeds, responding to broadcasts, and clicking through hashtags. They also produced content, aired to the audience of peers that was delivered by social media's publicity and norms of reciprocity. This audience made solitary time social. It brought girls two moments of entertainment for each broadcast: the expressive, when they crafted and uploaded messages; and the interactive, when friends engaged.³⁶ Girls focused on social media when they got together, too, sharing things they had seen online. Both alone and in groups, the girls used social media to change the time horizons of entertainment, *making* or *magnifying* moments to stretch out fun.

Focus and engagement disrupted the tedium of boredom. Moreover, this kind of emotional intensity is a basic human need, which is why young people go to great lengths

posting pictures and posting fragments of experiences online—making it more enduring and more meaningful.

³⁶ The girls' use of social media clashed with much classical theory about small group interaction. Goffman's assertion that "an individual's activities must occur either in social situations or solitarily" (1967: p67) was blurred by the endless hours that the girls spent apart but communicating. So, too, by their time spent together while focusing mainly on their own phones.

to find thrills.³⁷ Sociologists have considered how people generate emotional energy, and for Randall Collins, the answer lay in small group interactions. When group members focus on the same activity and sense one another's involvement, he explained, they join an "interaction ritual" that makes them feel energized and engaged.³⁸ "Where mutual focus and entrainment builds up among the participants, self-reinforcing feedback processes generate moments of compelling emotional experience," he wrote.³⁹ Collins saw bodily co-presence as a key part of this interaction ritual. Online interactions, he claimed, "lack the flow of interaction in real time,"⁴⁰ making mediated communication unlikely to generate emotional energy.

But the girls' online socializing was an engaging interaction ritual. They felt thrill and togetherness at the *perception* of shared attention, even when they were apart. In addition, many of their broadcasts enacted a social intimacy that could be fulfilling and energizing. When they traded memes or Vines, they felt 'in' on the joke, one that outsiders and parents would not get. Likewise, when they tweeted using hashtags like **#immigrantproblems** or **#brokepeopleproblems**, they felt connected to one another; not just heard, but understood. This was true when their themes were somber—money, or racism—or banal. Tweets beginning **That face you make when...** or **That feeling when...** or **That moment when...** drew on and reaffirmed community with peers. The energy of

³⁷ E.g., Katz 1988

³⁸ Collins 2004: p112

³⁹ Collins 2004: pxii

⁴⁰ Collins goes on, "This is not the rhythm of immediate vocal participation, which... is honed to tenths of seconds. There is little or no buildup of focus of attention in reading an email, no paralinguistic background signals of mutual engrossment" (2004: p63)

connection and fulfilment could beat back boredom.

Yet constant connection did have drawbacks. Some studies warn that social media is addictive and leaves users always hunting the next dopamine rush.⁴¹ In the longer term, too, young people's time use shape their trajectories. Sociologist Annette Lareau found key class differences in how young people spend their time. Middle-class children typically have their time structured and scheduled by their parents, she found, while poorer children often have more control over their leisure hours. This leaves poor young people not only disproportionately exposed to boredom, but also without the sense of entitlement that Lareau found could be developed through organized activities. This sense of entitlement can help young people advocate for themselves in schools, leaving middle-class children skilled at talking to authority figures and making rules work in their favor.⁴² Poorer youth, by contrast, often develop a sense of constraint that makes them less likely to try to customize interactions in institutional settings, and more likely to be tracked or judged by teachers.⁴³

Relatedly, wealthier peers' extra-curriculars did not only gleam on resumes and college admissions essays. They also prepared middle-class youth for intense 'time realities' to come at college and beyond. While the girls' more affluent peers still socialized online with a determined urgency, they were also learning to multitask, delegate, and navigate multiple contexts at once. The girls were left less practiced in time management,

⁴¹ Sales 2016

⁴² Lareau 2003

⁴³ Lareau 2003; See also Bettie 2003

or, at least, in what time management typically means in colleges and workplaces.⁴⁴

Still, the girls successfully amused and entertained each other without turning to the riskier kicks on which studies of poor teens often dwell. By leaning on one another and their broader peer group, the girls built gratifying social lives, using emotional intensity to disrupt monotony. As they sidestepped the struggle and risks of boredom, the girls boosted their daily wellbeing, and overcame an under-recognized source of hardship.

⁴⁴ Eckert's (1989) ethnography of a Michigan high school charts how patterns of socializing in high school prepare young adults for the class realities they will likely face as adults; middle class children are prepared for corporate professional lifestyles through peer socializing styles that share the norms of some of these environments. Poor teens, by contrast, have styles of socializing that prepare them for the loyalty and mutual support necessary for surviving as a poor adult.

However, there were some within-group differences among the girls. Scholars have described the "digital divide" between technology-users from different social classes (e.g., DiMaggio et al 2001; Hargittai & Hinnant 2008). This was clear at school. Some students effortlessly touch-typed and formatted documents and presentations. Others hesitantly struck the keyboard with index fingers, or asked Ms. Flores how to search for information online. But Aisha, among the poorest of the girls, was among the most digitally skilled. She used social media as a tool. Online, she was coming to understand aesthetics, internalizing the indicators of 'cool,' and learning how to strategically balance concealing with revealing so as to maximize her social allure. She was boosting her own popularity, and finely tuning a feedback loop between her social and economic capital. But Aisha certainly was not typical—each class has only one Homecoming Queen—and the skills that she honed using social media set her apart from her friends. This calls for greater nuance and within studies of class-based disparities in digital capabilities.

4—Emotional Support and Breakdown

The policeman levelled his badge and tweaked his collar. He scanned his surroundings as he rode the mall escalator, familiar but focused. Then he noticed the young woman standing in front of him, and poked her between the shoulders.

Aisha's eyes widened as she turned around. Then she grinned.

"Officer Jacks!" she squealed. "No *waaay*! How are you?" Aisha beamed. She straightened her back, and looked his crisp uniform up and down.

Aisha and Officer Jacks talked, catching up about school.

"That made my whole day," Aisha said at the top of the escalator, after Jacks walked off. "He is daddy, that man. Isn't he daddy?"

Jacks often patrolled the streets near school. He was friendly with the teens, and tried to learn their names. But Aisha knew him for another reason, too.

As she explained a few weeks earlier, when an alarm blared as we tricked the barriers at Central Square to ride the red line, "My mom used to call the police on me all the time."

Aisha laughed as she went on: "If I was half an hour late when I went out, she called the cops. Once I wasn't even out—I was sleeping in my bed!—and she didn't check, and she called the popo. That's why you see me so friendly with the cops." But then her face fell and her tone dropped, as she imagined talking to her mother: "What's the police going to do? It's not like they were going to beat me more than you were going to."

Aisha loved her mom. But their relationship had been difficult. Once, Aisha compared her childhood to, "Scientology... a cult." She used to feel hounded for being a "normal five-year-old," and remembered Diana threatening, "I'm going to sign the papers

to send you away. You're a bad child." As Aisha recalled, the threats followed "silly things, dumb things, like you didn't wash dishes."

"My mom really made me believe I was a bad person," Aisha said. Tears welled as they often did when she discussed her mother, one of the few chinks in her armor.

One of their worst fights was during a school vacation, when Diana screamed at Aisha for sweeping too slowly. "If you're taking your time like that, get out of my house!" Aisha recalled. She put down the broom. Then, Aisha relayed, "I just walked downstairs, grabbed my purse and a book, and walked out."

Aisha went to Brittani's. She crashed for a restless night with her best friend, and then spent a week with an aunt in a neighboring town. Brittani gave Aisha a bed, but also helped her process. "It's mentally disturbing," Aisha said, of getting kicked out. "It makes you feel less than."

Aisha talked her feelings through with her friends. The girls were used to listening to one another's problems. They empathized with—or distracted from—conflict at home. They "came through" for each other, offering stability when things got chaotic elsewhere. They managed feelings of risk in their neighborhood, bonding over shared experiences and sharing safety tips. And, in the face of stigma and surveillance, they made one another feel valued.

Adolescents everywhere struggle with insecurities; with fitting in and falling out. Many look to their friends for help, since peers can offer teens the acceptance and validation that parents rarely can. But the girls faced further insults brought by poverty and racism. Marginalization chips at self-esteem, and can cause a type of hardship that

sociologists have called “negative emotional energy.”¹ This kind of ongoing stress can be even worse for wellbeing than discrete, traumatic life events.² Researches find a connection between repeated affronts and things like violence, aggression, and gang membership, as young people act to restore power and pride.³

The girls tried to patch up emotional injuries and prevent their long-term risks.⁴ They formed what psychologists Kathleen Call and Jeylan Mortimer called an “arena of comfort,” a “safe haven” among friends.⁵ As Call and Mortimer explain, “If a person has an experience that is harmful or threatening to the self-image in one contact, the injury can be soothed, or compensated for, in another domain through the strong, positive relationships and enhancing experiences that are encountered there.”⁶ The girls met everyday strain with comfort and support.

But resilience was draining. The girls’ interdependence could cause conflict, especially when someone was failed to give—or take—the right amount of support. When the balance was upset, when emotional reciprocity was compromised, the result was often social breakdown.

¹ Collins 2004

² Call & Mortimer 2001: p7

³ A large literature on gang memberships considers the emotional intimacy and status granted by gangs in the context socioeconomic marginality (tracing back to e.g., Cohen 1955). Inter-gang conflict has been discussed as a status-seeking behavior that saves group face (e.g., Harding 2010; Anderson 2000; Howell 2011)

⁴ Emotional support given and received in the aftermath of traumatic neighborhood violence is catalogued in chapter six

⁵ Call and Mortimer 2001: p3

⁶ Call and Mortimer 2001: p3

Home: Conflict and Instability

One March Saturday, Joanne gripped her cellphone as she climbed into the passenger seat. As her stepfather, Frantz, started the car, she scrolled through her poems. She went through the words in her head, and her big hoop earrings bobbed along. So did her newly done hair, which fell, sleek and shiny, to her jaw.

Minutes later Frantz pulled over and Aisha hopped in, with two girlfriends from school. The four seniors were a team, and they fidgeted excitedly as they discussed different ways to perform the group poem they'd written on Google Docs. The slam had finally arrived.

"If we get through to the semi-finals, we'll have to go back tomorrow!" Joanne said to the packed back seat.

"What is it, a beauty contest?" Frantz asked, gazing blankly at the road. His speech tended to the Spartan. Joanne had never grown close to Frantz, and described herself as having a single mother. When Frantz passed evenings watching shows behind his closed bedroom door, Joanne kept his four children busy through their mom's late shifts at the hospital.

"What? Beauty? No. It's a poetry contest," Joanne said, a little sour.

"Oh. Poetry," he muttered.

Researchers and policy makers have long framed the family as the most important factor for adolescent wellbeing and success, especially for poor youth. Many believe that a strong family can protect young people from the effects of neighborhood disadvantage.⁷

⁷ Elliot et al 2006: p161; see also Werner & Smith 1992; Dumka, Roosa, Michaels & Suh 1995;

But the girls' parents often knew little about swaths of their daughters' lives. Their parents worked hard, and their hours ate into family time at home. Stephanie's mom worked the graveyard shift at a sportswear factory. Nicole's dad rose at 2:30 a.m. to get his cab on the road. Maude and Odette's mom worked evenings at a candy factory in a town sixteen miles away. "When I would come home from school," Maude recalled, "she was already on her way to work, and she would be home around midnight."

Many parents in poor neighborhoods work such low-wage jobs with unconventional hours. This is particularly true in the aftermath of welfare reform in the 1990's, which pushed many low-income parents into the labor force. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, signed into law in 1996, profoundly changed how low-income families received assistance. With the stated aim of reducing welfare dependency, the act placed time limits on the receipt of benefits and also mandated work requirements.

The reforms made many parents, and mothers especially, take jobs with unconventional or inflexible shift schedules. This cut into the time and support they could offer their children.

The act changed dynamics in low-income households nationwide.⁸ Critics charged that by making adults take paid work outside the home, the law failed to value unpaid domestic labor. It ignored, they claimed, the fact that "raising children in poverty is itself a tricky and exhausting job."⁹ Opponents argued that welfare reform was "anti-family,"

Masten, Best, & Garnezy 1990

⁸ On the consequences of welfare reform for family dynamics, see e.g., Duncan, Huston & Weisner 2007; Kalil & Dunifon 2007; Johnson et al., 2010; Dodson et al. 2012; Presser 2004

⁹ Ehrenreich 2002

because pressuring parents to accept a job—“no matter how dangerous, abusive, or poorly paid”¹⁰—left adults less time for parenting.

Two decades later, studies have traced the long-term negative impact of welfare reform on household dynamics and child wellbeing.¹¹ For instance—although maternal employment usually associates positively with adolescent outcomes, mothers who work long or non-standard hours, like shift-workers in the low-wage labor market, often have less time to emotionally support their children.¹² Fluctuating or atypical schedules interfere with things like family meals or helping with homework. Some studies link having a parent who works non-standard hours with lower test scores, and more behavioral problems among children.¹³ And unpredictability can be stressful, taking a toll on mothers and in turn impairing their parenting.¹⁴

Another consequence of parental employment in the low-wage labor marker is what researchers have called “adultification,” when older children are forced into adult roles, including caring for younger children.¹⁵

Nearly all of the girls cared for younger children with some regularity. Joanne, for instance, left the house at 6:50 a.m. each morning to ferry her little brothers to school, moving “at a lightening pace” to catch her own 7:10 bus to CRLS. Joanne stood in when

¹⁰ Ehrenreich 2002

¹¹ Duncan et al. 2007; Kalil & Dunifon 2007

¹² Johnson et al. 2010

¹³ E.g., Han 2005; Stadzins et al. 2004, 2006; Joshi & Bogen 2007

¹⁴ Presser 2004; McLoyd et al. 1994; Conger & Elder 1994

¹⁵ Burton 2007; Dodson & Dickert 2004.

her mother worked long hours. “I was a mom, I was an everything, I was a provider,” she said, reflecting on her relationship with her siblings. “I took them to their recitals, and their little school concerts. To the park, if they were on the football team in the summer. [I’d] sit and wait for them. Take them to doctors’ appointments, take them to the mall. Try to give them something, instead of just sitting inside the house all day.” It had not been easy, but she loved them deeply. “I had to grow up really, really fast,” she said. “I would have liked to go out more and do whatever... but I am very blessed and I wouldn’t give them up.”

Many of the girls grew up around babies and toddlers—siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews—and pitched in with childcare. They managed children with deft skill and often great joy; Odette handled her brother’s baby son and daughter with unthinking expertise, changing diapers, wiping tears, soothing and settling, all with deeply embodied ease.

Moreover, many girls had less time with their parents than they would have liked. Brittani, for example, was unusually close to her mom. But her mother’s unpredictable hours usually stopped her coming to Brittani’s volleyball games. “She only came to like, what, two of my games?” Brittani said. “I kind of wish she tried to come, but she had work,” she reasoned. Her friends tried to support her when her mom could not. As Brittani remembered, “My friends came and cheered me on.” Aisha would be at each game, cheering from the bleachers and howling at the coach to take Brittani off the bench.

But parents who were present did not always make home a refuge. Families could give love and encouragement, but, relationships could also be fraught. Many of the girls struggled with conflict and instability.

Conflict

Odette and Maude lived with both of their parents. Both girls, as Maude said, called their father, “by his name, not ‘father’ or ‘daddy’ ... We’re not close like that.” She added: “My dad works, but I don’t know what he does.”

Maude was slightly closer to their mother, a bond Odette did not share. As Odette explained, “We don’t have conversations like, ‘How was your day in school?’ ... I wouldn’t mind talking to her about what’s going on in my life, it just never happens.”

At home, Odette resented her parents’ traditional expectations, especially their ideas about decorum. She wasn’t interested in curfews or modesty. It seemed so old-fashioned. Like many of the girls, Odette felt unfairly monitored and controlled relative to boys.

The tension between Odette’s beliefs and her parents’ often caused fights. Sometimes, Odette tried to empathize. “Haitian parents, it’s not really their fault,” she said. “They say all this stuff, but they don’t know psychology. They don’t know sociology. They don’t know how it affects kids.” Sociologists find that Haitian immigrants have among the highest level of parent-child conflict.¹⁶ Odette often felt wounded by her parents’ sharp tongues and harsh words.

Parental warmth, nurturance and acceptance all promote children’s wellbeing.¹⁷ But neighborhood poverty has a negative impact on maternal warmth, which studies blame on the strain of having to parent in conditions of scarcity.¹⁸ Relatedly, the constant anxiety of

¹⁶ There were conflicting socio-cultural expectations in many of the girls’ homes. Several of the young women felt their behavior to be unfairly monitored and controlled, relative to their brothers. Rumbaut finds that Haitian immigrants have among the highest levels of parent-child conflict (1997: p28).

¹⁷ Baumrind 1991; Steinberg et al. 1991; Powers et al. 1989

¹⁸ Klebanov et al 1994

scraping by can lead to more punitive parenting; poor mothers are more likely to use physical punishment than wealthier moms, and also to give commands without explanations.¹⁹ Even though some evidence suggests strict parenting can protect young people in poor neighborhoods, harsh discipline and an emphasis on obedience can hamper children's adjustment and development.²⁰

Girls listened to their friends' reports of conflict at home. They listened in person and online.²¹ Najma lived with her mother and father, both immigrants from Calcutta. She felt misunderstood by her parents, and vented online after fighting with them, often firing a cathartic barrage of Tweets that she knew her friends would read. One evening she Tweeted:

Despite all the change.. This is why me and my dad will never be cool.. Ever.

Your kids should mean the world to you, and it should be them over EVERYTHING.

My kids will never deal with this.

My mind is scarred. for life..

Sometimes, just expressing distress could soothe it.²² But often, the girls replied and engaged, like when Maude responded publicly to Najma's Tweets about a different

¹⁹ McLoyd 1990

²⁰ Baumrind 1991; Burton 2007; Furstenberg 1993; Jarrett 1997; Elder et al 1995; Furstenberg 1993; Jarrett 1995

²¹ Mostly, girls subtweeted arguments with friends, rather than revealing them explicitly online. This was not so when conflict involved family members, who were mostly not on Twitter.

²² Expressions of emotional state are one of the dominant forms of self-disclosure on Facebook (Manago et al. 2012). In part for this reason, studies find a positive relationship between frequency of overall Facebook use and perceived social support (Goulet 2012; Hampton et al. 2011). Short, frequent, asynchronous exchanges — like a status update that receives likes or comments — provides the perception of higher levels of social support (Hampton & Lu 2017). Social network theorist Keith Hampton attributes this to the “pervasive awareness” facilitated by social media, which provides a heightened awareness of the resources embedded in one's social network (Hampton 2016).

fight:

Najma: **I hate going to my parents for comfort when I'm upset or physically hurt. They yell at me for being upset or hurt. WTF?**

Maude: **@Najma Your Okay Girl?!!**

Najma: **@Maude Im trying to be.**

Maude: **@Najma Damn Well I Hope You Feel Better**

Najma: **@Maude thank you .. You didn't see or hear nothing right!?**

Maude: **@Najma Noo Just Based Off Your Tweets Lol**

Najma: **@Maude THANK GOD. shit is always so embarrassing**

In turn, Najma jumped in when her friends spoke of conflict, like when Joanne tweeted about trouble at home:

Joanne : **I don't depend on you because you're always an unreliable parent to me**

Joanne : **The life of a fighter is a hard one, but I'm proud of where I've gotten and know just where I wanna be in the future.**

Najma: **@Joanne we come from the STRUGGLE.**

Joanne : **@Najma Ain't that the truth!**

Friends either responded directly, or reached out with a private message or call.

The girls came to count on each other to cope with conflict at home. For Aisha, this care was transformative. As a child, she remembered shrinking beneath Diana's withering words. Aisha believed she was bad and undeserving. But over the years, her friendships changed how she felt about herself. "You attract what you are," she said. "I attracted Joanne, and Joanne's not a bad person. I attracted Brittani, and Brittani's not a bad person." Through her friends, Aisha learned that she was worthy.

Instability

One Tuesday after school, Aisha sat in her spot in the corner of the living room. She crossed her bare legs on the desk chair, its fabric worn thin and scratchy, and told me about a conversation she had just had.

“Just now, Esther was telling me, ‘You literally cut off anyone, without thinking twice,’” Aisha relayed. “But that’s just me. I just know everyone’s gonna leave.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I feel like the reason why I am how I am, why I don’t get emotionally attached is because when my Aunt died, she was the one I really cared about, I really loved,” Aisha explained.

In Uganda, Aisha grew up around some of her mom’s sisters. Aisha liked the bustle and she liked the women’s warmth, something not always offered by Diana. Aunt Grace was younger—in her twenties when Aisha was in elementary school—and Aisha looked up to her. Aisha tried to spend all her time with Grace, leaving her brothers’ horseplay for the comfort of her aunt’s company.

Grace moved out of the house after a disagreement with Diana. She went to live with another sister, who was sick and needed nursing back to health. But the sister did not get well. She died, of a disease people only whispered about, a disease Grace got, too, when the sister’s husband raped her. Four years later, Grace died of AIDS.

Aisha was marked by the loss. When she moved to Cambridge, she prayed each day after school for God to bring back her Aunt. “I know you resurrect,” she remembered pleading, hands clasped. The grief sullied her faith. “That girl served,” Aisha said. “Every part of her was God. For her to die like that, to go through what she went through... I was like, ‘There’s no God who’d do anything like that. If it was the right God she was serving,

there's no way.”

After losing Aunt Grace, Aisha grew scared of feeling pain like that again. The fear nudged her away from attachments—closeness meant vulnerability—and left her distrustful.

But Aisha's best friends had earned her trust. For years, they had come through and helped out. She knew she could count on them. “I really cherish Joanne, Najma, Esther and Brittani, ‘cause they’ve actually been there and shown me,” Aisha explained. “But *bye!* anyone else!”

Aisha depended on her best friends, and they, in turn, depended on her. But beyond her inner circle, Aisha was capricious, and proud. “I am the best at cutting people out,” she explained another time. “I just blank people when I don’t want to see them. All the time. I’m gone.”

Aisha's narrative of defensive non-attachment was common in the neighborhood. Teens boasted about their independence from—and power to “drop”—all but a few close friends.²³

Often, teens attributed their independence or defensiveness to instability. In particular, they blamed adults who were unkind, unreliable, or who had walked out, or died.

They shared their messages of guarded detachment face-to-face and online. Feeling agitated one afternoon, Joanne opened Twitter to vent and clear her head. She tweeted,

When you're so irritated you don't know what to do with yourself.

I can count on one hand the number of people who I trust

²³ There may have been further factors motivating this narrative of social distance. The teen girls in Nikki Jones' (2009) *Between Good and Ghetto* split their social ties into two groups: friends and associates. Labeling somebody as an associate absolved the girls from demands for loyalty, and kept girls free from the need to fight in somebody's defense, though the girls never spoke this way.

You can only get slapped in the face so many times before #LessonLearned

In her tweets, Joanne referenced and reinforced a resonant discourse of distrust.²⁴ So did Najma, when she retweeted a post that read: **I push people away: Mainly because I'm scared I'm going to get hurt. And partly because I'm scared I'm going to hurt them.. and most importantly because I know their going to leave sooner or later anyway...** Najma's caption to the post read, **MY LIFE.. Couldn't have said it better:**

Sometimes, girls drew on this independence to reject boys who were pursuing them. One afternoon, Stephanie read aloud a text conversation with a boy that was trying to "bag" her. She didn't like him like that, she shrugged. "See, I don't cling onto people," she said. "Because I'm used to being disappointed. I don't rely on people emotionally much, unless I'm very close to you." As when Aisha mentioned her girls, this last qualifier mattered, because the girls' friends were largely exempt from their mistrust.

Girls could be called out if they forgot the disclaimer, like when Nicole challenged Rosalie on Twitter:

Rosalie: **Can't ever count on anyone or anything**

Nicole: **Ummm excuse me!?!?**

Rosalie: **@Nicole lol whatttt?**

Nicole: **@Rosalie I took some offense to that one baby girl.**

Rosalie: **@Nicole my bad girl... All love <3 <3**

In her tweets, Nicole was also restating her dependability. Between friends, this was obligatory. "*Come through*" was a command and an imperative. Close friends' reliability brought basic stability when family ties could be chaotic, or worse. The girls were a sort of

²⁴ On trust and distrust in poor neighborhoods, see e.g., Smith 2007.

surrogate family; need found its way to need.

The girls' and their best friends—their “ride or dies” or “Day 1 A1’s”—bore witness to one another’s lives. It was to each other that they discussed their days, and with each other that they talked through their problems, hopes and fears. Their mutual vulnerability and emotional reciprocity built a sturdy intimacy, which the girls enjoyed when things were rough at home.

Safe on the Streets: Neighborhood Violence and Vulnerability

Mostly, the girls felt safe in NC, but the neighborhood could be unpredictable. Flashes of violence could come at any time; as Maude said, “I remember once there was a shooting in the middle of the day. A guy got shot in the mouth.”

Violence was not common, but it outlived the heat of its moment. It lived on in landmarks or streets tarnished by trauma. “*That pizza place, you know, where Sparks was shot,*” the girls would say. It lived on, too, in memories; the girls would not forget seeing Rosalie’s brother, Bryan, beaten by a man in a bicycle helmet one summer afternoon. Like the shooting Maude remembered, Bryan was attacked in broad daylight. Stephanie remembered, “He beat the crap out of him. He was choking him, squeezing the life out of him. Blood was gushing, and we thought he was gonna die right then. Everyone ran outside. Everyone was screaming, ‘Get off him!’” Stephanie remembered feeling powerless as the man kicked and punched her friend. She turned to the adults. “Bryan’s mom ran out screaming, ‘Get off my child!’ But he wouldn’t get off.” The adults were as powerless as she was. That was a hard feeling to forget.

In NC, violence fell mostly on the bodies of boys and men. But the girls felt

threatened, too, especially in the dark. The nearest subway station was a short walk from the projects, but the route ran down an alley fringed on one side by a high tangle of barbed wire, and on the other by a park. During the day, when kids romped in the playground, teens sauntered down the walkway. But it was different after dark. “You can’t catch me at the train station at night,” Joanne said. Aisha liked to run home from the station, sneakers smacking brick as her eyes watched every shadow.

The girls hated walking home alone, and they checked to confirm their friends were safe. For this, senior Isis once thanked Aisha on Twitter, writing, **Aisha texted, snapchatted & tweeted me to make sure I got home safe ... That’s my bitch Imfao**

Sometimes, the girls took each other home after late night hang-outs.²⁵ “We would walk home with each other,” Joanne explained. “It wasn’t really that good of an idea to walk by yourself. Creepy people, creepy men. Creepy men were on the corner.” They walked each other back to buildings in the same projects, bringing along a brother or friend so they wouldn’t have to return alone.

The girls had other strategies to stay safe. They remained alert while out and about— commenting on passing cars, squinting at unfamiliar plates, and trying to make out shady figures.²⁶ This was part of the daily trade of gossip that passed long afternoons. But it also kept their eyes on the street.²⁷ As Maude explained, “You have to be cautious of

²⁵ Cobbina et al. (2008) found that girls in a poor St. Louis neighborhood also avoided being out alone, and relied on members of their social network to accompany them. But the authors found that the girls tended not to rely on their friends for company, but rather on boys and men they knew.

²⁶ Several urban ethnographies in poor neighborhoods show strangers to be a certain cause of fear, e.g., Patillo-McCoy 1999; Anderson 1990; Merry 1981

²⁷ Urban theorist Jane Jacobs (1992 [1961]) discussed the importance of having “eyes on the street” to promote neighborhood safety. To Jacobs, neighborhood residents and strangers who kept watch of street life and activity were key to local safety. See also Duneier 2000.

what's going to happen. Whoever comes through in a car, if it looks different to you, like you've never seen it before, you gotta look at it sideways, 'cause you never know."

The girls also shared stories of harassment or violence, bonding over a type of *danger talk*. One day at school, Ella, a petite senior with a sharp brunette bob, told three friends about how, in 8th grade, a boy from the neighborhood stabbed her in the leg "at a children's party." She pointed to the numb spot on her left calf, where a half-inch scar curved like a Nike tick. The three girls listened and pressed for details. Then, Valentina, a senior with round cheeks and braces, told the girls about the time she thought she might get stabbed. Three men, one with a knife, had chased her into a store; she'd cowered behind the counter and begged the clerk to call the cops, she said. Valentina's story was not viewed as thunder-stealing or one-upmanship. Rather, sharing stories was an expression of empathy. The girls bonded over their experiences, experiences not shared by their parents, who had come of age in different times and places. But the girls understood. They were sincere each time they parted ways, when they said not, "Goodbye," but, "Be safe."

Some of the girls were bolder. Brittani didn't mind walking home late, even though the dimly-lit, ten-minute walk to her Section 8 apartment led down a blemished road. "There've been shootings on Rindge Ave," Brittani said. "Two people got shot. One by Foodtown. One got killed." But she had walked down Rindge for years. "It's pretty funny, 'cause I walk on that street late at night from my friends' houses," Brittani said. "I'm not really worried about it, 'cause I know so many people that I feel like no one's going to hurt me."

Aisha laughed at Brittani's bravery. "Brittani would walk through Dorchester hoods by herself in the middle of the night!" she said, shaking her head. Aisha was not so cavalier.

“It’s scary!” she said. “Some nights it’s just like bad feelings.” That was why she ran home, and made her friends text her once they were safe inside.

School and Community: Stigma, Surveillance, Exclusion

School

Racism and surveillance made the girls feel unwelcome and excluded. At school—committed, outwardly, to the ideal of diversity—the girls saw racial disparities when it came to discipline, dress codes, tracking, and classroom dynamics.²⁸

Even teachers the girls viewed as well-intentioned could act wrongly. Aisha was the only Black student in her AP US history class. That felt strange, even without her teacher’s overtures. “He was always singling me out,” Aisha said. “It was for all these opportunities. You know, good things. But it still made me mad, ‘cause I did not want all that extra attention.”

There were also race-based social tensions among students. Staff concurred that cliques at CRLS were, on the whole, racially divided. But they blamed this on the fact that freshman brought to high school their middle school friend groups, which, because of residential segregation, were often ethnically homogenous.

Racialized dynamics showed up in classrooms, too. One morning after Spring Break, Ms. Flores tried to settle her STARs class as students hugged and chatted. Nina, a

²⁸ The girls, however, perceived a gap between the institutions’ discursive ideals and their experiences at schools. Diversity was often proudly spoken about, but its realization was thin. Carter (2005: p14) has discussed how discourses of ‘diversity’ at school can be superficial. And, in other qualitative research with young people, teens discuss their awareness of the difference between *diversity* and *integration* in their schools (e.g., Shedd 2015). Other researchers have also uncovered higher rates of appearance-based policing oriented towards minority students (e.g., Morris 2005, 2007; on students’ perceptions, see Kupchik et al. 2007).

senior, led check-in, and told the group to go around the circle and summarize their break in one word. The room cooed, and some teens looked up as they pondered.

Maya, a white senior with freckles and kinky brown hair, said, “My week was fail.” Classmates giggled.

“Wait, did you say *jail*?” another student called out. The giggles grew to throaty laughs at the suggestion.

Amidst the gasping and thigh-slapping, Deja, an African-American senior, stared at her lap. Deja was a heavy girl, who often sat silently, alone. She laid her palms on her thighs. Her gray, flannel sweatpants frayed at the bottom around scuffed sneakers.

“I went to a jail,” Deja mumbled.

Lila, a Hispanic senior, on her right, leaned in. Lila’s kohl-lined eyes scanned Deja’s face.

“Was it scary?”

Deja nodded, the slightest bob. “It was. Mad scary.”

Lila waited.

“He was hurting himself,” Deja said.

The room hushed, so the two girls did, too. “I have to go visit my brother soon,” Lila said quickly, before the pair looked up to wait for the next student’s word.²⁹

²⁹ Seemingly innocuous conversation topics quite often brought up inequities. One morning, Stephanie led check in, and asked everybody in the circle to name something they were excited for over the upcoming Easter Break. Each student went without prompting as they went around the circle. Hakim, an African-American senior, sat in sullen quiet.

“Hakim?” Ms. Flores nudged.

“I’m not really excited for anything,” he shrugged. “I’m just living life as it goes.”

“Nothing at all? It can be something in the future,” Stephanie tried.

“I don’t even know what I’m doing on the weekend,” he said.

Stephanie gave up. Next up, Aya, an Asian-American senior, said she was excited for a playwright festival.

Many of the girls believed race guided academic tracking. “They always say you can do whatever you want,” Joanne said, about her high school. “But when it comes to academic things, there’s a clear divide in terms of who’s taking what classes, and how many kids of color are in the technical school programs. It’s really noticeable... In the [advanced] classes it was no Black people. They would all be put in the chorus class. So it’s like, ‘Oh, I can only sing?’”

Joanne worried about the consequences of this kind of tracking. She knew intuitively what sociologists have uncovered: that feeling worthless hampers young people’s academic experiences.³⁰ Dejection and discouragement can lead to disinvestment and a cycle of underachievement. This was something Joanne first sensed back in middle school, when she recalled a science teacher telling her mostly Black class, “You’re just gonna be bums on the street.” Joanne thought the teacher should have tried to understand his students. She reflected, “He had no patience for students who were obviously lashing out in anger because they weren’t being treated fairly. He would just go off on them.”

From experiences like these, Joanne developed a long-term plan to help young people like those she grew up with. The plan started with college, where she was excited

Rochelle, an African-American senior said, “I’m excited for the day off.” She worked at Dunkin’ Donuts. “I never get to sleep in. It’s gonna feel good!”

Tina, white, said she had tickets to see Belinda Carlisle and she’s really excited.

“What’s Belinda Carlisle?” Amaya, an African-American senior asked.

“She’s a singer, like folk rock,” answered Lililan, another white girl.

Sometimes, however, the teens poked fun at the schools’ racial dynamics. At the end of class one morning, Ms. Flores asked if anybody had any announcements for the class. David, an African-American senior, stood up and cleared his throat. “You should all by tickets to *Urinetown*,” he said, advertising the school play he was involved with.

“Ugh, I hate when play people do that!” Natty said, arms folded but smiling.

“I don’t have any money!” Leah, a white senior, called out.

“That’s racist!” Natty yelled at Leah. “You should support your friends!”

³⁰ E.g., Kaplan 2013; MacLeod 1987

to study psychology, maybe child psychology, given all she'd learned from raising the babies. After that, graduate school. Columbia topped her list. Then, finally, she would found her non-profit. Its mission, she said, would be to use "creative means to get students reengaged in school."

Joanne felt strongly about this. She explained, "It will prevent dropout rates but also build confidence, because how can you motivate yourself without confidence? If you don't have confidence, you're not gonna raise your hand because you think you're dumb."

This was something she knew first hand, having herself faced the insult of low expectations. The day after George Zimmerman's acquittal in the murder trial of Trayvon Martin, Joanne discussed the case and what it brought up for her. "I have two negatives against me," she said. "I'm Black and I'm female... It's in your face every day. People are surprised when I'm intelligent. Culturally, there's just so much associated with being a woman. They don't expect much from you in the first place, and then on top of that, being Black. They don't expect too much from you."

As Joanne struggled with her own confidence, she also worried about classmates tracked into technical classes. "I'm not a person that needs to be pushed that much," she said. "But when you see people who don't have anyone to push them, and they let themselves get dragged into the system that's not working for them, it's really sad." Joanne felt that the school could and should do better by her peers.

Community

It was not just at school that Joanne and her friends were put down. They were bothered, too, by stares and scowls from strangers when they were out and about, and by

surveillance and stereotyping in stores and other places.³¹

One evening, Joanne described her experience with Najma in CVS that afternoon as Vincent drove us to the movie theater. “The second we walked in, this [employee] literally started following us,” Joanne said. “Najma needed tampons. Mind you, there was a camera right there anyway. Like, we’re not stealing tampons!”

“It is a recession,” Vincent joked.

“No,” Joanne said. “That’s so stereotyping. That’s like racial profiling. It was wrong.” She thought for a moment, then went on: “It would be one thing if we looked like the hobos outside. We looked very nice, mind you. All sophisticated. Not wearing sweatpants or anything.”³²

“What did y’all say?”

“Nothing! He’s following us around, pretending to be fixing up the tampons right next to us. He’s like, ‘Do you need some assistance?’

“You should have been like, ‘Yes, which type is best?’” Vincent laughed. Joanne didn’t.

A few weeks later, Aisha bounced down Western Avenue after basketball practice one night. Telling a story with her characteristic zeal, Aisha waved her hands for emphasis. As she gestured, she knocked a bicycle U-locked to a streetlight. It clattered down, and Aisha bent to lift it. The lock and frame rattled stubbornly against the metal, and she tried

³¹ See Chin 2001 on how race and class can structure humiliating and even dehumanizing consumer experiences for low-income youth of color.

³² The girls profiled in Julie Bettie’s (2003) *Women Without Class* dressed up before going to the mall, thinking themselves less likely to be targets of intrusive surveillance by security guards if they were wearing smart clothes. Young people in Elizabeth Chin’s *Purchasing Power* (2001) acted similarly.

different grips to ease the bike upright. It wouldn't budge. Stumped, she knelt onto the dirty pavement to reset it properly. Across the street, a white couple slowed their pace and stared at her. "They think I'm stealing it," Aisha said to me plainly, as she raised the bike and dusted off her knees.

Young people know how they are seen and what stereotypes exist about them.³³ Like many poor teens, the girls were routinely denied access to social affirmation and esteem. Moreover, the stereotypes they faced differed from the way they saw themselves—as striving, successful young women. This kind of disparity can be harmful; when people have interactions consistent with their self-beliefs, they experience positive feelings, like pride, but when they are treated in ways that diverge from their self-concepts, they can experience anger, shame, and guilt.³⁴

Negative feelings are not just a threat to wellbeing. They can also impact long-term trajectories, when teens internalize degradation and grow withdrawn and disinvested.³⁵ Teens can also externalize insults, seeking to fix damaged pride through violence or domination.³⁶

Together, the girls talked through their experiences of stigma and marginalization.

³³ Kaplan 2013

³⁴ The symbolic interactionist tradition of analyzing what role emotion plays in daily life traces back to Cooley (1964 [1902]). Theorists in this tradition consider how "emotion rules" and emotional dynamics structure interactions and encounters. Kemper (1978) posited that in any interaction, people have positions on two things: status and power. As these two dimensions are affirmed or denied in interactions, emotions emerge for participants. For example, affirming someone's high status generates positive, love-related emotions. Conversely, the repeated experience of low status can lead to the potential for chronic shame (e.g., Coreno 1992). For a review of theoretical approaches to the study of emotion in everyday life, see Turner & Stets (2006).

³⁵ E.g., Kaplan 2013; MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977

³⁶ E.g., Scheff & Retzinger 1991; Suttles 1968; Anderson 2000; Bourgois 1996

In their discussions, they shared a vocabulary drawn from the well of their common experiences, a vocabulary adults didn't always share.

After Joanne's migraines started, her doctor referred her to a therapist, hoping that this—along with her meditation and breathing exercises—might help her manage pain. Joanne liked her therapist, Nina, but could not always speak plainly with her, especially about race and racism. As Joanne explained one afternoon, “I walk around [the projects] and see a bunch of people who look like me, but I go outta here, I don't see Black people.³⁷ But you can't really say much, even to my therapist. She's white, and she was like, ‘I don't want you to feel you can't say things to me about race.’ But it's like, I don't want to offend with my thought process... Like, some people hate white people. I don't even hate white people, I just wish they would understand.”

Joanne was grateful for Nina. And, none of her friends had access to institutionalized emotional support in the form of a therapist. But Joanne sometimes censored herself, sensing that Nina's office had what sociologists call “feeling rules,” which control what people are allowed to feel.³⁸ These feeling rules restricted Joanne's candor with Nina, limiting what they could discuss. Moreover, when the feelings people have differ from those they feel they can express, this can compound negative emotions.³⁹

³⁷ Elijah Anderson (2012) has discussed how the iconography of the physical ghetto persists even as African-Americans become more visible in society. He argues that the “iconic ghetto” burdens Black Americans with a deficit of credibility, making them have to continually account for themselves.

³⁸ Building from the dramaturgical approach to the study of emotion, scholars like Arlie Hochschild (1979, 1983), Thoits (1991) and Rosenberg (1990) have shown how individuals can feel conflicted between the “feeling rules” of a situation—the emotions they feel they *should* display—and their actual emotions. This discrepancy between feelings and feeling rules can compound and exacerbate negative emotional states.

³⁹ See e.g., Turner & Stets 2006

With her friends, however, Joanne could share. She could be candid. The girls were one another's *back stage*, and they discussed their full range of feelings, including those like anger and resentment, which they did not always feel able to share elsewhere.

Online and in person, the girls heard one another out. They listened and replied, as when Aisha described a bad experience at a subway station on Facebook. She wrote, **Today when I was going to meet my friends I got racially profiled at the train station ... I watched the train guy help a lighter skinned man get on the train because he was missing a few cents.. When I approached with the similar reason telling him I had a wrinkly \$20 dollar bill that the machine couldn't take.and that I was missing a dollar he told me to walk across the city to go to cvs and get change.. (I was appalled) then I went in to a store after i met my friends and the cashier told us, " don't go in the back if you are not paying " he proceeds to say, " we only made this rule for people like you " I never talk about these issues because I get super emotional .. But there's something about today ..I just had to share with y'all.. #fergusoneverywhere**

Dozens of friends read Aisha's story, and with their 'like' button, fifty-six people offered something like acknowledgement and support. There was a catharsis in candor, and community in sharing.

Sometimes the girls used humor, like when Joanne tweeted, **so this old lady was scared to sit next to me -_- I only jump old ladies Monday-Friday hun. The weekends are my days off.**

Humor can be effective as a response to dominance, either to subvert authority or

to release negative feelings.⁴⁰ The girls laughed about outsidership.⁴¹ They found solidarity in marginality, giggling about what they shared, like faux-pas' made by their immigrant parents in all-American settings. On Najma's bed after Joanne's 18th birthday picnic, Aisha did a skit: her mom and aunt trying to order in Chuck-E-Cheese. She spoke in accented English and imitated their confusion. The girls cackled at her hyperbole.

Then Joanne jumped in. "My mom can never put stuff in the cart in *Market Basket*," she segued. "She gotta weigh everything. She finds all the Haitian people by the bell peppers, like 'Eh eh eh!'" The girls thrashed and rolled on the mattress. Brittani, whose mother was born and raised in Cambridge, joined in, too, miming how her mom blocked the aisle at *Market Basket* with her cart. The girls laughed and laughed, and when the giggles wore off, they lounged on Najma's bed, cheeks aching, as they sighed and smiled.

As well as sharing—or laughing about—their bad experiences, the girls also dealt with stigmatization by building each other up. They expressed love, care, and appreciation, online and in person.

The girls affirmed one another almost every day. Sometimes these were brief tweets, like when Najma tweeted, **I have never ever had any friends like @Aisha @Joanne they are the realest friends anyone could have !!!!** or when Joanne tweeted, **I can honestly say there will never be another @Aisha in the world** and Aisha replied, **@Joanne aww this**

⁴⁰ See e.g., Lamont et al. 2016; Hirsch 2014. Also, Scheff & Retzinger (1991) describe the "shame-rage cycle," where a social bond comes under stress as a result of someone feeling shamed by another person. This can be cooperatively acknowledged, however, and a social bond can be effectively repaired through laughter.

⁴¹ Fairly regularly, the girls invoked marginality as a basis for intimacy, and used their shared experiences of stigma to generate a shared identity that they could affirm. Amy Wilkins shows how some white teens "self-marginalize" in pursuit of a similar basis of identity, choosing subcultural affiliations to foster bonds with peers based on clear boundaries from others (Wilkins 2008).

is the best tweet all day waahh I'm crying.

But sometimes posts were more lavish. As Najma scrolled through her apps one morning, she saw something that stalled her swiping and made her grin. Aisha had posted a photo of Najma stirring a pot on a burner, with the caption: **This is my friend @Najma cooking for me !! This is what you call a real friendship ... This girl has done the outmost for me !! She cares so much, it's honestly not ok. She's paid for my phone bill and that's not even half of it . I knew her since 8th grade but our friendship and family of her, Joanne and I grew stronger!! I cannot do anything in the world to replace her !! SHE'S MY FUCKING WORLD .. I've cried in front of her!! When I ned someone she's literally the first one to leap!! I cannot say or do anything that can truly explain how grateful I am of her AND I JUST WANT TO SAY I LOVE YOU PUCHAI and THANKYOU for being a #friend !! A true mother fucking friend !!!**

Najma screenshotted Aisha's post, and uploaded it to Twitter, with her own caption: **What I got to wake up to this morning >>>>>>>>>>.**

To celebrate birthdays, girls made photo collages with free apps, stitching together images of their friend, which they uploaded, typically with long captions. On Rosalie's birthday, Nicole's caption read, **Y'all don't understand the bond me and this chick share. I feel a connection like no other with you. My soul sister. We been through it all and I knew you was real when you cried when I cried. You've always been there and never judged me. Words really can't explain the amount of respect, inspiration and Love I have for you. Happy Birthday baby girl and know no matter what I'm here for you.**

Even if posts were—as some social media critics have claimed—partially motivated by performance or self-aggrandizement, girls still enjoyed being their focus. Reading Nicole's message and other birthday wishes, Rosalie felt worthy. She felt needed.

This type of recognition lifted the girls. Day to day, they answered to parents, teachers and bosses; adults who controlled their schedules and whereabouts. They dealt

with conflict and instability at home, and felt racially marginalized and profiled at school and in public space. But with their friends, the girls felt important. They felt like they mattered.

Black feminist writer Patricia Hill Collins argued that the act of women loving one another is fundamental to resisting oppression. Hill Collins argues, “If members of the group on the bottom love one another and affirm one another’s worth, then the entire system that assigns that group to the bottom becomes suspect.”⁴² When the girls built each other up, they challenged everyone who put them down.

Breakdown

The girls depended on one another for emotional care. This care was multifaceted, and crucial. But it could also be taxing, and the net spun from threads of support could fray under the weight of need. When this happened, the girls fought. Social breakdown followed two main breaches: *non-reciprocity*, a gap between help given and taken; and *non-recognition*, a lack of respect.

Non-Reciprocity

Friends were expected to come through for each other online and in person.⁴³ Online, teens followed their friends on several platforms, and they also followed classmates, neighbors, and acquaintances. A follow was a validation. It was also public, so it could announce and cement a relationship. Unfollowing did the opposite.

⁴² Hill Collins 2000: p184

⁴³ Reciprocity has long been understood as a key component of economic exchange (following anthropologists like Mauss (1967) and Sahlins (1972)). Economists and social exchange theorists have also emphasized equilibrium as a central dynamic of social interaction (e.g., Homans 1961; Emerson 1976). Online, the need for reciprocity was explicitly articulated in clearer terms than was the need for balance or repayment in, say, the material realm. Nancy-Jo Sales also finds teenaged girls argue with one another over the politics of liking photos online (2016).

One afternoon at basketball practice, Aisha sat on the tarmac in halftime and stretched her legs out in front of her. She squeezed her calves and chatted to Damien, a school friend warming up for the guys' game on the next court. Damien was short but fast, and he had a great arm. Aisha and Damien's friend, Dani, jogged over, light with the glee of news to break. Dani had a story: Lakeisha, a "psycho bitch," had unfollowed her on Twitter.

Dani told Aisha and Damien what happened. "I was like, 'Hello, bitch!'" she said.

Aisha grunted sympathetically.

Damien shook his head. "But she'll fuck *you* up for unfollowing her!" He said. "That's ratchet!"

"Yeah!" Dani said. "She has that thing where it says who unfollowed you on Twitter. I didn't unfollow her 'cause I was scared. She'll tweet at you like, 'Why did you unfollow me, bitch?' I seen her do it to people before!"

Non-reciprocity online weakened the audience that teens relied on for fun but also for support. When Aisha asked her friends, "Did you like my status?" she was concerned with her tally of likes, but also her access to care.

Another type of non-reciprocity was when someone sought something in exchange for giving emotional support. As Aisha explained, "Everyone does something for everyone, but it won't be for credit. If I'm your friend, you shouldn't be keeping tabs." Aisha argued with Najma after the two girls rallied to care for Joanne when she went through a rough patch. "Najma brings it up every day!" Aisha bristled. "Joanne has done so much. The things Joanne has done for us!" To Aisha, helping out should not be a transaction.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ This made something that was *sacred*—care and support—into a *profane* object of instrumental maximization. Najma introduced a new logic, one of rational exchange, into a process that her friends did not see in this way.

But Najma, too, was having a hard time. And when she struggled to give help without praise in return, she also stopped taking it. This further irritated Aisha, who felt robbed of the chance to feel like a competent, caring friend. “I guess we’re not of a purpose,” Aisha said. She and Joanne went to Najma to try and reset the balance. Joanne told Najma, “It’s not fair that you think that we’re not your number one support system, because we are.” The girls wanted Najma to feel supported, but they, too, wanted to enjoy feeling supportive.

Non-Recognition

The girls argued, too, when they felt un-seen, and their suffering unrecognized.⁴⁵ Sometimes this was as simple as walking unacknowledged down a hallway.⁴⁶ But the more profound non-recognition was when someone saw their own troubles as worse or more worthy than their friends’. When Aisha and Joanne confronted Najma, they started out concerned, especially when Najma burst into tears right away. “She just kept crying,” Aisha relayed. “She was bawling, like, ‘I don’t know what to do! I don’t eat. My parents don’t have money for me.’” Aisha saw Najma’s strain. She said, “Najma’s a kid herself, but she spends her entire life trying to raise her sister’s kid. Her sister bullies her into doing it, so she can go roll up. She is big, and she’ll hit you.”

But Aisha started to feel like Najma wasn’t listening. Aisha didn’t mind talking

⁴⁵ Ethnographers have long shown how feeling disrespected leads to conflict, both between groups, and even among friends (e.g., Anderson 2000; Bourgois 1996). Nikki Jones shows specifically how girls fight about being disrespected (2009: p14).

⁴⁶ Erving Goffman (1971: p79) discusses the possibility of non-recognition through an unreciprocated ‘goodbye,’ which can leave an interaction unresolved, or ended in an unsatisfactory way. Scheff (1990) explores how exclusion can unfold at the micro-level of an encounter, breaking attunement, and bringing shame, which can spiral with anger. Kemper (1978) also speaks to this association between shame and anger.

through issues; the girls had done that since middle school. “I don’t mind your problems,” Aisha reflected. But after a while, she got frustrated. Aisha gave Najma advice again and again, offering suggestions “three, four or five times,” she said.

Najma eventually cried out, “You don’t understand!”

Hearing that, Aisha got mad. “Oh, okay! I guess we’ve never gone through that!” she said later, sarcasm thick. “You can’t tell me that for me and Joanne it’s been an easy ride. She doesn’t ask how we’re doing. Maybe we’re dying too, you don’t know! Don’t make it seem like our lives are perfect. We’re all broken.”

Aisha wanted to help her friends, but she resented the suggestion that her own troubles were trivial.

At the poetry slam, the girls changed into the black and turquoise T-shirts they were given, swag from the organizers. Then they took their seats and waited for their turn on stage.

“I can’t wait to Instagram all this,” Aisha said.

Up front, poets performed at a row of microphones. Behind them, big posters of black question marks were framed on white walls. The girls clapped eagerly for other teams, and between poems, they leaned to each other and whispered out lines they’d loved.

When the girls were called up, Aisha and Joanne walked to the stage with their teammates, holding hands.

An hour later, after each poet had performed, the girls twitched in their seats waiting for the results. The judge praised their presence and lyricism, but they didn’t make the semi-finals.

There was no time to dwell. The girls scurried to the bathroom, holding their bags of clothes.

Prom was in an hour.

“Those poems were intense,” Joanne said, as she zipped up her dress next to the sink. Her gown was bright, aquamarine, and strapless. It cinched at her waist and pooled glamorously around her feet.

“That’s because everyone’s been abused, or something like that,” Aisha said, digging through her make-up bag until her fingers caught the tube of mascara.

“Yeah,” Joanne said.

Joanne watched Aisha line her own eyes in the mirror, then she looked back at her reflection. Joanne didn’t know much about makeup. She wasn’t girly like some of her friends and classmates. All she had was a few bottles of nail polish. But today was a special occasion.

Joanne asked Aisha to draw on some eye make-up, and Aisha held her best friend’s jaw softly as she painted.

When she was done, Aisha dashed into a cubicle and slipped into the dress an aunt had darned for her. The floor-length fabric was blue and gold. Aisha glittered as she moved, as the turquoise sequins on the asymmetric neckline caught the light. She walked back to the mirror to pin the strap in place just like she had practiced earlier. But the pin kept warping against the thick cloth, and Aisha flustered as she tried over and over to fix her dress. Time was running out.

“Oh well, I guess I can’t wear it!” she snapped.

Joanne looked at Aisha, pausing before she spoke. When she did, it was in the voice

she used to shepherd her siblings: firm and containing. “Of course you’re gonna wear it,” Joanne said. “You didn’t get this bomb-ass dress to not wear it!”

Aisha took a deep breath and held out the sewing kit. She stood frozen, taking small sips of breath, as Joanne stitched.

“All good.”

Aisha ran her hands down the dress and walked to Joanne.

The girls stood side-by-side in front of the mirror and looked at themselves, beaming.

From work, to love, to war, feelings drive social action.⁴⁷ *Belonging* is a fundamental need; *reputation* is among the most common motives.⁴⁸ Encounters and interactions are key to our emotional comfort, since we seek, from others, the recognition of our basic humanity.⁴⁹

Poor young people, especially poor young people of color, are often pushed to the fringe of society and denied its praise. This is a threat to their wellbeing. Moreover, it threatens their long-term outcomes and trajectories. Teenagers are especially needy when it comes to validation, but they are also especially vulnerable to downward mobility caused by turning points.

Research shows how stigmatization can cause the types of social problems that can act as turning points for young people. On the one hand, marginality can be met with anger

⁴⁷ Collins 2004

⁴⁸ See e.g., Goodwin et al. 2001; Scheff 1994; Collins 2004

⁴⁹ Honneth 1995

and violence, like for the poor young adults involved in East Harlem's crack trade studied by anthropologist Philippe Bourgois. Bourgois argued that the "cultural assault" of social exclusion led young people into a "street culture of resistance." This, in turn, destroyed both "its participants and the community harboring them," by trapping them in "lifestyles of violence, substance abuse, and internalized rage."⁵⁰ Other ethnographers have also found that adolescents can meet poverty's insults with aggression. Shame is a close friend of rage, and rage can cause violence, which feels something like power.⁵¹

Marginalization can also be internalized. Surveillance and scorn can be absorbed, and metabolized into feelings of inadequacy. This can prompt a defensive disinvestment, researchers argue. Jay MacLeod in *Ain't No Makin' It* claimed that the stigmatization of the young men he studied led to their rejection of the "achievement ideology," and prompted their disengagement at school.⁵²

The girls tried to fight emotional affronts together.⁵³ They empathized with conflict at home. They were dependable when adults were not. They managed feelings of risk in their neighborhood, and bonded over 'danger talk.' And they built each other up in the face of disrespect and racism at school or elsewhere. This emotional support lay a necessary

⁵⁰ Bourgois 1996: p 8-9. See also Jones (2009)

⁵¹ If shame is repressed rather than acknowledged, it can morph easily into rage. This rage can trigger aggressive or destructive actions (Scheff & Retzinger 1991; see also e.g., Suttles 1968; Anderson 2000; Bourgois 1996).

⁵² MacLeod 1987. See also Willis 1977. Anthropologists Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) argued controversially that some Black high school students developed an "oppositional culture" characterized by the rejection of academic achievement for fear of being seen by their peers as "acting white." This has been empirically discredited by subsequent studies (e.g., Carter 2003; Harris 2011).

⁵³ Many psychological studies of responses to stigmatization focus on individual resilience, but sociologists emphasize that resilience is a property of groups (Hall & Lamont 2013).

foundation for the potential of future mobility, by defending against violent quests for status, or spirals of shame and detachment.

The threads of emotional support formed a net that could fray into conflict when reciprocity or recognition were compromised. When someone failed to “come through,” or expected something in return, they unbalanced the reciprocity that the group relied on. Likewise, when somebody failed to take help, they took from their friends that fleeting empowerment of fixing things. Non-recognition, either as a greeting unmet or the graver failure to grasp another’s suffering, also triggered social breakdown. The girls fought when obligations were breached because their emotional needs were so critical, and so vast.

“My friends have been really important in my life,” Maude reflected after work one Friday. “They had a part in who I am.” she said. Aisha spoke similarly but went further: “My family hasn’t been there for me. Joanne has.”

Listening, being there, and ‘getting it’ are not often what come to mind when we think about survival in poor neighborhoods. Poverty is, after all, an economic relationship. But emotional and economic wellbeing are entwined. Some scholars have suggested that too much poverty research frames need as merely material. As sociologist Michèle Lamont argues, economic approaches to wellbeing must also consider *social* inclusion.⁵⁴ Concepts like dignity and self-worth are spreading among policy makers, too, as societies reckon with the essential role of recognition in social justice.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Hall & Lamont 2013

⁵⁵ Fraser 2000; Hodson 2001; Honneth 2012. Often, the literature on recognition focuses on the macro-level: for instance, on state recognition, as it pertains to citizenship and immigration (Joppke 2010) or multiculturalism (Kymlicka 1995). But the sense of affirmation, welcome, and reception is necessarily more micro, and this level is understudied (Lamont et al. 2016).

Poverty does entail material deprivation. But it can also entail going through life—and, in the girls' case, coming of age—feeling put down, kept out, undercut and undermined. Stiffening beneath the unwanted eyes of store clerks or sprinting home from the subway could feel as grim as an empty fridge. When the girls gave each other sanctuary, when they heard stories of trauma, when they affirmed one another, they gave aid no less vital than when they traded cash.⁵⁶ Empathy, advice, validation, and love were among the deepest needs they could meet.

⁵⁶ This may indicate the value of segregated peer groups. The girls shared a deep empathy, based on an existential and experiential similarity, which facilitated meaningful and mutual emotional engagement. Their positional and phenomenological likeness allowed the girls to feel understood by one another. As Joanne said about her white therapist, “I know you wish you could understand, but you can’t understand something unless you’ve lived it yourself.”

5—Bodies, Boyfriends, and Sex

Over the years, the girls' thin limbs, packed hard with muscle, started to soften. As children, they kept pace with their brothers when they raced around JP. As teenagers, legs filled and slowed; bellies gently rounded; hips took on heft. The girls tweaked their faces, too: a wing of liquid eyeliner on the lash line, a smudge of red onto parted lips. The girls moved with a new weight as boys and men looked at them differently. They learned that they had a new power.

In maturity, the girls found new pleasures but also new risks. There were fine lines to walk between self-worth and self-doubt, intimacy and vulnerability, desire and danger. As usual, the girls walked together. They were good at solving problems. But when it came to sex and boyfriends, the reach of the peer group was shorter than in other areas, like body image. Unusually, friends could come up short.

Bodies: Self-Esteem and Insecurity

Most of the girls closely managed their appearance. It was important to look good.¹ In slow moments at school, they fussed over themselves. Girls picked their nails or eyelashes, and applied lip balm and hand cream, often using iPhone cameras as mirrors.

During puberty, girls' self-esteem plummets. Among the factors that sociologists and psychologists blame are the insecurities caused by morphing bodies and first romances.²

Some of the girls welcomed changes to their bodies. “Yung Twig” Rosalie watched

¹ On bodily or ‘erotic’ capital, see Wacquant 2004; Mears 2011; Green 2008

² Hoffman & Baldwin 2002; Cash & Pruzinsky 2002

with triumph as her body finally swelled and curved. Rosalie was younger than her best friends, and she'd been left behind as they all matured. She introduced the occasional black dress into her regimen of hoodies and blue jeans, pleased with how they clung to her new lines. "I am feeling myself!" Rosalie grinned one Saturday night, scrolling through pictures Nicole had taken. "I look hella thick!"

But most of her friends felt less confident. Some of the girls discussed working out and changing their diets to mold their bodies.³ Few followed through, but many posted photos of foods they thought were healthy, like granola bars and tea-based soft drinks, with captions like **#summerbody** or **#antioxidants**. They also posted when they went for a jog or worked out at home, like when Najma tweeted, **Just did 50 sit-ups**. With their posts and 'fat talk,'⁴ they performed womanhood, which was critical and self-aware.

Online, the girls compared themselves to celebrities and Instagram stars and "Video Vixens." But messages about how they should look came from closer to home, too, including from family members.

"My mom tells me I'm ugly every two seconds," Aisha said, placid. Diana's comments used to hurt, but Aisha had grown better at ignoring them.

Odette spoke similarly. "My aunt is still telling me I have to lose weight," she said. But Odette was ambivalent. "I dunno, you know, I love my curves. I really do," she said. Still, she sometimes wound saran wrap around her stomach and went walking on hot days,

³ A sizeable 'buffer effect' literature explores the relatively low prevalence of eating disorder symptomatology among young women and girls of color (e.g., Schooler & Daniels 2014; Milkie 1999; Nichter 2000; Lovejoy 2001). Nonetheless, "self-objectification" is a persistent pattern of behavior among girls and young women from all racial and socioeconomic groups (see e.g., Fredrickson et al. 1998; Calogero et al. 2010).

⁴ See e.g., Nichter 2000; Saguy 2013; Greenhalgh 2015

hoping to sweat off a few pounds.

Aisha and Odette tried to resist things they heard, but body-based comments really got to Joanne. One Sunday, she ran into a former neighbor in the JP parking lot. “You’re so beautiful, look at you!” the neighbor said to Joanne. She drew Joanne into a hug, then stepped back, holding her by the shoulders to scan her petite, voluptuous frame. “Look how thick you got!” she exclaimed.

“Thank you,” Joanne said, shifting slightly.

As we walked away, Joanne confided that she hated comments like that. “It’s like saying, ‘Oh you’ve put on so much weight.’ I’m like, ‘Well I haven’t seen you for ten years, so...’”

The woman’s well-intentioned words hit a nerve, as Joanne had wrestled with body image through high school.

“I just don’t look like everyone else,” she worried. And dating didn’t help. “Boys want the big girls in secret, and then they want the skinny ones in public,” she said.

Her friends tried to lift her, telling her, “You’re just like everyone else!” But she still felt uncomfortable, an ache which many of the girls knew: the wish for a different size, shape, or skin tone.

As young women of color, the girls were excluded by beauty norms that prized their white, willowy schoolmates.

In STARS one morning, senior Yanelis sat at one of the class computers. She showed me what happened when she typed, “Beautiful woman” into Google. Headshots of white women, mostly blonde, covered the screen, and not until Yanelis scrolled to page five of the search results did she see a Black woman.

Some of the girls felt that these standards seeped into school, and drove race-based double standards when it came to dress-code discipline.⁵ Near Yanelis, seniors Lila and Valentina discussed body image. They rolled their eyes describing girls who wore heels and short skirts to school. “I’m like, ‘You’re sixteen!’” Valentina said.

“But also, they get away with it more,” Lila said. “They won’t get in trouble for such short skirts, but some people will.”

“Who gets in trouble?” I asked.

Lila crossed her arms. “Plain and simple? The Black girls and the white girls. The thick girls and the skinny girls,” she said, tying race to body shape to explain which bodies she thought staff punished.⁶

Racist and colorist ideas about beauty were hard to ignore emotionally, even while the girls criticized them intellectually. Aisha discussed her own struggles one afternoon in iHop. Pushing her food around, she said, “I know how it feels to feel like you’re not pretty enough,” she said. “I’ve been Black my whole entire life.” She stabbed a spongy pancake with her fork. “I’ve been Black, dark-skinned, and you literally have to learn to love yourself over and over again.” Her big eyes glazed. “You have to have that space in your heart to learn to love yourself again.” To others, Aisha glowed with beauty and poise, but she struggled quietly with herself.

Low self-esteem can take a long-term toll. It makes girls more likely to smoke,

⁵ Previous studies have suggested that minority femininities are ‘read’ as problematic and oppositional by white staff, and frequently sanctioned (see e.g., Morris 2007, or see Ferguson 2000 for an equivalent discussion of minority masculinities). Negative and “controlling” images have long been used to sexualize Black women and to problematize their sexuality (Hill Collins 2000).

⁶ Sales 2016: p121. The teen girls Sales interviewed claimed that popular girls at school were not dress coded or slut-shamed as less popular girls were.

binge drink, and develop eating disorders.⁷ Low self-esteem also makes young women more likely to partner with abusive men.

Insecurity could be socially costly, too. At school, confidence and popularity grew together, a vine around a branch. So, girls tried to hide their self-doubt. They faked acceptance of body parts they resented. But not too much; arrogance could also be shamed.

“What I hate,” Lila said to Valentina, “is when people say, ‘Do you think you’re pretty?’”

“I hate that!” Valentina said.

“Online, boys ask you that,” Lila explained. “And you can’t win when you answer, because either you’re arrogant or you’re insecure.”

On social media, boys sometimes prodded girls’ sore spots. Online, girls also compared themselves to others. But girls found validation on their apps, too. When Lila posted, **I hate that I have a nice body but an ugly face . - ___ -** her girlfriends replied with comments like, **your face is so beautiful!** And, **WHO LIED AND TOLD U U HAVE AN UGLY FACE??? BECAUSE I SEE A BEAUTIFUL BODY AND A GORGEOUS FACE!!!** And, **You are beautiful girly don’t let anyone tell you otherwise! I love you!!** The girls affirmed each other offline as well. They flattered one another, praising each other’s clothes and bodies. And, they were tactile and affectionate, running their hands over arms and backs and hair. They touched and hugged one another freely, making each other feel comfortable and at ease.

Boyfriends: Confusion, Burden, Risk

⁷ E.g., Shisslak et al, 1995; U.S Department of Health and Human Services 2001; National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse 2007

High school meant the end of cooties and playground pranks. Over time, cross-gender friendships gained a certain charge. Some of the girls were uninterested in romance, while others flirted with or dated boys. Of those that did, girls wanted different things. Some girls sought the comfort and security of a partner; some wanted that marker of maturity; some felt important when pursued, or found that boys' affection could offset insults from parents or the world.⁸

Mediated Intimacy

Although girls did not typically date people they met online,⁹ social media shaped all kinds of romantic relationship, and at every stage. At the start, moving from “talking to” a boy to being “his girl” could be bewildering.¹⁰ Parents offered no counsel, as most opposed their daughters dating. Girls spoke to their friends, considered astrological compatibility. They also looked online. Girls pored through posts and pages, seeking information about boys they liked.

Online, dating followed certain scripts. Teens planted seeds of flirtation—like liking or commenting on photos—which then bloomed in more sheltered spaces, like text

⁸ Some girls wanted a relationship like those in the magazines and shows they consumed; the ones that glorified romance and monogamy, and that tied the realization of successful adult femininity to an intimate, heterosexual partnership.

⁹ The girls did not use online dating or hook-up apps, which were not fully mainstreamed in 2012 (they also may have been too young). Nor did they use social media to find—and date—people in the neighborhood (as in e.g., Lane 2018). Instead, social media infused the close peer and romantic relationships they had with people they already knew “in real life.”

¹⁰ Contemporary youth culture—particularly as it pertains to dating and romance—is informal (Pascoe 2011; Bogle 2008; Modell 1989). Pascoe (2011) points out that this informality is reflected in young people's language, which frequently lacks a clear vocabulary to define relationship statuses or practices. Earlier terms, like “courtship” or “dating” have been replaced by fuzzier processes, like “talking to,” or “hanging out” (Miller and Benson 1999).

or Twitter inboxes.¹¹

But it wasn't always so simple. One of the things researchers criticize about social media is the loss of the cues infused into in-person communication. In face to face interactions, people lean heavily on non-verbal cues—including body language and tone of voice—to help understand one another. These cues are critical to communication, and researchers worry that when they are lost, what results is a sort of ambiguous “cuelessness” where people do not know how to interpret messages.¹²

For the teens, cuelessness could be perplexing. For instance, a delayed response to a text might be a battle for dominance—it might be a boy asserting power by acting aloof. But he could also just be busy. Teens' choices of platform, emojis, and punctuation could also mark a friend-zone, or they might not. Moreover, some romantic moves—like commenting on statuses and liking photos—were also platonic, which raised endless questions: *Why didn't he like my profile picture? Why did he follow me on Instagram but not on Twitter? Why does that girl comment on all his photos? Why does he keep liking hers?*

However, teens were also skilled communicators, and more often than not, their cuelessness was deliberate, even artful.¹³ The girls used it, too, especially in the form of the “sub.” A *sub*, short for subliminal, aimed to send a specific message without addressing that person. For instance, on Facebook, Joanne once let a boy know that she was mad when

¹¹ Sociologist Nancy Gershon (2010) explores young people's media ideology about the proper role of technology in their relationships.

¹² Rutter 1988

¹³ As boyd explains, “Rather than finding privacy by controlling access to content, many teens are instead controlling access to meaning.” (2014: p76).

he kept her waiting on a response. She wrote, **That little thing on FB that tells you someone has seen your message. Mmhmm...**

Four people liked her post, and Najma, who knew the situation, marked herself as an insider by commenting, **#shotsfired**.

Subs helped the girls communicate with others, particularly boys, without being explicit.¹⁴ Subs were plausibly deniable, limiting the girls' vulnerability.

Aisha often used subs to communicate with boys. She saw romance as a type of game. She didn't have boyfriends and only rarely went on a date, using various justifications: the loss of her Aunt Grace; her morals; a \$300 bet with Joanne's brother Vincent that she wouldn't make it out of CRLS a virgin. But Aisha's disinterest, paired with her practiced reserve—and, of course, her beauty and style—drove boys crazy. They liked her, and she liked that. Sometimes, Aisha toyed with them, the way her downstairs neighbor's orange cat batted around those little black mice. Aisha posted subs that she knew boys would read, like when she tweeted, **#ijustwantyoutoknow kid I'm over you so get it out of your mind**.

Aisha played dumb when called out, like when she posted on Facebook, **I'm scared to open up to you but not because you might hurt me.. I'm just scared to loose you**. When Terrence, its target, commented, **Mmmmm?** Aisha responded, ... **huh?**

Once partnerships were established and announced, girls continued to reply on social media. Teens “stalked” one another and monitored online activity. When they found odd—or ambiguous—interactions, trust could be tested.

¹⁴ dana boyd describes “social steganography”—covered writing—performed by teens online to protect the true meanings of digital broadcasts. They might do this using in-jokes, references or implicit links to share encoded messages (Marwick & boyd 2014).

“Creeping” could unearth harder evidence, too. Maude had no interest in boys through most of high school. She was staid and self-contained, and she knew what she liked: TV and Twitter, preferably in comfy clothes with a plate of hot food on her lap.

Maude didn’t consider herself fancy. She didn’t know how to flirt. But when Micky swung back through NC, and she reconnected with an old childhood flame, she was a little flattered when he put moves on her. He asked her to be his girlfriend. She said no. But he asked again, and again, and eventually, she was wooed. She’d known him for a long time, after all. It was romantic. After a while, Maude agreed to take things further; he seemed like the right guy for her first time.

The two hung out, and enjoyed each other’s company. They weren’t Facebook friends, but Maude followed Mickey on Instagram, where she saw a photo of Mickey looking fine in formalwear. He told her he’d been at his cousin’s wedding.

A few days later, Maude’s phone vibrated in class. It was Rosalie, but she couldn’t answer. Rosalie called again. Then Rosalie texted: “You need to see this!”

Rosalie had added Mickey on Facebook. On Facebook, he was tagged in a wedding photo. Maude had seen it already, Mickey smart in his tux. But then Rosalie clicked through to the profiles of other people tagged, and found a couple more photos. There was Micky in a decorated car. There was Micky with a woman—a bride. Rosalie thought they looked cozy, so she found the woman’s Instagram page. On Instagram, Rosalie saw a photo of Mickey crouching, hands on the woman’s swollen stomach, lips gently pressed to the bump.

Maude confronted Micky. She was betrayed by his deception, but also humiliated by the publicity. “You put all our business out there!” She yelled. He claimed she was

mistaken, but she had screenshots. She dumped him, duped and hurt.

Social media could make it hard to move on after break-ups. Teens liked to keep tabs on their exes, seeing what they were up to and who they were with. But this could hurt. One night at Joanne's house, Najma pouted as she thumbed her screen. She had just broken up with her boyfriend, Malachi, and Joanne knew what she was doing.

"Stop *watching* him!" Joanne said to her friend.

"I can't stop," Najma said, scrolling through Malachi's tweets.

"Well, don't comment," Joanne offered.

"I'm not commenting. I'm just watching," Najma insisted.

"But it's making you sad."

Joanne wanted to limit Najma's involvement with her ex, but couldn't divert the steady stream of information flowing from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. Given how much time the girls spend online, avoiding someone could be near impossible.

Soon after, Najma posted, **She'll never be me**, when she thought Malachi was staring to see other girls. The words captioned a photo montage with three identical selfies showing Najma head to knee. In the pictures, she stood with her legs apart, feet planted. She had her hands on her hips and her back slightly arched. Her loose, silky black hair tumbled over her shoulders while she gazed, open mouthed and steel-eyed, into the camera

Subs were as popular in the aftermath of a relationship than in their early stages. Girls posted confident selfies, or uploaded screenshots of Facetime calls or cute text messages from new partners, showing they were over it, and, more importantly, still desired.

The girls could not stop their friends' relationships ending. They couldn't save each

other from heartbreak or humiliation. Nor could they pry friends from the drip-feed of exes' feeds. Still, they offered help in ways they knew how. Joanne described how to act when a friend's ex got a new girl. "You have to be like, 'She *ugggly*,'" she said, theatrically. "Even though she be like a supermodel coming down the runway! You gotta be like, 'She ain't all that!'"

Partnership and Heartbreak

Of all the girls, Odette was the most dogged in her hunt for intimacy. In relationships, she saw comfort and approval, things she didn't tend to get at home. "I have a way I need to be loved," Odette explained. As a girl she'd sought tenderness from mother figures: an Aunt back in Haiti, mothers of her friends. As a teen, she turned to men.

Vincent was the first. She had always liked her friend Joanne's brother, and when Odette was in eighth grade, and Vincent a high school junior, their relationship changed. Odette didn't mind the age difference, at least not until junior prom, when Vincent invited another girl, Sofia, as his date. Odette didn't know if he liked Sofia or just didn't want to bring a middle-schooler to prom. Either way, she decided to have sex with him that day, "so he had no reason to get laid later," she said. Odette had planned to wait until she was 16, but things didn't always go to plan.

Odette loved Vincent, but she did wish their relationship was easier. They argued a lot, and sometimes Odette didn't know where she stood.

They broke up shortly before Odette started high school. "We were still messing around," she said. At least until Bryan came up to Odette at an after-school program.

"You suck dick," Bryan chided.

Odette looked up at Rosalie's brother. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

“The street talks,” he smirked.

Eventually, they got back together. Then they broke up again.

But Odette could never fully move on. She cared for Vincent, and though their break-up had ended Odette’s friendship with Joanne and cleaved their cliques apart, she’d stayed close to his mom and grandma, who said she thought Odette would bear her first great-grandchild.

Years later, Odette was mad at herself for letting Vincent continue to get to her. “I feel like he’s mocking me,” she said. She used poetry to clear her head, writing about love and loss and power in words that throbbed with darkness and heat.

Sometimes Vincent did nice things, sharing his hookah, or giving Odette a ride to New Hampshire when she missed the bus to a meeting at college. But sometimes she found him seedy, like when she told him, “I have a sore throat,” and he replied, “You know what cures it...” From time to time, Odette would submit to Vincent’s body and the hope of his heart, along with the promise that this time would be different.

But it never was. One summer, Nicole watched Odette, and had an idea. A bribe. If Odette kept away from Vincent until school started, Nicole would buy her a new pair of Uggs. Odette did not make good, but Nicole had tried.

The Odette love had to give went unchanneled. It surrounded her like a charge. She turned to Robenson, a neighborhood boy she’d grown up with.

Odette and Robenson started talking more and hanging out together. She confided things in him, like when she was embarrassed that Vincent had given her chlamydia. Robenson tried to reassure her. “He’d sleep with anything,” he said. Odette laughed recalling his words: “Even if she used to have a dick before, he’d be like, ‘So? She doesn’t

have a dick now!’”

Odette thought Robenson was a “man.” He knew her curfew. He drove her home, and watched from his car until she was safely through the door.

Their relationship turned physical. Odette was happy to have someone to spoil, and the feeling seemed mutual. “It was only \$120, but he paid more to get executive,” Odette gushed. “He’s not cheap. Whenever he has money he’ll spend it on me. It was so fun. We got Henny. I gave him a massage. I gave him a manicure.”

But Robenson, who was close to Vincent, worried how the romance would play with the boys. He asked her to keep their tryst on the “DL.” Odette didn’t want to hide. “I was like, ‘Oh now you’re interested in your friendship?’” Things fizzled, and she was hurt and mad.

Odette was also mad that Vincent was chasing a girl she went to school with, Abigail. Odette rolled her eyes as she explained. “Black guys... they always want white girls or Hispanic girls ‘cause of the hair and the fashion. She’s nasty. There’s nothing to be jealous of,” she said, as if saying out loud made it true.

Odette didn’t know how to act around the new couple. The first time she was alone with them, it was awkward. “She was like, ‘Oh, do you want to see the teddy bear he bought me? It’s bigger than me!’” Odette recalled. “I’m like, ‘That’s cute if you really wanna strive for a guy to get you a teddy bear.’ Then she goes on his lap and starts kissing him.” Odette walked out.

Around that time, Odette started posting self-loving selfies, subbing her ex and his new girl. One Snapchat read, **Lol U I’m fresher then U! I kno u care** over a selfie. In the picture, Odette wore a purple shirt, neckline plunging down beneath the bottom of the shot.

She had her head cocked, and pushed the rim of a green beer bottle into her tongue, which poked out through parted red lips.

Odette knew what she was doing. “She would like my Instagram pictures,” she said, of Abigail. “So I put a picture like ‘Basic bitches be lurkin’ and hatin’.’”

A couple months later, it was Thanksgiving. Every year, Vincent and Joanne’s mom, Carole, threw one of the neighborhood’s biggest and best parties.

Odette couldn’t keep away without offending Carole and Grandma, so she always stopped by, even after she split up with Vincent and fell out with Joanne.

On Thursday afternoon, Joanne chopped celery and tore parsley to garnish the Turkey. Renee, an older cousin, teetered into the kitchen on high black heels. She thrust an iPad at Vincent, who knew what this gesture meant and began snapping photos.

“Aight, I’m done!” Renee said, slipping off her stilettos and into her Uggs for the rest of the party.

Harried but upbeat, Carole snapped orders as Joanne worked quickly to lay large foil platters over the table, which was draped with a rust-colored paper tablecloth. Fried collard greens, rice and beans, mac and cheese, stuffing, candied yams, potato salad, and mashed potatoes crowded around the bronzed bird. Wine drinks in 1.5 liter bottles stood to each side like candelabras.

Before serving dinner, Carole stood in the middle of the kitchen and quieted the room. “Thanksgiving is a time to love,” she said, as friends and family recorded her on their cell phones. Carole said she’d always found the holiday meaningful as it was in November that she first came to America, seventeen years ago.

Then it was time to eat. First, Joanne fed the kids, heaping their portions onto red

paper plates. Then adults crowded around the table, serving themselves before finding a wall or surface to lean against and eat.

Vincent's music rang from the living room, and the children, fed and energized, ran screaming through people's legs.

The front door banged open. In walked Odette, trailed by Maude, Nicole, Stephanie, and Rosalie. Guests chewing second helpings looked up at the girls, who were loud, drunk and rowdy. Maude grabbed at people in her path, pulling them into selfies. Odette stood still, and looked around. Her long, clinging black skirt and low-cut white vest were cinched at the waist by a thick brown belt.

Last year, Odette had come alone. As she'd kissed uncles' cheeks and greeted children, Nicole had called. Scrolling Twitter at home, Nicole had seen some subs sent from inside the party:

@Najma: When people I don't like show up some place I'm having fun << *shrugs*

@Joanne : @Najma 'Nougghhh said

@Najma: @Joanne lol this bitch <<<

Odette had left promptly, wounded.

This year, she brought her whole crew, and as the girls squealed in the entryway, Vincent stole a glance at his ex.

Minutes later, a second flash of cold air hit the house as the front door opened again. The pale woman who walked in wore a tight, white, satin pantsuit, glinting with sequins. Her brown eyes peered out from her thick, product-drenched hair as she trailed a balding white man who squinted through his bifocals and clutched a duffel bag.

"Oh shit," Nicole said, leaning to me. "That's Abigail." From the kitchen, Carole waved at Abigail and her dad, beckoning them to join her. The man stared into guests' faces

as he decided whether to leave his daughter behind. Abigail squirmed and shrunk into her hunched shoulders. She had to slide past Odette, Maude, and Stephanie to get to the kitchen, and the girls did not reset their sneers. Odette scowled as she looked at all those sequins. Then she restored her cool nonchalance, save a giveaway purse of her lips.

Odette marched out to the icy night, shot some Ciroc, and came back steeled.

She wanted to dance. Odette dragged Stephanie onto the dance floor in the living room and moved in time with the music. As it grew louder, she grew bolder, popping her hips. Her friends crowded around, knowing what she was feeling and what she needed from them.

Abigail sat alone on the sofa, adjusting her clothes and hair. Vincent had left to hang with his boys, so she sipped slowly from her Corona and reached for each child that scooted past. She giggled as they slipped from her grasp.

As people packed into the living room, the girls kept dancing. Some guests goaded them with chants of “Eh, eh, eh!” or “Go, go, go!”

Odette was swept up by the noise, and the Ciroc. As her friends went to cool off with a glass of water, she ramped up her movement, running her hands over her thick body, and pushing her hips in big circles. Sexually graphic lyrics—*Ratchet pussy, bust it open! Boujie pussy, bust it open!*—boomed through the dim room as her vigorous dancing made people step away. Odette thrust at the air in the middle of an emptying dance floor.

The boys returned and smirked as Odette dropped to all fours and humped the floor. At first, her hips kept time with the music, but then they pumped faster and faster, outpacing the beat of the song. One of the guys elbowed Vincent and raised his eyebrows, inquiry and accusation. Vincent shrugged and smiled limply. Then he backed out of the room.

When Odette's clique came back from the kitchen, they saw her straddling an older man on the computer chair, grinding her hips into his lap.

As Nicole took a step towards her, Carole pushed through the crowd and stood behind Odette as she twerked up and down on the stranger's crotch. Anticipation and amusement rippled through the room Carole stood still, hands on her hips.

Nicole stepped back. She was powerless now.

Perhaps perceiving the stares or the silence, Odette turned around. She met Carole's glare and climbed off. Odette laughed because there was nothing else to do. Her friends took her home and put her to bed.

As Odette strained against her parents' strictures, boys offered the passion and validation she craved. She hunted for partnership. Sometimes Odette's friends worried about her, even trying to intervene, like when Nicole offered the bribe. But friends could not overcome the power and lure of romance. All they could do was pick up the pieces.

Boyfriends and Burdens

Even stable and committed partnerships could come with expectations and obligations. At home, the girls did a lot of work, their labor both practical and emotional. They worked for their boyfriends, too.

As well caring for her four kid siblings and whichever cousins were passing through her home, Joanne gave time and energy to her boyfriend, Rico.

Aisha explained, "Rico's like, been through a lot. Adoption and foster homes. Joanne really supports him. She's the reason he's not out there shooting people or killing people. She can't break up with him."

Aisha saw how much Joanne did for Rico, and she watched, over time, as her best

friend grew drained.

Joanne processed her feelings in her poems, like this one, which she hoped to perform at a slam one day:

*He wants a girl who can keep quiet
Intellect will not be in her dialect
'Cause if she tries to utter sophistication
she suddenly is suspect*

*His bullshit reeks of late nights
On the back porch
trying to catch glimpses
of Daddy as he walks through the front door
He's never walked through the front door*

*So now he's hollowed out
hollowing you out
so he can find space to hide
in the burrows of your skin*

*He's never lain his head on a woman's chest
'Cause his Mama's head was always bent
Her sorrow taking up all the space where
He should have learned what it means*

To forget your demons

Just breathe in her healing.

You love him, but you're not the hero in his tragedy

Your supporting role

Is code name for his bottom bitch

Stitch your hands together behind

Your back everytime you want to touch him

He's not your responsibility

He won't be the answer to lonely nights that want you to hold on to your virginity

*Broken beings are a danger to your innocence because there is always a
consequence*

When he rolls away from you at night instead of holding your hand

And loneliness becomes lonelier then ever

You wanna fix him and make him better

*But will never make the little boy who's still waiting for daddy to show up and
waiting for mama to sober up*

Realize how much you wanna be his wife to cherish and hold

Till death do you part

But you need to live before you die

And your interactions were simply meant as a quick greeting before goodbye.

Eventually, to Aisha's—and Rico's—surprise, Joanne ended the relationship. It happened after Rico left NC for college, when Joanne felt low on his list of priorities. “It was too much work,” she explained. “Even when he was here, he'd hang with his boys. It was causing me a migraine.”

Joanne was charmed when another boy, Andrew, began trying to “bag” her. But she felt like the NC boys were watching. “It's hard living around here,” she said. “Everybody knew me as his girl. The other day, I'm talking to Andrew and a couple of Rico's friends were just staring at me.” They called her “Mrs. Garcia,” using Rico's last name.

“I'm my own individual human being,” Joanne insisted.

She kept seeing Andrew. One afternoon she scrolled giddily through photos of him, occasionally tipping her screen to me and to Aisha, who was also talking to a guy, Jason. Aisha liked Jason, but wondered aloud whether he wasn't “too damaged.”

Joanne empathized. “It's always the ones that have been hurt,” she said. “You gotta peel back. You gotta take that onion peeler. I feel like I always spend time doing that. I have the patience for that kinda crap. It sucks.”

But Andrew seemed different. He was going places. Andrew attended a well-regarded private university, not the community college where most of the other guys went part-time. He was ambitious, and talented. While Rico sat out with his boys, smoking and drinking, Andrew played the guitar. “And he plays the piano, and he plays the clarinet,” Joanne gushed. He also spoke French and Spanish, “the languages that I consider the languages of love,” she said, pressing her phone into her chest and smiling.

Joanne and Andrew spent a summer getting to know each other. They talked every

day. He called her his girlfriend. He promised that once school started again, he would get a car and drive it up to see her. “He’s making plans for the future,” Joanne beamed. “Usually it’s the girl that’ll do that.”

But when Andrew returned to college, Joanne heard from him less and less. Doubt crept in, and her hopes dimmed. She feared Andrew had “freaked out” after they had been intimate for the first time. “He got scared after,” she said. “He was being bombarded with really strong emotions. I was like, ‘Well, act on your emotions! Don’t get scared.’”

The relationship stalled, and Joanne was burned. But she still took Andrew’s calls when he was “stressed out” about his schedule. “I’m tryina help him keep calm and stuff, while still being mad at him,” she said. “I am helping him get his goals in order and just take it one day at a time.”

Among the girls, friendships were, on the whole, reciprocal. But romantic relationships could be unbalanced by power asymmetries and gender dynamics, giving the girls extra care work.¹⁵ When this labor grew draining, they turned to their friends and vented. The girls helped each other as they helped those around them.

Boyfriends and Risk

None of the girls sold drugs or owned firearms. But sometimes they dated boys who did. For instance, Nicole’s boyfriend, Junior, was a neighborhood “OG” and a dealer. Junior had money and status, and Nicole’s grace matched his clout. She seemed polished

¹⁵ As bell hooks wrote, patriarchal thinking “sets up a gendered arrangement in which men are more likely to get their emotional needs met while women will be deprived” (hooks 2000: p160 - 161). Girls can also be subjected to danger in relationships if they have abusive partners, though I did not know any of the girls to be involved in romantic relationships that they, or their friends, characterized as physically abusive. But for many young women, bad boyfriends can “wreak havoc with whole lives” (Armstrong et al. 2010). They can be controlling or exploitative, and young women often lack the confidence to challenge them (Sales 2016)

even in sweatpants, and had a touch of the regal. When the girls sat out with other teens through long summer nights in JP, Nicole flit around, moth like, talking to everyone and leaving them wanting more.

Years earlier, Junior had had to wait for Nicole. Their six-year age gap stopped him chasing her, though he would grin and promise, “You’ll be my wifey one day.” When Nicole was old enough, they became a couple.

Nicole’s family were livid. They thought Junior had been involved with the killing of Nicole’s half-brother, Sparks, and at the very least, they thought he knew things. Some of them stopped talking to her. A few of her friends disapproved too, worried about his involvement with “that life.” But the girls didn’t respond as her family did, threatening to cut her off or kick her out. The girls knew they could not compete with love. So they stood by, ready to offer help if it was sought.

The girls had different ideas about what was acceptable when it came to boys. One night in the park, Odette and Stephanie sat at a picnic table lit by the dim glow of distant streetlights. Odette unpicked a cigar from a tin Junior had given her, to use as a rollie for her little bag of weed.

Stephanie watched Odette crumble chunks between thumb and forefinger. “I’m not that fond of Junior,” Stephanie said.

Odette didn’t reply. Stephanie continued: “So many times Nicole’s gotten really sad over how he’d keep her waiting. And all the other stuff.” “But at the same time, he makes a good point,” Odette said. “She knows what she got herself into.”

Odette had a new boyfriend, Darius. Darius dealt, too.

“Yeah,” Stephanie said. “But you also have to make adjustments. Meet her in the

middle.”

“Junior definitely tries to,” Odette said. “He has so much—like, you don’t understand how much money he be getting and shit, and plays.”

“Is he just selling a lot of weed?” Stephanie asked, hopeful.

“No. He sells everything.”

“Everything?” Stephanie asked.

“Yeah.”

Stephanie paused. “No offense to Nicole, like if she loves him, whatever. But I just wouldn’t feel comfortable being with a guy who sells a bunch of shit.”

Odette paused and sealed her joint. “I know. Like that’s how I feel about Darius.”

“‘Cause a lot of those guys get caught up, you know?” Stephanie nudged.

“The thing about Darius that I like is that he doesn’t just do *that*. He actually has a job, too. He’s a drug dealer, but he also has an office job at MIT. I like that.”

“Yeah that’s good,” Stephanie said. “There’s a lot of guys like, ‘I’m just gonna sell.’ And then they don’t have a day job.”

Odette took a flame to her rollie. There were holes in it.

“Does Junior pack though?” Stephanie asked.

“Mmmhmm,” Odette said affirmatively, sucking vainly on her joint.

“Pssssh,” Stephanie said.

“That’s the thing I get scared of with Darius,” Odette said. “If it’s in the car, if we get stopped by the police. It’s four o’ clock in the morning and you’re smoking weed, it’s not even the weed, but I don’t wanna be in the car with you if you’re packing.”

Stephanie did not push Odette or encourage her to stop seeing Darius. She did not

approve, but she knew boys had a power that she lacked. And she knew that power might win out in an ultimatum. Instead, Stephanie stuck by her best friend. She offered her thoughts, and let Odette talk through her own.

Sex: Intimacy and Risk

Sexuality is a step on the path to adulthood, one that marks maturity and autonomy. A source of self-actualization and personal identity, sex is a normal component of healthy development.¹⁶ Sexual relationships can offer adolescents intimacy, connection, and importantly, pleasure. As bell hooks explained, “the ability to experience and know pleasure is an essential ingredient of wellness.”¹⁷

But sexuality is also a touchstone for social anxieties, and teen sex, in particular, has sparked various moral panics.¹⁸ The sexuality of young people is often seen as “out-of-control, dangerous, and immoral,”¹⁹ or a “problem to solve, delay, or mute.”²⁰ The sexual

¹⁶ Rubin 1993; Epstein 1994; Foucault 1978; Weeks 2007; Wilkins 2008. As sociologist Jessica Fields explains, “Sexual subjectivity” is “fundamental to young people’s sense of agency in all aspects of their lives (Fields 2008: p110).

¹⁷ hooks 2014 [1993]: p116. Other Black feminists link pleasure and sexual autonomy not merely to wellbeing but also to political resistance. Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, writes, “When self-defined by Black women ourselves, Black women’s sexualities can become an important place of resistance. Just as harnessing the power of the erotic is important for domination, reclaiming and self-defining that same eroticism may constitute one path toward Black women’s empowerment” (Hill Collins 2000: p139). Relatedly, Audre Lorde argues that women’s understanding of erotic pleasure and fulfillment is revolutionary under patriarchy, and can foster women’s agency throughout their lives (Lorde 1984).

¹⁸ Weeks 1996; Cohen 2002; Tolman 1994; Pascoe 2011; Russell 2005

¹⁹ Schalet 2004: p1

²⁰ Fields 2009: p169. When adults deny young people’s sexual agency and subjectivity, they not only disempower adolescents, but obscure how broader social conditions and inequalities shape their experiences with sexuality (Froyum 2010).

lives of young people are not equally stigmatized, however. Social and political forces shape views about appropriate and legitimate sexualities, and, as a result, inequalities relating to race, class, and gender all shape how policy-makers, researchers, and popular culture alike treat young people and their sex lives.²¹ Poor young women of color, like the NC girls, have long had their sexuality seen as “risky,” not just because girls’ sexuality is often pathologized or seen as a “crisis,”²² but also because of racist ideas that Black girls’ sexuality is especially excessive and problematic.²³

Sex can, of course, expose young people to dangers, and socially vulnerable young women are at higher risk for coercive sex and for “risky sex,” defined as “any sexual activity that increases the risk of contracting HIV or other STI or becoming pregnant.”²⁴ Yet by focusing disproportionately on things like unintended teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, and overlooking the ways young people experience and make sense of sexual desire and intimacy, researchers often problematize and even medicalize young women’s sex lives.

Adults and institutions often fail to see teen sex as a normal part of adolescence, even though most high school seniors have had intercourse.²⁵ This was true among the NC

²¹ Froyum 2010. See also Barcelos & Gubrium 2014, Fields 2008, Garcia 2009.

²² E.g., Garcia 2012

²³ McBride Murray 1996. Black feminists, like Patricia Hill Collins (2000), have critiqued the use of “controlling images”—like the notion of the sexually uncontrollable ‘Jezebel’ or ‘Welfare Recipient’—to stigmatize Black female sexuality. Black adolescent sexuality is problematized disproportionately compared with white teens, just as Black children’s’ behavior is often seen as more adult than white children’s’ behavior (Ferguson 2001).

²⁴ Taylor-Seehafer & Rew 2000: p15; Miller 2008

²⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2016; Schalet 2000

girls, who had little access to information about sex. At CRLS, girls had some formal sex education, though the girls found it lacking. “Sex ed was lame,” Joanne said.

Senior Anika concurred. “I only got one class,” she said. “And all I remember is the teacher being like, ‘Here is Mr. Woody!’ and bringing out this wooden dick and a condom!”²⁶

Still, this was more than girls learned at home. Most flinched to imagine discussing sex with their parents. With just a hint of irony, Joanne said she would continue to insist to Carole that she was a virgin, “Even if I birth a baby.”

As a result, the girls were under-informed when they made decisions about sex. Odette got the contraceptive Nuva Ring in her sophomore year before switching to the pill. After that, she explained, “I stopped birth control all together because I just got freaked out with everything on the news about things being unhealthy in medicine.” Nobody advised Odette differently, including her friends.

Although the girls felt more comfortable talking to one another about sex than they did their parents, they struggled to guide and advise one another because their experiences were so different. Girls had no shared knowledge or common language. Aisha remembered when her friend, Tiana, lost her virginity. Aisha sensed that Tiana wanted to talk, but she found their conversation awkward. “Tiana was like, ‘Yeah, it was good, it was good,’” Aisha said. “Then, she was like, ‘I feel so weird, I don’t know what to do.’ There was never a process to internalize what just happened. It was always like, ‘Yeah, I’m fine.’” Aisha, who had never had sex, did not really know how to help Tiana make sense of her

²⁶ Heteronormativity, sexism, and racism operate together to structure the content and delivery of school-based sex education (Garcia 2009). For more on sexual education in high schools, see Fields 2009, Irvine 2002, Luker 2006.

experience.

Moreover, sex and intimacy were experienced more privately than other things the girls dealt with jointly, like boredom or racism. They were brokered between partners, away from social settings. Friends were often unable to help each other deal with the power relations and stigma that could impact their sexual experiences, or with discrepancies between their own and others' desires.²⁷

Stigma

The school had a 'Teen Health Center,' where students could get STI tests or grab a "goody bag" of free condoms. But social dynamics left the institutional resource under-used. "*I would never go in there,*" teens said, afraid to be seen coming or going.

Stories and rumors about sex spread fast, and the girls did not want their names caught up. One afternoon, Aisha and I went to her friend Jenna's apartment. Jenna led us to her bedroom, through the living room, where an overweight, middle-aged white man lay snoring on the couch, face up and naked save his boxers. A fan whirled overhead.

Jenna closed the door and pulled out her Blackberry. Jenna, Aisha, and their friend Kiara huddled around the phone, reading texts from a boy. Then Jenna's cousin Dani threw open the bedroom door.

"'Aight, I wanna tell you guys about how Liz got chlamydia,'" Dani announced as she marched in.

Jenna and Kiara squealed and clapped.

²⁷ Sexuality is intrinsically gendered, and adolescent girls often inhabit a model of sexuality oriented to men and male pleasure. In this model, girls view and experience sex as something owed or served to men (e.g., Wade & Heldman 2012; also in Khan's (2010) ethnographic study of high schoolers, teen girls see their sexuality as a 'gift.' Other research finds that young women limit their own sexual feelings to avoid the dangers associated with sexual desire (e.g., Tolman 1994).

“So. Liz smashed Xavier,” Dani regaled. “Xavier smashed Dee. Dee smashed AJ. AJ Smashed Makayla. Makayla...”

“Makayla smashed everybody,” Kiara cut in. The girls laughed. “How did you find out about this?” she asked.

“Sydney went with Liz to get tested,” Dani said.

“So Sydney’s big ass was like, ‘Guess what, Liz has chlamydia?’ Loud bitch!” Kiara said.

Although Kiara disapproved of Sydney sharing what she knew about Liz, this kind of information spread fast. Teens talked about sex as they lounged in each other’s homes, rode the train together, or waited for their game at basketball practice.

“Tina sucked my brothers dick. In my house! I was like, ‘Do you want a toothbrush?’”

“Kasie wanted to sleep with him, so she starts grinding up on him. But she had her period, so he smashed Aliya.”

“Did y’all know that Orlena got blinded by cum?”

For girls, though not for boys, sex could be stigmatizing.²⁸ But sex appeal could bring social status. Selfies with tight clothes or suggestive smiles got many likes.²⁹ So the

²⁸ Gendered double standards around sex and stigmatization are well documented (e.g., Bogle 2008; Miller 2008; Krager & Staff 2009). The fear of stigmatization can lead girls to repress their sexual desires (Orenstein 1994; Tolman 1994).

²⁹ There were semiotics of sexiness, drawn mostly from broader cultural images that labeled certain poses, stances, and expressions ‘sexy.’ The rationalization, standardization and commodification of sex over the past few decades, and the “pornification” of popular culture (Nikunen et al. 2008) have transformed sexiness into a largely “formulaic visual vocabulary” (Esch & Mayer 2008: p7), on which the girls could draw, and avoid, depending on their intended audience and meaning.

Bettie (2003) shows how Chola girls in a California high school used markers of sexuality—dressing in tight, suggestive clothes and wearing heavy make-up—to mark their

girls walked a line: on one side frigidity, immaturity, youth; on the other, sluttiness and shame. They had to hover in the middle: sexy but not too sexual, cute, coy, and just a little bit available.³⁰

Dancing revealed some of these conflicts. At parties, in loud, smoke-fogged rooms, boys goaded girls to dance. They liked to watch. At one of Stevenson's parties, he cut the music and hollered at the crowd. "Yo, listen up! I'm only a say this once, but this is a party, so y'all gotta dance!" he yelled.

Another guy put his hands on Stevenson's shoulders and echoed: "What he's tryna say is: *shake yo ass!*"

"*I can't dance!*" the girls protested. But they could. They danced alone in their rooms, practicing 'in' dances from Youtube or Vine. They danced together, too, taking photos and videos to make their solitary fun social. Girls danced on and with each other, giggling to make the risqué innocent.

After Stevenson's announcement, the girls stood around the rooms' edges, prodding one another to dance, either with words or a light shove towards the dance floor.

Vincent came up behind Nicole.

"I can't dance," she said, as he pulled her hips back into his crotch and entwined his fingers with hers. "Show me how," she said, in concession. Then she ground her hips into him and bent forwards. His hands moved to her hips and her back.

Later, when the music picked up and teens got *wavey*, the dancing was bolder.

adulthood, as well as to assert their independence from school control, and challenge school sanctioned notions of demure femininity.

³⁰ The young women interviewed by Garcia (2012) expressed a similar tension.

Dagging simulated intercourse with a practiced sterility. A boy approached a girl and, with no eye contact, spun her to face away. He bent her over and thrust against her rear, as she braced her hands against her knees or a wall and gyrated her hips. Both looked out into the distance, until one or both dancers walked away. Many of the girls never danced this way, but those who did often had the same disclaimer: “I can’t dance.”

Aisha didn’t dance with boys, and nor did she really date them. But she liked their interest. “Marc likes me,” she said of a JP friend. “When he stops liking me ‘cause I’m unresponsive, then I lure him back... I like being chased.”

Aisha publicized her abstinence with tweets like, **Virginity .. Is a thing you don’t toy with .. IDC IDC .. and #HonestHour I have never had sex (a proud virgin)**.

But sometimes, particularly when she knew boys were interested, she could be suggestive, with tweets like, **I think I’m sexually frustrated.. Make out scenes in shows and shit turn me on .. #thedilemma**

Aisha grasped the expectations around female sexuality, and walked the line with skill. Not everyone was so capable. The peer group could not remove stigma at school or in the neighborhood. Sex was too fraught, too loaded, too new. Girls could discuss sexist double-standards in the comfort of each other’s company, but they could not change the rules.

Pressure and Abuse

Young women from all backgrounds grow up with the threat of sexual violence. Terms like ‘rape culture’ capture how, for women everywhere, sexual objectification and harassment are often part of daily life.

Studies that look specifically at poor neighborhoods find that many young women grow up facing the “the demoralizing effects of omnipresent and constant harassment,” as

well as “pervasive intimate partner violence and high risk of sexual assault.”³¹ As a result, moving girls out of poor neighborhoods leads to a sharp reduction in their rates of distress, depression, and what sociologists have called “the female fear.”³²

Many of the girls experienced unwanted sexual attention. They shared stories of being badgered by boys and men, like when Dani told Aisha and Jenna about a college classmate who dropped by her dorm room night after night. He came to use her kettle to make ramen noodles, she explained. “One day he climbs in my bed,” Dani told the girls. “I ask what he’s doing. He says he’s cold. I’m like, ‘Okay, but when your three minute noodles are done, you are out.’ Suddenly his hand is in my pants,” Dani continued, “and I’m grabbing his hand like *no*. And he’s all like, ‘Let me smash.’ And I’m like, ‘No.’ And he’s like, ‘Let me smash.’ And I was like, ‘No, I’m a virgin, and damn, your noodles are done.’” Dani used her virginity to justify her “no.” A boyfriend was another ready excuse; it marshaled male power to hold a man accountable.

Girls also faced coercion, like when Malik, one of the older JP boys, found Odette drinking and smoking after her relationship with Robenson broke down. Malik asked Odette to join him in his car. “I was really freaking high,” Odette recalled. “We had like three, four blunts, and I’m getting drunk off Remy straight.” Malik was helping Odette forget. But he had other plans, too. “He’s like, ‘Let’s do something.’ And I’m like, ‘What do I look like? I’m not gonna fuck you in your car.’” Malik was ready. “I can get a hotel,”

³¹ Popkin, Leventhal & Weismann 2010: p716. Jody Miller (2008) also discusses the prolific and casual sexual harassment in poor neighborhoods, including physical harassment, like men grabbing young women’s bodies.

³² Kling, Liebman & Katz 2007; Popkin et al. 2010: p717; Miller 2008

he said, and turned the ignition. “Don’t bullshit me,” he said as he revved toward the highway, Odette recalled. “I was like, ‘Oh shit, I can’t back out.’” So she didn’t. “I was like, ‘Fuck it, whatever.’ It wasn’t that great for me.”

It was not just in intimate encounters that some of the girls faced sexual harassment. They often felt uncomfortable in public space, too. Walking through a quiet part of the projects on the way home one evening, Aisha glanced sideways at a group of men sitting on a low wall. She pulled my arm to speed us up. “I hate walking through here. This is where the creeps hang out. All the men, just looking,” she whispered. Aisha often mentioned “scary” people in her neighborhood. Sometimes she included women—drunks and users who stumbled around her block. But mostly she meant the men whose glares put her on edge.

One Sunday afternoon, Odette walked through the fiery June sun with her cousin Marie. The girls wore short shorts and strappy shirts in the heat. They passed Frantz, Joanne and Vincent’s stepfather, leaning against the back stairs to his apartment. His gaze roved over their skin, and he called out, “Oh yeah. Where’s your boyfriends?” In private, Odette and her friends called Frantz, “a pedo perv.” But the girls said nothing as he called out, they just stiffened and walked faster.

Odette was especially tense under his stare.

Back when she was dating Vincent, Frantz said and did things that made her uncomfortable. At first, she tried to brush it off. “There’s always those Haitian older creepy guys who would just stare at younger girls or whatever,” she reasoned.

But Frantz got lewder. At home, or during rides to school, “He’d just tell me all this stupid stuff about him and his sex life,” she recalled.

Then he started asking Odette about his step-daughter, seeking information about Joanne and Rico. *Are they still dating?* He would prod. *Are they having sex?* “I don’t know,” Odette would claim, and Frantz would push: “No. I know you’re close.” He asked questions about Odette’s relationship with Vincent, too. “When was the last time?” she remembered him saying. “Are you having sex with anybody else?”

Frantz asked Odette why she was with Vincent. In other countries, he told her, young girls sleep with older men. Sometimes mothers and daughters share husbands, he smirked.

Eventually Frantz went further. “He would try to kiss me. He tried to touch me in my private parts. In his room.” Odette didn’t know what to do. She still had to greet him when she went to the house—“I didn’t want to be disrespectful to him,” she said—so she started taking one of the kids with her. “I had to bring Evens or Sandley to go and say Hi, and then try and get outta there as fast as I can.”

Odette recalled thinking through her options. “I wouldn’t mind telling [their] Grandma, but what is she gonna do? And with [their] mom, I don’t wanna cause drama.”

She decided to tell Vincent. He cracked up and said, “You probably liked it.”

Somehow, Carole found out what was happening and invited Odette to the house. She wanted to apologize, she claimed.

“The mom was like, ‘I’m just sad you didn’t come to me about this,’” Odette remembered. She found herself apologizing to Carole.

Carole then asked Odette what exactly Frantz had done. As she started explaining, Frantz appeared and surprised her.

“Suddenly he’s there, denying everything!” Odette recalled. She made to leave, but

not before Carole offered her solution: in the future, Odette should stay downstairs when she visited, instead of going upstairs, where Frantz hung out in his bedroom.

Odette turned to her friends. She talked with Joanne, and her cousin Rachelle, who, as Odette explained, had “had an experience like that.” Her friends couldn’t keep her from harm. But they could listen when she needed to be heard.³³

Walking The Line

As the girls became young women, their bodies morphed. So, too, did the way men looked at them; the way they saw themselves; and the things they desired. For many young women, self-esteem plummets during adolescence. The girls often tried to hide their newfound insecurities as they grew critical and self-aware. But some experienced a fundamental destabilization, and a near-constant discomfort. Romantic relationships promised partnership and validation, but could also lead to betrayal and disappointment when they didn’t work out as the girls hoped. Boyfriends could burden the girls with care work, or, on occasion, expose them to second-hand risk. As the girls explored their

³³ Constraining norms of deference meant girls could not openly and directly challenge men. The only time I saw them talk back was to a man who was not a neighborhood resident. At a summer cookout one Saturday evening, we sat in Odette and Maude’s yard, enjoying the late sun. The crowd thinned and the hot charcoal of the barbecues ashed. Jean, the father of the DJ was 45 or 50 years old. He had long dreads and few teeth. As he walked drunkenly from girl to girl, we laughed, at first. We watched him grab a woman near his own age, hold her hips, and press himself against her, trying to make her dance with him. But when Jean sat down by Nicole and brought his face inches from hers, the girls straightened their backs.

“I’m very glad to know you,” he muttered, eyes glazed and bleary. She nodded a perfunctory acknowledgement then resumed her conversation with her friends.

Nisha, the girls’ friend, protested to Maude and her sister Lourdes: “You need to tell your mom to make him go home!” They didn’t feel able to directly engage him. But when he pressed his thigh against Nicole’s, Lourdes sprang to action. Lourdes, 25, was Odette and Maude’s older sister. She stood up to protect the girls in her yard.

“Go home!” Lourdes said, hand on hip. “Go home to your wife. Go. Home!” She kept a hint of a smile on her face the whole time.

sexuality, their desire and autonomy could be compromised by stigma or by coercion from boys and men.

The girls could not always protect each other. They could not loosen the tight grip of beauty norms, or change double-standards about female sexuality. The girls couldn't stop their friends getting hurt or humiliated. Many teens report that their strongest emotion of all is being in love.³⁴ The same was true for some of the girls, which made romance a hard spell to break. Girlfriends could not offer the emotional intensity or physical pleasure that boyfriends could, and nor could they mark maturity and adulthood in the same way. But friends did some small work. They affirmed one another, keeping compliments flowing online and in person to try and boost confidence. When it came to dating, friends did not serve ultimatums as family members sometimes did. Instead, the girls were constant, loving witnesses to one another's lives. When Joanne first started talking to Andrew, the musician who spoke multiple languages, she gave me a couple of details before turning to her best friend and saying, "Aisha, *you* should supply the information. You know better than anyone!" What the girls offered was a sort of safety net as their friends went through their first relationships. They listened, they heard, and they picked up the pieces. The young women walked fine lines between pleasure and shame, danger and desire. They tried to get it right.

Odette never stopped trying. She cast about for someone who might finally cherish her like she craved. Darius, the drug dealer, charmed Odette and kept her high. He wooed her, speaking of the future. "He's always talking about plans," she gushed. She thought he

³⁴ Miller & Benson 1999; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield 2008

was old school: “He’s like, ‘Your skin is so soft,’ kissing my hand and all that.”

One day, his responses to her text messages slowed down. She started to worry. But when she invited him to a cookout, he replied, “‘I’m gonna come through, show me and you together, smiley face,’” she relayed. But Darius didn’t show, that day, or ever again. She didn’t know where he lived, and she couldn’t get in touch.

After Darius vanished, there was Johnson, a personal trainer. Pretending to be a sports fan to impress him was easy. All she had to do was find out the names of Boston’s teams. Odette blasted flirty Snapchats captioned *Go Patriots!* “I had to look it up,” she giggled. But they fizzled, too.

Hungry for love, Odette fed on whatever scraps she could forage: older men, married men, broken men. There was Richard, 14 years older than her at 32. Although he was engaged to the mother of his five-year-old, Odette questioned his commitment. “He’s been engaged for six years,” she frowned. “I been doing my research on Google like, ‘How long is too long to be engaged?’”

Then came Samuel. He was driven, caring, and, like Odette, originally Haitian. Samuel liked to call her up and ask about her day. “He’s just turned twenty-six, and he’s doing biology,” Odette said, excited. “And he speaks four languages ‘cause he’s been traveling, and he wants to do linguistics, so he’s gonna start going to school soon.” She pictured their future together.

Suddenly, Samuel said he had to leave Cambridge. His visa had expired, he explained, and his uncle had found him a woman in Texas to marry for papers. Odette didn’t want him to leave. There had to be a better way.

She Googled “marriage license in Massachusetts” on her cell phone.

“He tells me I’m someone he could spend his life with,” Odette said. “Maybe I’m not like, in love, but my whole heart is in it,” she reasoned. “I believe in the whole situation. There’s so much coincidences and signs which are so good. He has the same birthday as Nicole.”

As she decided whether to go through with the wedding, Odette felt rushed by Samuel’s uncle. But she felt like Samuel minded her feelings. “He was like, ‘You’re such an amazing person, but I understand if you don’t want to do it.’ I was crying the whole day.” Odette couldn’t talk to her parents. She felt her friends would try to dissuade her, so she kept her plans secret. One afternoon, she rode her bike out to Spy Pond in neighboring Arlington, where the water and the silence gave her calm. Both tires were flat, and her bike heaved over the two-mile path. Odette was breathless, but she didn’t complain.

She prayed for guidance.

“After a certain amount of time with someone, how is it supposed to feel?” she asked me one afternoon, voice trembling. The date she had set with a justice of the peace was coming up fast.

Odette didn’t have role models for romance or family life. “With my parents, it’s that structure where the wife is in the house. The dad doesn’t really bond. It’s not an ‘all together’ type of thing. It’s not interactive,” she explained.

She had doubts. She worried that marriage might interfere with her plans: “I still wanna travel, do the peace corps, maybe outreach work in Haiti, teach kids English and stuff like that.”

But Odette kept going down the path she had lain. “I didn’t want to,” she said, after the justice conducted the ceremony on a clear, sunny day. “I had second thoughts... But

it's not really about me in this situation. I'm doing it for him, because he has a lot going for him."

It was not the wedding she had dreamed of, but her hope would live another day.

Part 2: The Peer Group Under Threat

6—Technologies of Trauma

“Touched for the very first time!” Aisha sang with her classmate, Angelina. The girls stood at the front of the room and harmonized over the YouTube video playing from the teacher’s computer. The class watched and clapped.

At school, it was the Friday before Spring Break, and Joanne’s check-in had finally arrived. A good sport and a good student, Joanne always took seriously the games and activities other students chose for check-in. But she was a little more ambitious. Joanne planned an in-class talent show, for her peers to learn about and praise each other’s skills.

Aisha was in charge of the music, curating a soundtrack for the performances. Angelina joined her at the computer.

Angelina was one of the few girls at school who matched Aisha’s verve. She lined her eyes in no-nonsense black, and snugly dressed her curves. Like Aisha, Angelina was warm and tactile, bounding across the room to hug her friends as they arrived for class. Also like Aisha, Angelina was comfortable being loud. She was unapologetic, often stepping up to restore order when chaos came to the classroom, or hurrying to the door to tell teens talking in the hallway, “Be quiet!” But she was soft, too. Angelina was affectionate with the boys like an older sister, all gentle kindness.

Angelina and Aisha looked at each other as they belted Madonna. They quieted down as senior Leslie walked to the ‘stage.’ Leslie’s talent was make-up: she would apply a “cat eye” to her own face. As she daubed her lids, she explained that she had learned her skills from online videos. The class listened. They asked which brands and products she liked, and suggested she make a YouTube channel. Leslie finished her look with a flare of liquid eyeliner, and curtsied.

Behind her at the computer, the two girls jostled for the mouse. Aqua’s *Barbie Girl*

rang out and they jumped up to dance. As Aisha stamped her clunky lace-up boots, her open denim vest flapped over her white tank. Angelina's tight, faded jeans and pink shirt bared just enough tummy for her diamanté belly bar to glint as she moved.

"You can brush my hair, undress me everywhere!" they sang, and Angelina ran her hands through her hair in time with the lyrics. She whipped her hair—long, thick and black—as her classmates whooped and laughed.

Ms. Flores walked up to the girls with a warm smile. "Thank you, ladies, for that... show!" she said. "Who's up next? Is it you Josiah?"

Josiah, a junior, nodded, and his chair scraped as he stood and walked to the front of the room. Angelina and Aisha knew he didn't need a soundtrack, so they hugged him before taking seats among their friends.

Josiah adjusted himself and looked to Ms. Flores. "Am I allowed to curse?"
"This is our space," she said softly, nodding.

As a classmate, EJ, strummed out some chords on his guitar, Josiah cleared his throat. "So, this is a rap that I wrote and recorded myself when I was going through some stuff," he explained. Josiah looked down, caught the beat, and began.

*"Real friends turn to strangers, real quick,
Suddenly your heart go numb and u can't feel shit,
But I promise I was old enough to feel
When my pops got locked and my graduations he missed,
Or when my cousin's Pop got shot; they emptied four clips,
Some reckless kids without no ambition to live, shit,
This life's a movie with no script,
We know the black guy's gonna die but we don't never know when,*

*Around here they count their sins more than their blessings,
Rather play with a gun than attend their English lesson.
Just some wild young adolescents, violent minds,
But in their hearts they're still searching for acceptance...*

The class sat rapt, some teens leaning forward in their seats, others rocking with the chords. Josiah closed out his rap with a loud, “Peace!” and his peers jumped up to applaud.

“Yeah!” Aisha yelled. She ran to Josiah and embraced him in front of the room.

EJ, the guitarist stayed seated, and Angelina, who was next up, took Josiah’s seat. They performed “Knock You Down,” by Keri Hilson, EJ’s hands gliding over his strings while Angelina’s voice poured thick into the room. Her body swayed softly with the lyrics.

After the song, she bobbed a curtsey as classmates clapped and hollered.

Then Ms. Flores introduced the final act for the morning’s talent show: Joanne would read a poem. In front of the room, Joanne pulled out a worn paper notebook and flipped to the right page.

“This is called, ‘The Story of an Abused Child,’” Joanne said.

The room hushed. To the silence, Joanne read a first-person story of fear, hiding, violence. Her voice was even and clear as everyone watched.

She gently closed her book and met her classmates’ eyes.

“Oh, it’s not about me,” she giggled, to a boom of relieved laughter and applause. Angelina laughed too and threw her head back, her long black hair inching down the seat behind her.

Three months later, Angelina was twisting some braids for her friend, Vato, as he sat out on his front porch with some buddies. Across the street, Little Leaguers fielded balls

outside the elementary school. It was 8:00 p.m. on a warm June Sunday, and Angelina savored the lingering daylight. She was ready for the summer; graduation was just a few days away.

The teens on the porch talked and laughed as Angelina worked on Vato's hair, paying no special mind to the black sedan with tinted windows that crawled down the street and disappeared around a corner.

Angelina looked up and caught sight of her friend Brianna turning onto Willow Street. Brianna, known as Bree, was walking with her younger sister. The girls lived a few houses down from Vato and were on their way home.

When Bree saw Angelina, she walked over to the porch with her sister to chat.

Bree was a grade below Angelina at CRLS. She had big, wide-set brown eyes, dimpled cheeks, and full lips into which she had pierced a little gold hoop. Bree cared about her style, and her friends admired her polish as much as they did her warm personality. She liked to finish her outfits with jewelry: earrings, bracelets and necklaces that shimmered as she walked. She only took them off for track and softball practice, which she did after school, along with an anti-bullying youth leadership program.¹

The two girls had a conversation—Angelina up on the porch, Bree down on the street. As they talked, the black sedan crept back onto Willow Street. It approached the house with the green door, where Vato and his friends were passing their evening. The car braked. A window rolled down, and then came the noise: hollow, unmistakable pops.² People screamed and ducked and ran. The engine roared as the car blazed off, and

¹ Ballou 2012

² Levy 2012

neighbors rushed out to the panic on their street.

The bullets were meant for Vato, people assumed. Or maybe Shark. Most missed, lodging in walls or doorframes. But some hit flesh. Angelina was struck in the abdomen, and Bree in the chest.

Bree's sister dodged the metal and ran. She ran home and screamed for her mom, who burst into the street crying, "My baby! My baby!"³

In emergency surgery, doctors cut out the lead that had shredded Angelina's intestines and fractured her pelvis. She spent a week in intensive care and another recuperating on a ward, before being sent home with crutches and a colostomy bag.

Bree died on the street, neighbors holding her hand. She was sixteen and a half years old.

Community leaders, teachers, politicians and police could not find words. *Senseless... random... unthinkable...* they mourned. "My heart is just breaking," school superintendent Jeffrey Young said.⁴

Bree's mother said her daughter was "a people person. She loved life."⁵ And those people made the sidewalk their memorial as they left tributes outside Vato's house. Stuffed animals piled up, bright pink and blue against gray-black concrete. Friends lay plants and flowers. They tied helium balloons to the chain-link fence. They lit candles, some still with orange price stickers, others half-way burned, grabbed from shelves at home. Most of the

³ Ballou & Ellement 2012. I did not witness the Willow Street shooting. I reconstructed the scene depicted here by talking with friends and classmates of those present, including those who lived nearby, and by consulting reportage in local newspapers.

⁴ Ballou & Ellement 2012

⁵ Levy 2012

candles—dozens, first, then over a hundred—were devotionals. Their flames backlit the images on their glass of the Virgin, or her son.

Friends printed out photos of their girl, smiling, looking into the camera. They glued the photos to poster board and wrote captions in sharpie: *We love you!* and *Bree Daddy Runs on Dunkin' Boo Boo* and *The good really do die young :(*

Aisha wrote, *I Love You Honey You'll always be in our spirits looking over every one. I have so much respect for you! The realest person. R.I.P- Aisha. My condolences go out to the fam - Aisha.*

Aisha also checked up on Najma, whose ex-boyfriend Malachi was Bree's older brother. Through their relationship, Najma and Bree had grown tight, playfully laughing at Malachi, and sharing girl talk. "I'm here for you," Aisha let Najma know.

People waited for arrests. They had their theories. Neighbor Anisa, who managed the pin-making operation to distribute hundreds of badges bearing Bree's face, addressed dozens of grieverers shortly after the shooting. "Justice will be served," she said, to a crowd gathered on the street. "Because we all know, no need for words, we all know what's really good. We know what happened to her. We know why. We know who. We know how."⁶

But justice was not served. As the police rebuked a "pool of silence" in the neighborhood, Bree's family and friends waited.⁷ They waited while the candles melted wax thick over the sidewalk. They waited while the balloons wilted and the flowers browned. They kept waiting.

⁶ ilovedahatersz 2012

⁷ FOX25 News 2014

In poor neighborhoods, many young people have extremely high rates of exposure to trauma.⁸ A majority of low-income urban youths have either witnessed violence, or been its victim.⁹ Without adequate care, trauma can lead to things like anxiety, aggression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression, and poor teens typically have less access than their more affluent peers to the types of resources that can help with trauma management.¹⁰ This leaves low-income young people disproportionately exposed not only to neighborhood violence, but also to its long-term developmental risks. Girls are especially vulnerable: they are four times more likely than boys to develop PTSD and depression after trauma.¹¹

When tragedy came to NC, the young women had to stop each other spiraling, and prevent a catastrophe from starting a long-term downward slide. But trauma does not just impact individuals; violence and deaths can also disturb friendships and relationships.¹² This meant that girls had to keep their social fabric from fraying as tragedy pulled at its edges. They also had to restore the sense of safety they lost when traumas hit close to home.

⁸ Collins et al. 2010

⁹ Schwab-Stone et al. 1995; Schwab-Stone et al. 1999

¹⁰ Collins et al. 2010; Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor 1995; DuRant et al., 1995; Schwab-Stone et al., 1995; Singer et al., 1995

¹¹ Collins et al. 2010. In a review of the literature on sex differences in adolescent depression, Peterson et al. (1991: p252) conclude, “girls have shown the most negative reaction to life events.”

¹² Routines, relationships, and individual development are all threatened by a lack of security, which can profoundly interrupt daily life (Hirsch et al. 2000; Stevenson 1998). In the Durkheimian tradition, Berger & Luckmann (1967) explain how fundamental routine and ritual are for daily life; society, they argue, cannot exist, without some basic sense of the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of social life. Much of our social life is facilitated by shared assumptions about the world in which we live (Berger & Luckmann 1968). When these tacit, fundamental assumptions are tested, people often do not know how to respond. This can strain individuals, and also threaten the ongoing coherence and integrity of their social networks.

To support one another and protect their relationships, the girls had to make trauma *manageable*. This process had three key parts. First was dissemination. News spread fast, often from teen to teen on social media. Then came comprehension, when teens worked to understand and explain what had happened, and why. Finally, coping began when the girls grieved and started healing,

Trauma management was a social process. It was also often particular to the young people themselves. Girls went to wakes and funerals. They grieved with their families. Some leant on school guidance counselors for support. But the teens had their own ways of disseminating, comprehending and coping with crises, practices not always shared, or even known, by adults.

Dissemination

On a Tuesday night in March, nine months after the Willow Street shooting, Rosalie was at home, midway through an episode of *Law & Order SVU*.

Rosalie heard the rap at the front door, but she stayed put, letting her mom get it. When she glanced over, she knew right away that something was wrong. It wasn't just the sight of the two cops. It was their body language: their grave eyes and stiff backs. She jumped from the couch and ran upstairs.

The officers told Rosalie's mother that they had found the body of her son, Bryan. At twenty, Bryan was Rosalie's oldest brother.

After the policemen left her home, Rosalie called Nicole and Maude and told them her brother was dead. But Rosalie did not want to keep talking, so many of her other best friends found out the way most neighborhood teens did: online. Stephanie, for instance, was at home, scrolling on Twitter.

“Rosalie was retweeting stuff and people were tweeting stuff, and it was all on my TL. It was crazy,” Stephanie remembered. “It was late, it blew up around ten. I was like, ‘Oh I shouldn’t be on Facebook, I’m ‘sposed to be doing my homework. But I’ll just check it.’ Then I was like, ‘Oh shit. Okay, let me go call Maude and be like, what the fuck just happened?’ Then Maude and me went to the house.”¹³

News flew around the projects as it always did when awful things happened. Some teens called a friend or two to pass on things they heard, but information spread largely on social media. Twitter was especially favored because sharing was instant and public. In addition, teens could retweet or reply to tweets, allowing for public conversations. That Tuesday night, teens scrolling Twitter saw posts like:

R.I.P to one of the coolest dudes i ever met...shits crazy - with Bryan Cash

Ohmygadddd WHAT !!!!! NOO niggy please tell me this is not true !!!!

THAT CANNOT BE TRUE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Real nigga shit r.i.p. to Bryan Cash Forever missed ... From rex

Wtf I hate coming on here and finding out someone died..what happened to Bryan?

Quickly, girls wrote condolence messages that they posted on Twitter or on Rosalie and Leon’s Facebook walls. Aisha wrote, **My baby :/ PLEASE PLEASE STAY STRONG** and Stephanie wrote, **I know this is a hard time for you so please don’t hesitate to talk to me because I’ve been in a similar situation God Bless you and your family, I will keep you in my prayers, R.I.P...it was too soon.** Other teens learned of news by reading messages like

¹³ After learning of trauma online, teens often—although not always—sought one another out in person. This gestures to the limits of the emotional energy that can be generated through online interaction (see Collins 2004). Although focused communication and connection online could generate something like collective effervescence, and could certainly provoke intense emotional arousal, the synchrony brought by mutual entrainment among co-present bodies could heighten this arousal to a higher degree. Body language, gestures, and physiological signals are all involved in raising the degree of emotional energy generated when people come together in person.

these.

But the girls didn't always wait for one another to stumble over uploads. They tried to let their friends know what was going on. I met up with Aisha and Joanne the evening after Bryan was killed. We gathered in Aisha's living room as snow fell hard outside. Joanne sat on Aisha's blue couch, browsing Snapchat, while Aisha took her spot by the desktop in the corner. Her eyes darted over the screen as she skipped between Facebook, Twitter, and Pandora.

"What happened at school about Bryan?" I asked.

Aisha opened YouTube, searching for a song.

"Oh, the usual," Joanne said, not looking up from her phone.

"The usual?" I asked.

"You know, an announcement, a silence," she explained.

Then I asked the girls how they found out.

"My cousin told me," Joanne said. "And I was really trying to tell this girl," she said, pointing at Aisha and grinning. "I was like, 'Where is Aisha?' I didn't want her to not know. That happened to Jada when Bree died. Jada just came to school and saw all of these depressed people, and then she spazzed out. It sucks to not know what's going on."

Aisha said, "Yeah I literally had no idea."

"I Snapchatted you!" Joanne said, adamant. "I made a tears face and I was like, 'Bryan died.' That was my caption. You didn't see the Snapchat I sent you?"

"No," Aisha replied. "No, my iPod died so I didn't see any of this stuff.¹⁴ When I charged it I saw everyone saying all this stuff on Instagram. I texted Najma, 'cause I

¹⁴ Aisha did not have a cell phone at the time. Instead, she was using an iPod paired with Wi-Fi to access her social media apps.

thought someone was making a joke about Bryan's death. She texted back like, 'No, he's gone.'"

On the day of the Willow Street shooting, Natty, a cousin of Odette and Maude who lived on Willow Street, was out walking with her friend, Daya. Natty and Daya heard sirens, and as they walked back toward Natty's place, they saw a police car blocking the street. The girls went to chill at Daya's, watching some TV. Soon, Natty got a call from another friend, who told her that the girls had been shot nearby. Natty opened up Facebook.

"The whole Facebook, over like five pages, was talking about it," Natty remembered. "There was just so much conversation going through Facebook. Some people would say, 'RIP Bree.' Some people were writing like, 'Oh, my mom's with her mom at the hospital right now.'"

Adults and teachers sometimes learned of local tragedies through these online conversations between teens. Staff at CRLS first heard that their students, Bree and Angelina, had been shot, when a teacher's daughter read the news on Twitter. Ms. Flores explained: "Chandra's daughter was on Twitter. Chandra texted me. I called Damon [the principal], and it went around from there. It just exploded over Twitter and Facebook. The kids knew more than the cops."

Teachers and teens used the metaphor of explosion to describe how news spread on social media. Things "blew up" when a spark of information hit the dense brush of teens' connections.

But the news that blew up was not always accurate. After neighborhood traumas, teens typically got little information from mainstream news sources. Instead, their social

and informational worlds largely lined up.¹⁵ Fact and fiction both flowed through social ties in the chaotic and under-informed aftermath of violence. Shares and likes boosted posts' credibility, regardless of their accuracy, and this allowed misinformation to spread. Some teens, for instance, believed Angelina, too, had been killed when news first broke online.

Even reports that were accurate could be harmful. For example, when the neighborhood found out that Bryan was dead, several people assumed he had been shot, and they thought they knew why. Some remembered that beating in broad daylight from the guy in the motorcycle helmet. Others knew he made some plays, here and there. Still, the rumors hurt his family. Rosalie loved her oldest brother. She called him her "twin." When she read what some of her neighbors had to say, she quickly tweeted, **No one even knows what fucking happen, just shut up.** Other friends tried to back her up. Aisha tweeted, **#ripBRYAN. LET'S PLEASE STOP THE RUMORS !!!** and another friend added, **Shits Not Even About That At All So Stop Tryna Act Like Niggas Know How Shit Runs.**

Teens relied on their social networks, and especially their online connections, to quickly learn about traumas in the neighborhood. As they clamored to learn what was happening, information and rumor both spread together with urgency and speed.

Comprehension

Once news came that something had happened, girls began making sense of what

¹⁵ Studies have explored how social media can co-ordinate mass action after large-scale national events or natural disasters, for instance during the Arab Spring, or after Hurricane Katrina, California wildfires, or the Haitian Earthquake (e.g., Sutton et al. 2008; Lotan et al. 2011; Yates & Paquette 2011). Typically, these studies focus on the symbiotic relationship between emergency response, mass media, social media, and government action. The girls were focused on sharing information, not on coordinating action, and the boundary of the informational world was not especially permeable.

they had heard. As part of this comprehension process, the girls had to collectively define the situation, and also to give traumas social ownership.

Defining The Situation

The girls sifted through information and weighed different accounts to arrive at an understanding of what had happened.¹⁶ Often, this information was shared online. This was especially true one Friday in April 2013, two days after someone left two bombs at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. The girls woke to find their city locked down. Overnight, two suspects—brothers—had been identified. Police had killed the older of the pair, but the younger brother was on the run. Mayor Menino announced a citywide shelter-in-place ordinance. There was a manhunt.

Trapped in their homes, the girls opened up social media. On Twitter, waves of information lapped over one another. At first, the messages merely told of danger: teens warned each other about the ordinance and the closure of Boston's transit system. As some girls cheered a day off school, others protested being "jailed" with their "dramatic" families.

Mid-morning, Twitter blew up. Broadcast news had beamed a grainy image of the man the city was locked down for. The girls looked, and looked again. They stared at the dark curls sticking out the backwards white baseball cap. Some studied the eyebrows, cheekbones, nose. *Could it be?*

The photo was of a former classmate, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, and Twitter exploded as

¹⁶ As W.I. Thomas wrote, "Preliminary to any self-determined act of behavior there is always a stage of examination and deliberation which we may call the definition of the situation. And actually not only concrete acts are dependent on the definition of the situation, but gradually a whole life-policy and the personality of the individual himself follow from a series of such definitions" (1923). See also Goffman 1959.

the teens established that this was, indeed, their “Jahar.”

Classmates sparred instantly over Jahar’s guilt or innocence, with tweets like,

All you coppers will never get at my nigga Jahar

Bitch niggas quiet down, we knew Jahar as a friend not a terrorist

He is a *suspect* that means innocent until proven guilty. He’s still human.

Our friend is Jahar, not Suspect #2. Those are two different people.

OMG wtff!!! I could kill this motherfucker my damn self

People keep saying that this nigga was nice .. But do nice people kill innocent people and children?¹⁷

Some teens shared skepticism and conspiracy theories:

The government got shit all twisted, if you know Jizz you feel me

I’m not finna watch this old acquaintance get lit up by the corrupt government

Don’t believe the news

This could be any of YOU or shit even me if I was in the wrong place at the right time. With no leads the cops will make u 1!!

As the girls read through hundreds of their peers’ tweets, sense-making was collaborative but contested. Some of the girls tweeted prolifically, while others, like Brittani, preferred to mostly read. Brittani viewed Twitter as a huge conversation. “Imagine one giant room, and a group of people in there watching the same story on the same TV and just talking to each other about it,” she said. “That day, that’s what Twitter was. Everyone had their own opinion, everyone was coming at people for their opinion, and it was informing and at the same time entertaining... I just wanted to sit back and read it.” During the lockdown, Brittani tweeted, **Social media is just like a town without a sheriff.**

This mass exchange—made up of monologues, thoughts, and discussions—was

¹⁷ Each tweet here is from a unique individual unless specified.

one forum in which teens made sense of the news. Although as Brittani pointed out, teens did talk to each other and share opinions, Twitter was not exactly like a face-to-face conversation. Online, many rules of dialogue did not apply. For instance, there was not always turn-taking.¹⁸ In addition, people did not have to wait to speak, or limit their speech to allow a response. Nor did a tweet have to tie directly to what had just been said. The suspension of these rules of talk meant that teens often talked past each other.

Another feature of the teens' digital conversation was that although all teens could 'talk' online, all voices were not equal.¹⁹ Popular teens typically had bigger audiences, which gave their words more weight. A second group of young people also had louder voices in conversations about neighborhood traumas: teens deemed as socially close to the crisis.

Social Ownership: A Politics of Proximity

Teens located traumas socially, in sets of relationship. People drew in close around those at the heart of a trauma: siblings of victims, as well as best friends and current or ex-

¹⁸ See Sacks et al. (1974). Sociolinguists show that in face-to-face conversation, participants make sense of utterances by considering them in relation to preceding talk. They then proceed to display their understanding by relating their own speech to previous utterances (Sacks et al. 1974). Sequencing and meaning adjacency are core components of in-person dialogue, but these rules did not apply online. Twitter users could blast a series of messages that were not responding to earlier utterances, but that could still be viewed as part of the same conversation. Nor did people have to hold their Tweets until it was their 'turn;' online conversations had multiple participants, and did not obey turn taking rules characteristic of dyadic, or small group, in-person talk. Online, there was an "interplay between the *normative structures* of conversational interaction and the *communicative affordances* offered by different forms of technology" (Hutchby 2013: p13). Teenagers took advantage of the communicative capacity enabled by Twitter, and formed new conversational norms. Their norms resembled in-person talk in some ways, and deviated in others.

¹⁹ Some early internet advocates championed the democratization of speech permitted online. However, feminist critiques of Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989 [1962]), which idealized a democratic process characterized by the free exchange of ideas in public discussion, have pointed to the structural inequities, power, and status that constrain expression and participation in all forms of public talk (see e.g., Fraser 1990).

romantic partners. The Willow Street shooting took place the week before graduation. Angelina was supposed to walk. So was Malachi Holmes, Bree's older brother. In the month after his sister was murdered, Malachi gained one hundred and sixty eight new Facebook friends. And, as friend requests poured in, dozens of his existing Facebook friends flooded his wall with messages like,

Stay up my bro she would want us to stay strong.

**I'm so sorry for your loss, my condolences go out to you and the family, stay strong.
soo sorry Malachi. Ur the last person who deserves something like this to happen to u.**

This is complete shock to me. You guys were the first I mean FIRST people I met when I moved to cambridge in 2nd grade. This is horrible, I... I don't even know, I really don't.

**But please keep yooour head up Malachi <3 your fam, is like my fam ! Prayers go out to
y'all <3 I love u guys**

Amidst the standard "*Keep your head up*" and "*We're praying for you*" messages, some teens used social media's publicity to try and situate themselves near to the trauma. Malachi's wall became a staging ground for teens claiming closeness by quantifying their intimacy. They wrote things like, "*You know my family has been friends with your family for years...*" or "*since we became friends in fifth grade...*"

Other teens appealed for social ownership in different ways, including by indicating their closeness to victims of violence. For instance, they posted photos of themselves with young people who had been hurt or killed. Or, they scrolled back through timelines to 'like' older such photos, making them reappear on peers' feeds. Some wrote out their feelings, like after Bree's death, when Najma tweeted, **I'm crying now dude ugh!** and Maude wrote, **This Major Headache From Crying I Just Can't!!!!!!**

During the lockdown, Twitter was inundated with proximity claims. Odette tweeted: **Well I had a crush on a terrorist and sat with him in class.. I wanted to go to prom with him #scary #sad #confused**. Senior Sam tweeted: **Damn wtf I even had class with Jahar he was mad cool ... This is madness**. Such posts got many likes and comments.

But teens rejected claims of social ownership when they thought peers overstated their proximity. This resistance could be gentle, like when Vincent was summoned to the chaos at Copley Square after the marathon bombing. As he trooped to the finish line to join his fellow National Guardsmen, Aisha made a montage of photos of herself with Vincent. She uploaded it with a caption where she called him her brother: **MY PRAYERS GO OUT TO #Vincent on his first time duty as a SOLIDER. I want him to come home! That's my brother !! I can't sit here for 3 days and just STRESS about it !! However, I know his out there protecting our city and making sure we are safe #pray4Boston**

Joanne, Vincent's sister, tweeted back at Aisha, bemused. She told her best friend to calm down and go to sleep. Joanne's reply was soft because Aisha was her best friend, and because Aisha knew Vincent well.

But at other times, teens hit back with snark, like the ridicule shown to some who claimed closeness to Jahar during the manhunt. One teen mocked: **All these pple sayin they knew this person that bombed boston.. do yall feel special or somthin..like idc if u partied wit him or watever...if yall r so close to him then come tell us were ur boy is at!**

Teens "going too hard" for siblings or close friends of victims could also meet censure. For instance, some of Rosalie's best friends questioned well-wishers' sincerity after Bryan was killed. "Did I tell you about the whole thing with Rosalie?" Stephanie asked me days after the murder. "Najma and Joanne went up to Rosalie at school and gave her a hug!" She paused for effect and reaction. Najma and Joanne were in a different clique, and Stephanie thought they should have known their place. "I don't know if she hugged

back or not, but I doubt it, knowing Rosalie.”

These codes also applied on social media. Odette, another of Rosalie’s best friends, rolled her eyes as she scanned condolence messages online. “See, this is like my pet peeve,” she said. “I understand you wanna send your condolences and stuff, but now that they’re dead, you wanna be all sad over it? You weren’t really there for the person. You didn’t even know the person.”

Odette was private with her criticism, but others were not. Rosalie tweeted, **Just cuz you were cool with my brother doesn’t mean you gotta add me on Facebook #yourDismissed**. Leon, Rosalie’s brother, tweeted: **Bunch of these fuck niggas and birds actin like they was all cool with my bro**. And Bryan’s on-off girlfriend tweeted: **EVERYONE TRYNA ACT LIKE THEY LOVED BRYAN BUT NIGGAS DIDNT EVEN KNOW HIM SO FUCK EVERYONE**. Their close friends backed up their anger. One tweeted, **I bet the same people saying they were close to him haven’t even hit him up for years...** and another wrote, **I’m jus confused as to why some people are doing THE MOST. If you ain’t @Leon or @Rosalie take a seat!** Leon restated his feelings online before a planned memorial in the projects. He warned, **Yo son real talk like if you did not fuck wit my brother .. Then don’t show up tonight real nigga shitttt**.

Teens patrolled the borders of social ownership. They all broadcast hard times when they wanted compassion. Dramatic or traumatic tweets—about hospital visits or deaths in the family, for example—got an instant response from their audience.²⁰ But over-claiming

²⁰ When Aisha’s friend, Jenna, had her wisdom teeth removed, she tweeted and Instagrammed a photo of her bloodied teeth in a plastic baggie. Another time, senior Leti uploaded to Facebook a selfie from a hospital bed, showing an IV drip taped into her arm. Vincent’s friend, Malik, uploaded a photo of himself sat beside his unconscious aunt a few hours before her death. Such uploads had several purposes, including communicating a need for support from peers. They reliably received such assistance, as teens flocked to such unusual and grave updates. They engaged digitally, with their likes, favorites, and comments, conferring attention and approval as well as support.

drama was seen as attention seeking: being “thirsty” for likes.²¹ Teens policed peers who profiteered from drama, scorning trumped up proximity claims just as they panned too-sexy selfies. As senior Leslie tweeted on the day of the lockdown, **People who are tweeting lies about the bombing for retweets are just fucked up.**²²

Perhaps teens policed proximity claims because “owning” a trauma brought special privileges. One of these was the right to more powerfully define the situation. Proximity was a platform teens could use to speak over the mass conversation. When Maude saw the first few tweets about Willow Street, she looked for confirmation. “I didn’t believe it until Bree’s brother tweeted it,” she said. Those close to a crisis had louder voices, on and offline. More urgently, over-claiming social ownership could also threaten the process of getting care to those who were suffering. It could misdirect peer support and block the pipes through which it flowed.

Coping

The girls had grown up jostling for attention, offline and online. As put by dana boyd, “The advertising culture that teens witness reveals a market-driven valuation of attention. In school, teens observe how students broker attention with respect to classmates and teachers and start drama to negotiate power and status. Meanwhile, at home, teens often hear their parents gossip about work, neighbors, and family. While society derides attention, gossip, and drama, teens also receive clear signals that these behaviors are normal. Teens may mock peers for being ‘attention whores,’ but they also recognize that attention can be—and is often seen as—valuable.... Teens see gossip, drama, and attention games all around them, and not surprisingly, they mirror what they see” boyd 2014: p148). Teens also emulated the famous people they avidly followed on several social media platforms. boyd continues: “The norms of celebrity culture, including the politics of attention and drama, seep into everyday life. Teens watch nobodies become famous... Social media also allows people to enact celebrity practices. Teens can and do use social media to drum up attention for themselves and shower attention on others” (boyd 2014: p147) See also Marwick & boyd 2011.

²¹ As put by Greta, a teenaged girl interviewed by Nancy-Jo Sales about her social media habits, “More provocative equals more likes” (Sales 2016: p97).

²² That same afternoon, Malachi noted that Jahar’s Twitter account had gained seventy thousand followers in one day. Malachi joked, “Damn that’s all I gotta do to get followed on Twitter?”

After sharing news of trauma and trying to make sense of what had happened and to whom, teens started coping. They accounted for crises by explaining away risk; they shared scripts for grieving, especially online; and they worked to help each other move on.

(Dis)Location

Despite local violence or unwanted attention from men, the girls mostly felt fundamentally safe in NC. When trauma shook this sense, they sometimes drew boundaries around violent events, to mark them off as spatially, or socially, distant.

Spatial boundaries marked *somewhere else* as the real site of risk. After the Willow Street shooting, I spoke with Josiah, Angelina's friend and classmate. We sat on the grass down by the river and talked about the shooting. Like everyone, Josiah was horrified.

"Vato is a bad guy," Josiah said. "He is from Boston," he offered, by way of an explanation. "I predicted he'd be dead this year. That's a bad thing to say on someone, but all this karma's gonna catch up with him. He just left those two bodies on his porch, and that's just such a thing that he would do, just *dip*." Josiah pulled up blades of grass and rolled them in his fingers. "People are always like, 'Cambridge is not a safe place to live,' and I'm like, 'It *is* a safe place. He's not even from here!'"

Although Bree and Angelina were shot in Cambridge, Josiah used Vato's Boston roots to explain why his neighborhood was still safe. After the shooting, Angelina recuperated in her East Cambridge apartment.

Three weeks after that June Sunday, I visited Angelina at her home, with Ms. Flores and Angelina's friend, Leti. In her apartment, Angelina perched on a black stool in the middle of her living room, in ripped blue jeans and a black and red leopard-printed sleeveless shirt. Her eyes were lined in her favorite deep black. Half her hair was straightened, and the other half was clipped back, waiting for its turn with the iron.

Around Angelina, three sofas were covered tightly in blankets, and in the corner, a large, flat-screen TV thudded a hip-hop bass. Angelina's mom asked her daughter to turn down the music in softly murmured Spanish. Angelina clicked the remote.

The air was thin in the summer heat, and a window-mounted air-conditioning unit balanced on two dented cans of black beans gave little relief.

"How's it coming?" Ms. Flores asked.

"It's hard walking," Angelina said.

As she talked, her mom, in espadrilles and a loose, black, kaftan-style shirt, worked on her hair.

"You don't realize how much you use your stomach muscles," Angelina went on. She could now walk short distances with crutches, but they dug into her arms and left welts on her palms.

Her physical therapist came by a few times a week. So did her therapist. "He looks like Jim Carey," Angelina said.

"Is he funny like him too?" Ms. Flores offered.

"Not so much."

Angelina and Ms. Flores discussed the criminal case building around the shooting, which Angelina called, "the incident."

During Angelina's hospital stay, police had stood guard outside her room, afraid that whoever was responsible might try to take care of this accidental witness.

Ms. Flores asked Angelina if she felt safe, back at home. Angelina nodded.

"Like, I do," she said. Angelina massaged her thigh and adjusted her leg, picking it up with her hands and putting it back down. "I don't really worry too much. I mean, I worry if they think I saw something. My mom worries about that. My mom wants to move

outta here, but I don't wanna move out of Cambridge. Boston, that's worse!" Leti, on one of the sofas, laughed in agreement.

By locating danger in Boston, girls drew boundaries that positioned Cambridge as safe, or safer.

Yet each local trauma marked the teens' collective memory.²³ Year after year, the list of neighborhood tragedies and lost friends grew longer, and after a young person's death, tweets often acknowledged others. After Bryan was killed, some teens tweeted things like:

Another soldier has been lost R.I.P Bryan #Salute
Sorry to Cambridge for losing another one. My respect out to Bryan. Nobody's catching a
break man.

Cambridge Is Really Starting To See More RIPs But Less Happy Birthdays ...

So the girls drew a second type of boundary to shore up their sense of safety. They placed violence and trauma in a different *social* world to their own, even when it occurred nearby. They used a discursive shorthand, with terms like "that life," which left specifics unsaid.²⁴

Natty, who lived on Willow Street, had dated Rosalie's brother Bryan when she was younger. After he was killed, she spoke with me about their relationship. "He was my first boyfriend," she said. They dated for six months but eventually broke up, Natty explained,

²³ In *Villa Victoria*, sociologist Mario Small explains how rare but shocking events like shootings are "powerful, disheartening, and debilitating," and they attach scarring memories to the neighborhood, its resources, and its public spaces (Small 2004: p143)

²⁴ To make this distinction, the girls drew a symbolic boundary between themselves and participants in "that life." Michèle Lamont and Virag Molnar describe the *symbolic* and *social* boundaries that people draw between themselves and others. Symbolic boundaries are "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (Lamont & Molnar 2002: p168). They "separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership" (ibid). For the girls, drawing such a boundary created feelings of similarity with their friends and peers *not* in "that life," who were categorized as separate.

because the pair “were in different times.” Bryan was a few years older than Natty, who was just getting settled at high school. But even after they broke up, the two remained close friends, and joked from time to time about getting back together.

“Now, that’s never going to happen,” Natty said. She paused. “He was in a whole different world.”

Some of the other girls spoke similarly. I was with Stephanie the night after Bryan’s murder. She was exhausted, not having slept much since hearing the news. Stephanie and Bryan had grown up together, and Rosalie was one of her best friends.

As she sank into a chair, her body slackened against the cushions. “We don’t know who Bryan might have had problems with,” Stephanie said. “It’s sad that he was part of that lifestyle.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Like, he just sold stuff, to make quick cash and help out,” Stephanie said. “He wasn’t a terrible person. And even though he did that, like, all the people he’s helped out—I was reading all the statuses and everyone had something that he had done for them.”

I nodded.

“I don’t know what Leon is doing right now,” she said, of Rosalie’s other brother. “Leon is a smart kid who needs to get his shit together,” she insisted. “Leon is not about that lifestyle.”

Stephanie used the same language when she talked about Sparks, Nicole’s step-brother who’d been killed a few years earlier. “It was ’09 or ’10, I think,” Stephanie said. Teens often couldn’t remember exactly when friends or classmates had died, recalling instead where, or why. “It was right there on Mass Ave. They shot him through the window. They pulled up next to him and just shot through the car, and the bullet went into his head.

That whole lifestyle, man.”

Odette echoed Stephanie when she discussed Sparks on another occasion. “He’d been into that whole life for a while,” she said. “That lifestyle just caught up, and he died.”

After local traumas, the girls often drew boundaries that located risk and danger in different spatial or social worlds. This practice may have been helpful in the long term, because when young people persistently feel powerless or unsafe, they often anxiously anticipate future trauma. This anticipation can prevent them from processing past negative experiences.²⁵ In addition, the combination of *experiencing* and *anticipating* trauma can lead, over time, to PTSD.²⁶ Dislocating violence helped teens feel safer, both short and long term.

Grief Online

Stephanie found out on Facebook that Bryan had died. Right away, she called Maude, and the two girls rushed to Rosalie’s home. Stephanie worried what she would find. “Bryan was the one in the family Rosalie was most closest with,” Stephanie said. “She really, really sweated him.”

When she arrived at the apartment, a short walk from her own, she saw relatives and family friends already gathered, sat on chairs and sofas. Stephanie found Rosalie alone in the corner, desolate, and silent.

“It was the worst I’ve ever seen her,” Stephanie remembered. “She was sitting there on Twitter. Just sitting there on her computer, just slouched down.”

The following night, Stephanie returned to the apartment, and I went with her. As

²⁵ Pynoos, Steinberg, & Goenjian 1996; Kiser et al. 1993; Overstreet & Braun 2000; Schwab-Stone et al., 1999

²⁶ Collins et al. 2010

we approached, four adults and a young child were on their way out.

“Keep the door open,” Stephanie asked. But she was too quiet, and her words dissolved into the damp air. The family nodded a somber greeting as they passed us.

The six stone steps leading up to the front door were darker gray than usual, wetted by the day’s spattering rain. We wiped our Ugg boots on the straw mat, and walked through the unlocked door.

In the living room, some older family members sat quietly. One elderly man leaned back in a soft chair. Another sat straight-backed, his forearm propped on his cane. Rosalie approached us, wearing grey sweats and with her hair wrapped. Her gaze was both expectant and helpless. Stephanie handed her the cookies and flowers we had brought. Rosalie passed them to her mother, who stood in the kitchen. Stephanie and I each embraced Rosalie’s limp body. Then she mouthed, “Thank you,” leaning on the wall to remain on her feet.

After Stephanie and I left, we sat together on the metal bench outside the building.

“It makes you wanna cry, right?” Stephanie said, exhaling.

We sat together for a few quiet minutes. Then, both our phones buzzed at once, letting us know that Rosalie, who had changed her Twitter handle to **RIP BIG BRO ♥**, had tweeted:

thanks again @Jasmin & @Stephanie ♥ Stephanie replied, **Anytime boo. We love yall so stay up for your bro & your fam. We support you ♥** Rosalie retweeted this to her followers, along with my reply.

After losing Bryan, Rosalie took a week off school. One Thursday morning just after her return, she trudged to the bus stop at 7:30 a.m. As the bus arrived, she pulled her hands from deep in the pockets of her North Face hoodie and shook out her headphones,

trying to untangle them. Rosalie boarded the bus, and took a seat alone. She tucked one earbud up under each side of the hat that was pulled down almost over her eyes. She crossed her skinny legs at the knee, folded her arms, and slumped down.

Friends and classmates hopped on the bus and greeted her, tentative but upbeat:
Hey Rosalie!

She nodded acknowledgment, sometimes pulling her mouth into a half smile. Soon, the bus hummed with the babble of teens planning weekend fun.

Rosalie rocked side to side as the bus shook her body. She gazed blankly forwards. Startled by a classmate's shrieking laugh, Rosalie looked up. Then she sunk down, as if retreating from the world that did not share her pain. The bus teemed with raucous giggles and tidbits of gossip, once so illicitly pleasurable, now so painfully trivial. Rosalie closed her eyes and pulled her hat down further. As the bus filled, teens knocked into her crossed knees as they crowded further into the aisle. At the stop nearest school, students streamed out onto the sidewalk and trooped in cheery, boisterous groups to the building. Rosalie dragged her feet over the concrete, hands in her pockets, and disappeared through the doors.

Rosalie had always been shy. Now, hurting, she was almost mute. Online, however, Rosalie poured her thoughts and feelings onto her Twitter timeline. She had started tweeting as soon as those grave-eyed men had left her home. Over the next several days, Rosalie wrote out her rage and her pain, and retweeted messages from friends. Among her hundreds of tweets, she wrote:

I feel sickkkk to my stomach thinking about this whole situation !

To see my mom like this hurts just like a fucking bitch !!!!!

Fell in love wit my bros cardigan <3 <3 <3,im sleeping in it

Hurting ten times more right now...

My appetite is just the worse

Didn't even get to tell him that I love him like I always do the last time I saw him.

Something is holding me back from crying. I gotta be strong for him cause he wouldn't want to see me crying like this. Thanks for all the love everyone. I appreciate it

Silenced in person, Rosalie shared intimate details of her sorrow with her online audience. She was unfiltered and unguarded, defying critiques that social media broadcasts are a superficial, cultivated highlight reel.

Rosalie's peers read her posts, and learned how she was holding up as time passed. They responded in a way that they hoped felt supportive but not smothering. Digital condolences carried no obligation to respond. They let teens reach out from a respectful distance, while offering, but not compelling, social interaction.²⁷

Digital Rituals

Trauma can leave people not knowing what to say or how to act. As Natty described the instant when she recognized the manhunt suspect, "It was such a, 'I don't know what to say,' type of moment."

The girls had scripts and practices for responding to trauma. Many carried lost peers around, wearing, for instance, buttons, hats and t-shirts with their photos, and sometimes dates of their birth and death. There were also visits to graves on birthdays and

²⁷ A tweeted "RIP" message could, on occasion, be a calculated social performance. It could also, perhaps, have replaced a sturdier gesture of support. Yet, the girls consistently and cared for one another using social media during their darkest times. And, recipients often appreciated these messages. One year later, Nicole texted Rosalie on the anniversary of Bryan's death. The text read: **I know today is a hard day for you but as always stay strong. Understanding that the physical body isn't there but the soul forever lies with your heart and body every where you go. Keep grinding and making him proud like you're making us proud. Make sure you give your mom a call and know I'm here for you if you want to talk or just cry. I Love you!!** Rosalie screenshotted the message and sent it to her Snapchat contacts, with her own caption: **My main is better than yours.** Rosalie used Snapchat to thank Nicole publicly for reaching out. Her caption let Nicole, and everyone else, that she felt cared for.

anniversaries of passing: teens lay down roses in straight lines, brought helium balloons, and for the young men, left offerings of bottled Henny.

The girls and their friends also had a set of digital rituals that helped them grieve. For instance, when there was too much to say, or nothing at all; when teens felt overwhelmed by confusing or contradictory feelings, hashtags gave an alternative. A hashtag was a dense node of pathos and innuendo. Minutes after news broke of the Willow Street shooting, two hashtags exploded online: **#RIPBREE** and **#PrayforAngelina**. Although hashtags can be used to coordinate action between strangers—like **#TahrirSquare**—or to synthesize tweets on a topic—like **#election2016**—for the teens, these hashtags were primarily expressive. Under-defined and open to interpretation, they seamlessly joined emotions like sorrow, respect, and defiance.²⁸

As a collective expression, hashtags also had a ritual function. Aisha was pleased that the teens made **#RIPBree** trend locally on Twitter the night of the shooting. It felt significant, something like neighborhood pride. On special days, like late peers' birthdays or the anniversaries of their deaths, teens revived the hashtags. The concise and unifying digital touchstones expressed local teens' shared and ongoing commitment to lost friends.

Hashtags worked best for up-to-the-minute trends. They typically flared up and faded out, so teens also had other, more enduring digital memorials. Many wrote their friends into the digital architecture of their social world. Several of Bryan's friends, for instance, changed their Twitter handles to a variation of **RIP Bryan**, while others uploaded profile pictures or cover photos that featured him. Still others added Bryan's name to the

²⁸ Think of the semiotic richness conveyed by the **#BostonStrong** hashtag circulating in the aftermath of the marathon bombing. Twelve letters captured and communicated pride, grief, resilience, empathy, anger and defiance.

list of lost peers in their “about me” sections on social media, together with information like their grade, zodiac sign, and favorite sports teams. Najma’s “about me” read: **#TeamIndian #CRLS13est #Team Taurus; RIP Luke, Sparks, Corban, Brianna, PK & Bryan.**

All memorials, online and off, were policed by the politics of proximity. Not everyone could participate. The likeness of a fallen friend on a pin or in a profile picture, or their name in a hashtag, was a sacred thing.

Sociologist Randall Collins wrote about sacred objects: things that are “treated with respect,” have “special qualifications as to who can approach,” and are “emotionally and vehemently and self-righteously defended.”²⁹ “Sacred objects” include priestly books and ceremonial chalices, but the objects of teens’ rituals were sacred, too. Hashtags and images were the property of peers who had suffered, and teens fought their reappropriation by click-seeking carpetbaggers.

Their digital rituals provided a patterned and accessible set of scripts for responding to chaos and crisis. They funneled despair into symbols, making grief legible. And, because rituals don’t merely reference an individual’s grief but also assert a community that stands intact, the teens’ practices helped restate the integrity of the peer group when it was threatened by trauma. Moreover, because rituals were not freely usable, they also marked the borders of community. The exclusion of outsiders fostered internal solidarity and

²⁹ Collins 2004: p97 - 98. Collins built on Durkheim’s division of the sacred and profane as a key organizing logic in social life, along with his discussion of the role of ritual and religion in fostering moral solidarity. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim explains how rituals cement social order (1995 [1912]). For Durkheim, social order is maintained through moral solidarity, and moral solidarity is (re)enacted through rites and rituals, which strengthen the collective. Often, rituals involve totems: objects imbued with a sacred force, the source of which is the power of society itself. The sacred objects used by teens as their visual and discursive foci—like hashtags, pins, and t-shirts—were totems, too. The objects were imbued with the power of the group, and the teens had rules over who could, and who could not use or display them.

support.³⁰

Digital rituals exist at all scales, even globally. Facebook, for instance, began offering its hundreds of millions of users a new profile-picture overlay after momentous occasions: rainbow-striped as the Supreme Court brought all US couples the right to marry in *Obergefell vs. Hodges*; the Tricolor's red, white and blue after the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks. "When these flares of solidarity first go up," wrote writer Vinson Cunningham, "[t]he effect overwhelms; the uniformity of color and intent almost replicates a sung anthem."³¹ Like an anthem, a hashtag or a sea of new profile pictures were totems of group membership for the teens. They restated social bonds and testified to the endurance of their community.

Shutting Down and Moving On

Grief and trauma are exhausting. Repeated exposure to trauma can lead to PTSD and other hardships that can threaten wellbeing. The girls had a sense that crises could grow insufferable if they were not eventually shut down. Natty explained her survival strategy through a bitter grin: "Laugh it off. When bad shit happens, just laugh it off."

It made sense to shut down grief in a place where traumas struck with some regularity. Days after Bryan's death, Stephanie shook her head, and said, "I just hope nothing else happens, because it has been consecutive violence." Each death reopened barely healed wounds. Other tweens tweeted similarly:

I can't take seeing someone else I grew up with die.

RIP to all my fallen soldiers here Lucien, Jude, Corban & now Bryan ..

³⁰ Returning to Lamont and Molnar's discussion of symbolic boundaries, the mourners fostered feelings of solidarity and group membership through their boundary drawing, which marked off others as unwelcome (Lamont & Molnar 2002).

³¹ Cunningham 2016

**Way too many deaths in the past year. RIP T.K, Brianna, Corban, and more .. And now
Bryan today? SMH**

After Bryan was killed, Rosalie and Leon's friends tried to lift their spirits. When Stephanie went over to the apartment after the policemen left, she found Leon outside the block with his boys. "They were tryna make him feel better," she remembered. "I did get a smile out of him, ha, but you can tell, his eyes are just so fucking hurt." A couple years older than Rosalie, Leon's friends soothed him with other remedies, too, things to smoke and drink to dull the pain.

Rosalie's friends also tried to make her feel cheery. "You can't get depressed by all this," Stephanie relayed. "I said this to Rosalie: It's okay to let it out, and be sad and mad and angry at the world for a little bit. But you can't live your life in a dark place."

The weekend after the murder, Odette took Rosalie to play in the snow. "I tried to make jokes," Odette explained. "We were having this snowball fight. She was having fun. I'm just tryna make her smile. Not be down all the time." She paused and flashed her dimpled grin. "And girl," she said to me, "for the funeral, I got this suit. You should see my ass! Nicole's mom was like, 'When they see how hot you look, they're gonna stop crying!'"

But the teens' pacing of healing did not always mesh with what adults and teachers expected. In Angelina's living room that Thursday afternoon, Ms. Flores tried to have a conversation that Angelina seemed to find too earnest.

"How is your body feeling?" Ms. Flores asked gently.

Angelina lifted her shirt and pointed to a scar that ran down the center of her abdomen. "It looks like a zipper," she said, sucking her teeth. "I don't like it." Then she poked at her colostomy bag, off to the side. "The reason I hate this," Angelina said, with

another irritated prod, “is because look how *fat* it makes me look!” Angelina pulled her shirt back down, showing where she thought it made her stomach pooch.

We assured her otherwise.

“How is the rest of your body feeling?” Ms. Flores probed.

Angelina’s tone was matter-of-fact. “Well, I have a lotta knee pain,” she said, “‘cause where the bullet went in, it went through my digestive system, but it also fractured my pelvis and went through a lotta veins and nerves and stuff.”

Angelina ran her hands through her hair. “My ends were so bad!” she said.

Before Ms. Flores could speak, Angelina continued: “You shoulda seen it when I came out of hospital, it had been two weeks. It was so bad!”

Ms. Flores opened her mouth.

Angelina went on: “Today I did a treatment. I put cholesterol in it. *Me lo traes?*” Angelina asked her mom to bring over the bottle of hair product, and readjusted her leg.

Angelina did not want to dwell. Leti, her friend, helped distract her with happier talk. When Ms. Flores asked another well-meaning question, Leti stamped her right foot down next to Angelina’s. They were wearing the same sandals.

Months later, the girls quickly tired of the ‘soul searching’ encouraged at school after the arrest of their classmate, Jahar. Over lunch, Aisha’s friend and poetry buddy, Tamar, protested the teachers’ labored response. “They would not *stop* going on about it!” she said. “Three periods in a row! I was like, ‘If it carries on like this, I am not coming to school tomorrow.’”

“It was too much!” Aisha concurred, dipping a french fry into a pat of ketchup.

Their classmates aired similar frustrations online:

Um xcuse me Jahar ur interrupting my Dr Phil

If I hear Jahar's name in school even one more time I'm gonna skip class for the rest of the day idc.

The Jahar case also stung because teens resented the size of the police response to the bombing compared with the deaths of their friends. On the evening of the lockdown, teens scrolled jadedly through Twitter as police closed in on Dzhokhar Tsarnaev cowering in a boat parked in a Watertown yard. As they hauled him, bloodied, from his hiding spot, Rosalie tweeted: **Y'all monkey cops didn't find out who killed my brother, it's been a month and more but y'all find these suspects in 5 days..**

Others echoed her:

AS MUCH AS IM PROUD IT'S JUST A DAMN SHAME WE DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO BRIANNA OR BRYAN.

Find out who Killed Bryan and then MAYBE I will give a fuck about this shit.

The teens had a hierarchy of trauma that was not always shared by adults. Likewise, many of their coping practices were confined to their own social world. The girls were often attuned to one other's needs, knowing when to engage, and when to distract. At school, mourning could be more heavy-handed and unilateral grieving. In class two weeks after the Willow Street shooting, Ms. Flores raised "the incident." "I don't think we've talked about this enough," she said to the room. Students looked down or fiddled with their fingers. Eventually, she changed the subject.

Still, teachers and staff were often invaluable as teens dealt with traumas. Natty spent hours with a guidance counselor after her ex-boyfriend, Bryan, died. Students also appreciated Ms. Flores' sensitivity to their suffering. As Joanne later said, "It is really hard to sit in class and be present when someone else's reality was just shattered. Ms. Flores wasn't trying to be like, 'Let's continue on with George Washington.'"

School officials also took special measures to involve Angelina in her graduation.

Days after her surgeries, she was bedbound in hospital. Angelina could not walk or stand, but she could sit. So, Angelina had her hair styled, and was helped into a cap and gown, just like her friends. She joined the ceremony through a video-link. Her brother, a sophomore, picked up her diploma on her behalf.³² The crowd roared for Angelina, who, projected onto big screens, said a few words. “You guys,” she stirred, “We finally made it!”³³

The crowd screamed too, for Malachi Holmes, whose sister, Bree, was with Angelina on Willow Street that night. “You will never be alone,” the senior class president told him. “You have four hundred brothers and sisters.” As Malachi crossed the stage, those brothers and sisters rose to their feet and clapped.

Technologies of Trauma

In the aftermath of trauma, life can feel suspended as we clamor for information. In the longer term, crises can derail daily life and fracture relationships. In Cambridge, the girls tried to protect their friends from irreparable, downward spirals of grief. They also worked to restore routine, reassert safety, and shield the peer group as an ongoing source of support.

Teens pieced shattered worlds back together by making traumas manageable. Initially, news “exploded” online, through thick tangles of connections. Although rumors spread this way too, teens looked mostly to their networks for information. Once news came, teens made sense of the senseless, comprehending just what had happened, to whom,

³² Parker 2012

³³ *ibid*

and why. Sense-making involved giving traumas social ownership: deciding who should have a louder voice, and who deserved most care. There were politics to this proximity, and teens who got too close, physically or digitally, were rebuffed.

When it came to coping, girls explained away tragedies by appealing to distance: either spatial, when they framed other places, particularly Boston, as the real site of risk; or social, when they blamed danger on a lifestyle distinct from their own. Coping also involved grieving, and teens' shared scripts helped them talk when they did not know what to say, and act when they did not know what to do. These rituals bonded the teens, and affirmed their commitment to one another. Lastly, girls encouraged one other to "stay up."³⁴ Perhaps their quick use of distraction may have interfered with mourning, or stigmatized prolonged public grieving, but to the girls, it seemed sensible to move on quite fast when traumas seemed to keep on coming. This repair work existed largely out of view of adults, and clashed sometimes with their expectations for teens' trauma management.³⁵

Dissemination, comprehension, and coping could take months or years. Or, they could all come quickly, like the Thursday night a few weeks after Bryan's murder, when Aisha sat alone in her apartment. Although the trees showed hints of spring, the evenings were dark, still, and gloomy. Aisha was at her spot in the corner when she heard the bangs. She snapped her head up and counted. Instantly she logged onto Twitter, and shared:

³⁴ Social support is a protective factor against the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (Collins et al. 2010).

³⁵ This was particularly true when it came to the online dimension of grieving. Other research confirms that adults can be perplexed by teens' use of social media in times of trauma. For instance, Sales (2016) shows the shock provoked in adults, when kidnapping victim Hannah Anderson gave details of her experience online. The use of social media in hard times speaks to the total integration of these platforms into young people's lives, and to the different conceptions of privacy and publicity that most adolescents have, compared with adults like parents and teachers.

Multiple gun shots here .. ? Or am I hallucinating ?

I mean do we have to live in terror ? Every other ducking week now

They just found three bullets .. This shit is right under me ..

About 6-9 shots fired.. It was a drive by type thing .. 2 secs later the police came thru

No one was hurt ...

Aisha also uploaded to Facebook a grainy photograph of police searching the area with the caption **From the window .. It's fucking law and order out here**. She sent an eight second video of the same scene to her Snapchat contacts, voicing over the words, "Be safe." Her messages disseminated the event, and Aisha and her friends quickly learned that nobody was hurt. With her mom at work, her peers were her only outlet, and they met her posts with empathy and suggestions. Twelve people liked her Facebook status. One neighbor commented **same** and a friend wrote, **Yep sleep with ur light on then ull feel better**. Najma tweeted, **Its just so hard to sleep the night you hear gunshots**. In Aisha's moment of fear, dissemination, comprehension, and coping were simultaneous and cooperative.

Bigger traumas could have slow-billowing consequences, however. For months after Bryan's death, Rosalie was more timid and shaky than usual. Even when she went out with her friends, she hid in dark corners at parties. (Her mother, also afraid, took out life insurance policies for her and Leon.) One night, Rosalie's friends convinced her to come to a party nearby. She agreed, but as they rose to walk over, she cowered behind the front door. "I hate walking around in the dark. You go first. I'm scared," Rosalie said, pushing Maude into the street with a hand to the lower back. Maude looked back at Rosalie. They could see the building from where they stood, and only one streetlight was out. Maude stepped out encouragingly into the night. Then, her red cup slipped from her hand and the plastic clattered against the sidewalk. Rosalie jumped. Maude sighed.

Over time, however, Rosalie's friends helped her coax her back out of her shell.

While holding onto her big brother's memory, the baby of the group grew into a self-assured and joyful young woman. Rosalie inched, week-by-week, closer to the center of rooms. At a party in the projects one Saturday night, Nicole stood back and watched Rosalie. She smiled as she watched her best friend strut out from the shadows, and dance.

7—Growing Up and Apart

Aisha tried not to grin when her mom said she was leaving town for the weekend.

Word of the party bounced through NC, and on Friday evening, Aisha's home filled fast with eager teens.

Aisha wore her favorite piece of clothing: faded blue denim overalls cut to mid-thigh. With one broken strap, they dangled from her right shoulder over her purple crop top. Her outfit bared the smooth curve of her waist, and showed the ink she'd gotten the previous summer: a woman's face in profile over the continent of Africa.

The apartment teemed and warmed, and Aisha cast her eyes over the crowd, faces lit by the glare of phone screens.

Some girls danced together, moving sensually and suggestively against one another's bodies. Two feet away, Brittani sat on an armchair pushed against the wall. Brittani had arrived first, dutifully shoving furniture to clear the floor. On the chair, she curled her legs beneath her and crossed her arms over her baggy grey shirt, which read **We Are College Bound**.

Friends stopped by Brittani to chat, and those with liquor knew not to offer a sip. Brittani said alcohol smelled nasty and burned her throat. In high school, when some of the girls started drinking—lifting bottles from parents, borrowing older siblings' IDs, asking older friends to buy liquor, or even, occasionally, paying a homeless person to do it—Brittani steered clear.

When her friends sipped on nips and “L,” Brittani said, “I’m going to stay sober.” In senior year, when many of her friends were, as she put it, “pretty big into drinking, getting weed,” Brittani hung out with them, even down at the “Riv,” where teens gathered

in a dark clearing by the river to drink, smoke, and dance. Brittani didn't remember peer pressure: "I knew I'm not going to do it, so I had nothing to worry about," she said. "I can still have fun being sober."

At the Riv, Brittani enjoyed herself, and sometimes, felt useful. She watched out for her friends and made sure they were safe. "I don't want them wandering off or getting into any trouble," she said. "I'm the only one sober, so I feel like they're going to depend on me to keep them safe. And I feel like they *should* feel that way, because I don't want them to get hurt."

As she looked out at the party, Brittani saw her best friends were "wavey." Although Aisha had mostly stopped drinking, claiming to have grown "mad godly," she didn't throw parties too often. So, she'd stashed a bottle under the sink, and through the evening, she poured furtive shots into paper cups for her favorite friends. Aisha didn't smoke weed, though, and of the foursome, only one girl did. Aisha sent Najma—and other teens planning to roll up—out into the back stairwell.

As Brittani watched, Aisha shoved her way into the middle of the room and danced. She bent double to parody twerking. In front of a mirror, Aisha and her friends could twerk with snappy talent but they hid their skills in public. As Aisha's hands touched the floor and her thighs shook, she laughed and ran back into the crowd, yelling, "No, suh! No, suh!" Spurred by her friends' claps and giggles, Aisha jumped back in for a brief encore, this time crossing her arms over her chest and stroking her back to mimic a couple's hot embrace. Again, she broke down laughing, and scooted back into the crowd. This wouldn't be *that* type of party, her moves announced.

Looking on, senior April smiled. Like Aisha, April was popular, though the girls

moved through different social worlds. Tonight, they fed off each other's status. April had a pixie haircut and wore clinging black jeans with a tight black shirt. She curved her black eyeliner into a feline flick, and filed her nails into fashionable claws.

Boys marveled at Aisha and April, both so assertive and unattainable. Aisha cultivated her distance; April's intimacies were with women. At the party, some boys and girls gently flirted—placing hopeful hands on arms and backs—but most girls seemed more interesting in having fun with their friends. As they danced, bare bellies poked out between leggings and cropped shirts. The room belonged to the girls.

By midnight, steam speckled the windows. Maude leaned against a wall and fanned her face with her hands. "It's too hot in here. Too much Black people," she said, tugging at the chunky plastic pearls she had clipped around her neck.

Esther approached Maude. She lived nearby, and was scouting for an escort home.

"I would go, but I don't got nobody to walk me back," Maude said. Esther tried the next girl.

Minutes later, Aisha caught sight of the time on her iPod, and cut the music.

"Listen up!" She hollered. "Y'all have twenty minutes until the last train. Thank you for coming!" She waved dramatically at the door and bowed. Teens laughed at Aisha's bluntness, and those who'd come from East, Port, and Coast bustled out. NC kids lingered, but filed out when she started shifting furniture. When everyone was gone, Aisha peeled the duct tape off her fridge.

In her living room, Aisha surveyed the mess. She would remove each physical trace of the party before Diana came home, but first, she wanted to leave digital ones. Aisha scrolled through her photos, to choose some to upload. Her photos showed teens from all

over the city; teens with different hobbies, habits, and hopes.¹ Stoners and straight-laced kids had all crammed in, making the most of this Friday night.

Aisha's best friends all came to her party, despite their different views on drinking and drugs. The girls had not always known such discrepancies. They met as children, running on skinny legs through JP. But time brought new ideas and new opportunities, including the chance to dabble in what sociologists call 'risk behaviors,' like sex, drugs, and alcohol.

Like many teenagers, some of the girls experimented. They made choices. These choices forked the path they had walked down for years, mostly in lockstep. This split threatened to cause conflict, or pry open tight ties. To protect their friendships, the girls had to learn to deal with difference.

Homophily and Peer Effects

"Homophily," meaning love of the same, suggests that similarity is the foundation of friendship. Sociologists find that homophily exists over many types of social, romantic and professional bonds, and note that most people's social networks are largely homogenous in values, beliefs, and behaviors.²

Teenagers in particular tend to have friends like themselves. This is typified by the trope of the segregated lunch room—jocks at one table, nerds at another³—but empirically

¹ None of the girls' high SES classmates were present, however. This boundary mostly overlapped with racial divides, but not exclusively.

² For a comprehensive review of types of homophily that are observed across social domains, as well as their causes, see McPherson et al. 2001. See also Kalmijn 1998

³ Eckert 1989

observable, too. Young people often act like their friends, and behaviors—including risk behaviors—often cluster in peer networks. Peer influence associates with drug and alcohol use, smoking, pregnancy, violence, crime, and more.⁴

These correlations worry some researchers who study poor neighborhoods. They see “peer effects” between low-income young people as a “contagion” that spread risk behaviors through friendships.⁵ Social disorganization theory, which studies the role of place and context on deviance, even suggests that peer influence may be the primary way that community socialization adversely affects adolescents.⁶

Hundreds of studies in sociology and psychology try to uncover *why* practices and outcomes spread between peers.⁷ Some blame *selection*: the idea that teens choose friends who act like them.⁸ Others claim that through *socialization*, peers encourage one another to behave like they do.⁹

But studies that try to explain how networks become homophilous—that is, whether peer effects work through selection or socialization—have two limitations. First, they risk overlooking friendship’s real power. They reduce thick, living relationships to mere

⁴ This literature spans sociology, psychology, public health, and more. See e.g., Kandel 1978; Akers et al. 1979; Brooks-Gunn et al 1993; South & Baumer 2000; Thornberry & Krohn 1997; Elliot & Menard 1996; Elliot et al. 2006; Dishion 2000; Bosari & Carey 2001; Metzler et al 1994; Bachanas et al. 2002; Case & Katz 1991.

⁵ Jencks & Mayer 1990; Case & Katz 1991; Crane 1991

⁶ Sampson & Groves 1989; Shaw & McKay 1942

⁷ E.g., An 2011, 2016; Simons-Morton & Farhart 2010

⁸ McPherson et al. 2001; Kandel 1978; Cohen 1997

⁹ Prinstein & Dodge 2008

predictors of dependent variables, like whether someone smokes or not.¹⁰ A focus on quantifying peer effects can obscure the dynamic, day-to-day processes that animate friendships, and blur the complicated forms that social influence really takes.¹¹ Friendships themselves are seen as either present or absent, rather than continually negotiated and accomplished.

Second, framing peer effects as a “contagion” or “epidemic” leaves little room for diversity or resistance. This is true at both the individual and the group level. Studies tend to see people’s beliefs and behaviors as coherent and stable, when in fact they are often contradictory and changing. At the community level, too, sociologists know that not all members of a group or community behave similarly.

Although an earlier generation of sociologists argued that social isolation produced a singular, adaptive, and often oppositional ‘ghetto’ subculture in poor neighborhoods, researchers have since found a great diversity of beliefs and behaviors in poor, urban communities.¹² Researchers like Ulf Hannerz and Elijah Anderson showed that people with very different lifestyles live together as neighbors.¹³ Building on their work, sociologist David Harding pointed to the heterogeneous “cultural repertoires” that co-exist in poor

¹⁰ Giordano 2003: p257

¹¹ As neighborhood scholars Tama Leventhal and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn argue, “Contagion models in general do not specify how... peer influences operate” (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn 2000: p326). However, ethnographic work, for instance that by David Harding, shows the daily processes by which risk behaviors are transmitted. Harding shows that neighborhood violence drives younger teens to seek protective relationships from older boys, but that these friendships then expose boys to risk behaviors, as well as to cultural models that influence their behavior and decision making in domains like schooling and romantic relationships (Harding 2009: p459).

¹² E.g., Kuper 1953, Gans 1961, Hannerz 1969, Anderson 2000

¹³ Hannerz 1969. Later, Elijah Anderson wrote famously about the perceived division between ‘decent’ and ‘street’ individuals in poor neighborhoods (2000).

communities.¹⁴ This idea corrected earlier misconceptions that either “types” of people or rigid “codes” were the driving force behind certain behaviors. Instead, the notions of heterogeneity and cultural repertoires allowed for agency, individual decision making, and divergent outcomes.

Heterogeneity has been studied extensively at the neighborhood level. But researchers rarely consider what it might look like within a single clique. They do not explain how small social groups survive differences in actions and attitudes. This chapter shows what happened when the girls’ friendships were tested by change. There was no “epidemic” of peer effects. When some young women began drinking or having sex, most of the others did not follow suit. Girls who drank or took drugs did not *select* new friends with similar habits. That would have meant discarding their relationships and losing important sources of support. Yet nor did they *socialize* one another to start acting the same way. Instead, the girls had practices of preservation to protect their relationships.

Dealing With Difference

Identity Claims

During adolescence, young people start developing stable and adult identities. As the girls in NC formed their senses of self, they drew on their social relationships as well as their beliefs about things like success and ambition.¹⁵ Many made moral claims online,

¹⁴ Harding (2009) argues that that poor neighborhoods have higher cultural heterogeneity than do more advantaged neighborhoods. In poorer communities, there are more competing and contradictory cultural models.

¹⁵ Sociologist Kelly Nielson (2015) described the “ambition imperative,” whereby young people use their aspirations and ambitions around college attainment to make moral claims about their status and worth in the face of marginalization. Researchers document high and persistent

by doing things like tweeting photos of ‘A’ papers, or writing posts like, **Study Time Now! No matter what nothing distracts me from success and College is already my main priority & I’m a junior. .. #Getyourshittogether.** Nicole’s ‘about me’ on Twitter read: **My motivation and purpose to succeed are my main priorities. God got me!! College Student! Haitian Black, I’m educated, an educator, and role model. Reaching the stars.**

Some girls also made identity claims based on their decisions around risk behaviors. When Aisha shunned alcohol, she tweeted **#soberlife**, and of her vocal sexual abstinence, she hashtagged **#nunlife**. The imagined community conjured by hashtags transformed sobriety or virginity from personal choices into legitimate social identities. This could offer positivity and pride, like when Aisha tweeted, **#DUMBESTMOMENTS. WHEN I ALMOST LOST IT TO A NIGGA THAT I DIDN’T EVEN CARE ABOUT AND STILL DON’T - ____ - DAMN #TEAMVIRGINS WE’RE SUPERIOR.** Tweets’ publicity also solicited surveillance, forcing teens to follow through or else be ‘fake.’¹⁶ It also warded off those who would ‘try’ them by offering a hit or sip.

But those less abstemious could also make identity claims based on their choices. Odette, for instance, had her first hit of weed in sophomore year when her then-boyfriend Vincent suggested she try it. She didn’t like it very much. The next year, Odette’s friend Jeff gave her some as thanks for helping him with his homework. She liked it a little better. By the end of high school, when her smoking had become habitual, she posted photos and

educational aspirations among even very disadvantaged young people. Some recent empirical studies include Alexander et al. 2008, Frye 2012, and Deterding 2015.

¹⁶ In the teens’ local context, ‘fakeness’ was so loathed that the term was used as a generalized insult for anything, or anyone, bad. Goffman (1959) speaks to the connection between authenticity and social approval, and, as a result, fakeness as moral failure.

Snapchats of smoky O's blown expertly from her mouth.¹⁷ Offline, she tried to mold her practices into the legitimating shape of an identity. "I feel so spiritual when I'm high," Odette mused in the small hours of one Sunday morning, taking two cookies from a drawer in Nicole's kitchen. Biting into one chocolate chip cookie and handing me the other, Odette continued, placid, "I feel so spiritual and peaceful and humble. I could be a hippie."

On a few occasions, Odette reached for the social identity of a spiritual hippie. But her friends typically resisted this claim. Her sister, Maude, for instance, had never smoked tobacco or weed. When her sister or friends chose to, Maude reasoned, "It's not based off their character, it's just something they're doing." Maude split the practice—something a friend *did*—from a person—something a friend *was*.¹⁸ Brittani spoke similarly. To her, a friend who drank and smoked was, "still the same person. They just do something that makes them feel better."

All of the girls, however, claimed a positive identity for their cliques overall. To do this, they drew boundaries between their peer group and outsiders. This boosted their sense of internal similarity, papering over what could otherwise be morally-laden disparities.

One night I sat with Odette, Maude, Nicole, and Rosalie around a picnic table behind the projects. It was just after midnight, and the heat of the day had burned off finally into a clear night.

"Go in the house, Chuckie, you ugly ass!" a skinny Black woman with cropped

¹⁷ This visual vocabulary was somewhat male typed, and quite unusual among the girls. Odette also broadcast more suggestive Snapchats than her friends.

¹⁸ Sociologists Link and Phelan show that stigma can be constructed when members of an outgroup, are perceived to 'be' the thing that they are labeled. They give an example of people *being* schizophrenic rather than having schizophrenia, the former being more stigmatizing. (Link & Phelan 2001: p370). As such, *doing* deviance seen as less problematic than *being* deviant.

dark hair yelled from the long grass nearby. Chuckie, a white man in a sweat-stained grey shirt, leaned out of a first-floor window, and shouted back down at her.

The girls turned to the melee twenty feet away, and giggled.

“My *God*, she’s ratchet,” Nicole said, pursing her lips.

“She’s from Boston, right?” Maude asked.

The man and woman screamed back and forth. Chuckie retreated momentarily. Then his ginger hair poked back out through the window as he spewed insults at the woman below.

“Shut the fuck up, Chuckie,” she bellowed back up. “Your momma fucked that Haitian so he could get a green card, and you *still* live in public housing!” The girls cracked up laughing, scandalized.

“Yes, she’s from Boston,” Nicole said.

“Why are people from Boston coming over here? Like, is it that bad over there?” Maude said.

“So ratchet,” the girls cooed.

Like many residents of poor, urban neighborhoods, the girls judged their neighbors, splitting them into groups of worthy and unworthy.¹⁹ They slammed adults who were

¹⁹ The ‘boundary work’ performed by residents of poor, urban communities to divide their neighbors into categories of worth has been historically documented. In a study of the English working class in Coventry, sociologist Leo Kuper described two types of people; those who could be categorized as ‘respectable’ and those who were ‘rough’ (1953). Herbert Gans’ (1962) contrasted ‘routine seekers’, who seek to conform to ‘conventional’ norms, with ‘action seekers’, who are drawn to the thrill of deviance. Later such studies include Anderson 2000, Duneier 1992, Patillo 2007, and Newman 1999. In part, such dichotomies aimed to rebut popular misconceptions that poor neighborhoods were characterized by one specific culture, or type of people. In this discredited view, a ‘ghetto’ culture was imagined to have emerged as an adaptive response to residential segregation and socioeconomic marginalization. This ghetto ‘culture,’ if not explicitly oppositional to ‘mainstream’ societal ideals and institutions, was seen as at least implicitly in tension with these latter (see e.g., Lewis 1966).

bawdy, who wore tattered clothes or who used in public as “ratchet,” a favored epithet that meant classless, nasty, uncouth. The word drew a stark symbolic boundary, and marked social distance between themselves and that group of others.²⁰

Girls used “hood” and “ghetto” the same way; as class- and race- inflected slurs that roped off others as less worthy.²¹ Walking to the movie theater one night, Odette scowled as two girls strutted past us.

“That weave, though. This one thinks she’s Beyoncé!” she whispered.

“*Maaad* ratchet!” Maude laughed.

“Reminds me of those ratchet hoes that time in South Boston”

“Yeah that was so ghetto!” Odette smiled. “It was like, ‘Shaniqua, heeey!’”

People form identities by drawing boundaries between those they see as similar to themselves, and those they view as different.²² At a group level, too, drawing symbolic

In later research, some scholars considered ‘mainstream’ and ‘ghetto’ not as types of people but instead as schema of practice (building on Hannerz 1969). This was most famously argued in Anderson’s *Code of the Street* (2000), in which ‘decent’ and ‘street’ are described as codes of behavior. These codes co-exist in poor neighborhoods, and may be switched between, and tactically deployed, in different interactions and contexts (see also Harding 2009).

²⁰ Symbolic boundaries “separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership” (Lamont & Molnar 2002: p168). If these boundaries are widely recognized and become institutionalized, social boundaries can form. Social boundaries are “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources.... They are also revealed in stable behavioral patterns of association, as manifested in connubiality and commensality” (ibid).

²¹ At the same time, however, the girls sometimes used the same terms—hood and ghetto—to refer descriptively to the place where they lived. “This is the ‘hood,” Nicole said, as a justification for why we ought not pet a black cat that ran across our path one night. This distinction, between hood as a place and as a type of person, allowed the girls to protect their self-image.

²² Social psychologists and sociologists have looked at the connection between boundary drawing, and personal and group identity (e.g., Tajfel 1974; Epstein 1992; Jenkins 1996; Gieryn 1999; Fiske 2000; for a comprehensive review, see Lamont & Molnar 2002). This dynamic appears in a number of ethnographic studies. For instance, Jay MacLeod described just such a process among the two groups of young men he studied in *Ain’t No Makin’ It*. He explained, “Another factor that bears on

boundaries against outsiders can raise the sense of internal sameness.²³ By contrasting themselves with “ratchet” others, the girls minimized disparities within their cliques.²⁴ This fostered in-group closeness, even when their beliefs and behaviors began to diverge.

Pluralism

When the girls found themselves in situations that highlighted disparities between them, dealing with difference called for another set of strategies. Sometimes, the girls practiced pluralism, letting difference slide, especially when a friend was only *talking* about something provocative. In that case, the girls often tried to proceed with conversation, which could be less awkward than calling somebody out.

One Saturday afternoon, Odette and Stephanie strolled together over the bridge that ran from the end of their street to the strip mall. As they headed to browse the shelves at TJ Maxx, Odette had weed on her mind. Several of her stories veered towards marijuana, even though she knew Stephanie had never smoked and disapproved when she did.

“I got so high on my birthday,” Odette laughed at one point. “I was caught out in a storm, high as shit! It was so funny!” Without pause, Stephanie replied, “Oh God, the last time I got my hair done, I got caught in the rain, too! I wasted all my money.”

the Hallway Hangers’ rejection of the achievement ideology and the Brothers’ acceptance of it is the way in which these peer groups define themselves in relation to one another. The character of the Brothers’ peer group is in some measure a reaction to distinctive attributes of the Hallway Hangers.” (MacLeod 2010 [1987]: p266).

²³ E.g., Lamont 1992, 2000

²⁴ Moreover, it is likely that drawing these boundaries directed their *behavior* in a certain way, too. Boundaries do not only construct groups as similar and different, but also shape people’s understanding of their *responsibilities* toward such groups (Lamont 2000). Lamont explains that clustering “lexical terms within a single, all-encompassing polluting category”—like “ratchet”—is one way in which people “affirm the common rules for living by which they abide as participants in a symbolic community” (Lamont 1992: p27).

Stephanie smoothed over Odette's comments—comments that highlighted the friends' dissimilarity—by pulling on other threads to keep the interaction going. This type of conversational rescue could call for quick thinking, and non-sequiturs that challenged the rules of talk. But repeated several times over many years, this pragmatic response sidestepped conflict, and likely helped the girls preserve their friendships and the supports that flowed through them.

At times, the girls practiced pluralism through more challenging encounters with new habits and behaviors. They often treated their friends with grace and kindness, even when they got “too turnt,” like the night of Stevenson's party.

One Friday evening in January, Odette sat at home with Maude, Nicole, and Rosalie. The girls passed around a bottle of sangria that Nicole had bought an hour earlier from Foodtown, flashing her older sister's license when the man behind the counter, who knew the girls and their ages, had asked for ID. The other girls had handed Nicole a buck or two to contribute to the \$7.99 pitcher, and the lime-flavored tortilla chips that Maude threw onto the counter.

The glass bottle was smooth and heavy, and the girls took it in two hands. Rosalie had only recently started taking the bottle as it was passed around. Nicole didn't much like the development, though she knew it was inevitable. In her black yoga pants, black Ugg boots and a leopard print shirt, Nicole sat back in her chair, peering through her black-rimmed glasses at Rosalie and the rest of the girls.

Odette was complaining about Vincent. When she'd run into him earlier that day, he had high-fived the friend she was with but ignored her.

“He's a stupid little ninja turtle,” Maude consoled Odette. “That's what Vincent

looks like.”

“Whatever,” Odette shrugged, drawing a slug.

Minutes later, Nicole’s glance at her watch announced that it was time to head over to the party. As they stood, the girls checked the percentages of their cell phone batteries. They paused by the door for the clicks and flashes of iPhones while they smiled, pouted, and raised their red cups.

Then they stepped into the dark night, dodging the graying heaps of snow on the sidewalk. The drink had tamed the chill, but goosebumps still prickled Odette’s bare legs as her black pumps slid over the street’s icy film. She caught her balance and tucked her tight, white, short-sleeved shirt back into her black skirt. Vincent would be there tonight.

Across the way, the girls climbed three flights of stairs to Stevenson’s apartment. Stevenson nodded at them from where he stood DJ-ing, his laptop propped on a TV stand in the corner. Beside the computer, a large handle of Bacardi stood with a plastic pitcher of fruit punch. Behind him, a poster of Barack Obama sagged from its fastenings, next to a clock whose dusty hands rested timelessly at 5:50. The girls dropped their hats and coats in Stevenson’s bedroom, where there were two single beds, and a dozen high school certificates tacked to the wall between posters of 2Pac, Wale, and open-mouthed women in bikinis.

As more teens arrived, the girls met some with hugs, and others with glares and snide laughter. Odette was waiting for the guys. When Robenson walked in, she was by him in an instant.

“You got weed?” She asked. He mumbled something, and she pressed two fives into his hand in exchange for a little baggie. Then she gave another male friend two dollar

bills, and convinced him to drive over to the gas station and bring her back a chocolate cigarillo.

When he returned, Odette took her haul into the bathroom, trailed by Nicole, Maude and Rosalie. Sitting on the closed toilet seat, Odette used her house key to score the cigarillo and tip its contents into the trash. She crumbled clumps of marijuana into the rollie.

Maude folded her arms, bored.

Odette fussed and fumbled, and Maude rolled her eyes. Then she went for help. Maude fetched Leon, Rosalie's brother, who walked into the bathroom with an unlit joint of his own dangling from his upper lip. As he nimbly completed Odette's effort, he asked, "Why y'all using a 'rillo? This shit will burn up all your lungs!"

Odette shrugged. Leon turned to his little sister, narrowing his eyes at Rosalie: "Girl, you better not smoke!"

Nicole jumped in. "No, don't you dare ever smoke! I will kill you!" Then turning to Leon she said, "She knows we won't let her."

Rosalie smiled shyly, rocking to the beat of the music thumping from the living room.

"It's okay, I don't want to," Rosalie said.

Odette took her joint into the kitchen, climbing over the furniture that had been shoved in to make a dance floor. Her friends sat silently with her as she smoked. Some guys joined them with their own blunts. A calm quiet fell over the kitchen, as some teens made gentle small talk and acknowledged each another's coming and goings with nods and grunts. Maude and Rosalie waited by the doorway to avoid the hazy cloud. Nicole took a puff or two of Odette's joint, and when they were done, the girls rejoined the party.

Odette felt everything right away. As the girls danced together in the living room to the throbbing bass of Meek Mill, she squeezed her eyes tight together and flailed her arms about. Maude raised her eyebrows at her sister.

Suddenly, Odette turned her back to her friends, pivoting so that she faced into the center of the crowded room. Then she bent double and retched, sending a thick stream of sangria-pink vomit onto the middle of the floor. People screamed and sprang away.

Odette stumbled towards the bathroom, emitting a second pink pool just outside the door. Nicole grabbed Odette's arm and quickly steered her out of the house as guests' jaws dropped with disgust and amusement.

"I'm so high. I'm so sorry," Odette said to Nicole, red eyed, as she collapsed onto the block's interior stone stairwell.

"I am Odette. I am at Stevenson's house. This is a party," she said to herself.

Stevenson stuck his head out of the front door. Then he held out a roll of paper towels.

"Oh, we're fine. Thanks," Nicole said.

Stevenson stood still, arm extended.

"Oh," Nicole said, a second later. "You want us to clean that up?"

Stevenson widened his eyes in confirmation.

Nicole pursed her lips and drew in a breath before heading back into the apartment.

While Nicole mopped up the mess, Maude, Rosalie and I sat with Odette as she cried on the steps. When Nicole re-emerged, she decided to take Odette home. But Odette only had one shoe.

"Where's the other one, baby?" Nicole pressed. Odette was incoherent. Nicole

pressed a palm flat against her friend's clammy shoulder, and tried again.

Maude groaned, and went back into the house to search. When she emerged, shoe in hand, Nicole hauled Odette to her feet.

"Alright, boo, let's go," Nicole murmured.

We walked Odette down the stairs and out into the snowy projects. The girls guided Odette, with no coat and one shoe, to Nicole's apartment, stopping each time she needed to grasp the black metal railings to steady herself or settle her stomach. The girls put Odette to bed in Nicole's apartment. They pulled off her shoe and placed a trashcan near her head.

Before long, the girls laughed about Stevenson's party. There was no blame or malice, and Odette shook her head and smiled when her friends giggled about what happened that night. Nobody resented Odette. The party didn't factor into how they thought about or treated their friend.

Pushback

At times, however, the girls challenged words and actions they opposed. Often, this pushback was somewhat gentle, to protect both the interaction and everyone's feelings.

Through most of senior year, Najma was the only girl in Aisha's clique who regularly smoked and drank. One day after school, Joanne and Aisha were watching YouTube videos in Aisha's living room, when Najma called Joanne's cell. "Najma's going to buy fudge, then she's gonna come over," Joanne explained aloud to Aisha, placing a palm over the handset.

Aisha nodded.

"Wait," Joanne said to Najma, still on the line. "Where you going to buy fudge at?" She paused and frowned. "Ohhh! You said bud! I thought you said fudge!" Joanne said,

throwing her head back with a laugh.

When Najma arrived a few minutes later, Aisha glared at the plastic bag dangling from her fingers.

“You better not have bud in my apartment,” Aisha said.

Najma didn’t respond. She rubbed her head. “I’m tired,” she said. “I’m not going to school tomorrow.”

“You better be careful before you can’t go to prom,” Joanne said softly.

“I have to babysit anyway,” Najma replied.

“I can get your work for you. I can bring it to you,” Joanne offered. Najma shrugged and turned to leave.

“Y’all better be in school on Monday and on your best behavior!” Joanne said to Najma and Aisha before Najma reached the front door. “Cause people are coming to credit the school, and I’m giving them a tour. I’m gonna be stopping by, and y’all better be dressed proper and shit.”

Najma nodded and closed the door behind her

Where Aisha personally criticized Najma’s choices, Joanne used the institutional rulebook to question her plans to skip school. Neither girl was stridently confrontational, and neither pushed Najma when she ignored their challenges.

Two months later, Odette walked with her clique through the neighborhood on a Friday afternoon. Odette kicked at the paving stones. “Robenson gave me weed,” she told her friends. “I can’t wait to smoke it later!”

Nobody replied, so Odette went on. “We could go to the field... You wanna smoke tonight?”

“God, all the time!” Nicole said, smiling thinly. The girls knew that Odette was easily excited, but dancing around her statements could get tiring.

Odette giggled. “No, but I don’t really like drinking anymore... I can ask Jeff to get me a rollie from the gas station on his way home.”

“Damn, you are feeling too creative today, Odette,” Nicole said. This time her smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“Take the pothead away,” Stephanie seconded.

Pushback came when tolerance was exhausted. Mostly, the girls softened its sharp edges; the point was to nudge, not to hurt.

Policing

Occasionally, new habits were policed more forcefully. Often, this involved siblings, whose unconditional bond seemed to make tact less necessary. Lourdes was a few years older than Odette, and she sometimes thought her younger sister drank and smoked a little much. When Odette walked into their living room one night, drunk and high, Lourdes narrowed her eyes.

“You been drinking?” she demanded.

Odette rolled her eyes.

Then Lourdes glanced at Odette’s baggy T-shirt. The shirt had a big red arrow pointing down, and read **Free Breathalyzer. Blow here.**

“The fuck is wrong with you?” Lourdes said. “Is that a dude’s shirt? God!” She laughed at Odette, and her friends on the couch joined in. Laughter was a powerful weapon. Odette walked sheepishly into the kitchen.

At times, friends could be confrontational, too. One night just after Thanksgiving,

Odette and I went to Nicole's house after catching a late showing of *Best Man Holiday* at Entertainment Cinema. In Nicole's bedroom, Rosalie sat cross-legged on a folding metal chair in the middle of the floor. She tried not to yelp as Nicole held her head and wove thick braids into her hair. The strands of hair were laid out on the bed, next to Maude, Lourdes, and a friend, Sarana.

In the corner, Diego, a college buddy of Nicole and Odette staying in Cambridge over break, sat on chair covered with Nicole's clothes. He tipped back his head as he swigged from a can of Bud Light. The girls on the bed passed a Strawberita between them. Maude Instagrammed a selfie with the pink can.

As Nicole braided Rosalie's hair, the girls half-watched a movie playing quietly on a boxy, flickering television. The sides of the TV had been scratched up with scissors, and had several 'Nicole's' graffiti'd in white-out. Like all the other bedrooms in the JP apartments, there were no overhead lights. A bare bulb sticking up on a long lamp pole cast a white-yellow glare.

"No STD's, Diego?" Nicole cracked, during a lull in the movie.

"Not no moh," he quipped back, grinning.

"Hey, let's go smoke," Odette said. Diego stood up, but no one else moved.

"You coming, Jasmin?" Odette asked.

"I'm gonna stay here. It's cold," I replied.

"Good girl," Nicole said, deliberately. "Don't go burn up all your lungs!" she said to Odette's back. Nicole smoked in phases, and in her off-periods, disdain and a little self-righteousness helped her stay straight.

"Where'd they get that weed from?" Nicole wondered aloud.

“No, they have no weed to smoke,” Lourdes said. She meant that they were smoking cigarettes.

“Ew!” Nicole said. “They buggin’ with that black shit! They’re tryna kill themselves!” Tobacco, the girls agreed, was at the bottom of the heap of permissible vices.

“You know hookah is a hundred and eighty cigarettes or some shit?” Lourdes said.

“No, it isn’t! You’re just trying to scare us,” Nicole frowned.

“It popped up on my Instagram the other day,” Lourdes insisted.

“Why we watching this disrespectful ass movie?” Maude cut in. She didn’t smoke— hookah, tobacco or marijuana—and she didn’t much like these discussions. Rosalie had also opted out of the conversation, fussing over her phone to occupy her hands.

Sarana rose meekly from the bed to go and join Odette and Diego.

“Make sure you stay outside with them too,” Nicole said, shaking her head.

“Yeah, for a good thirty minutes!” Maude backed her up.

“Last time, they came to the house smelling like straight up marijuana,” Nicole said. “They had my house smelling like marijuana, and they were mad loud too! You know whenever Odette gets high she gets mad happy?” Nicole continued.

Maude nodded.

“I was like, ‘Yo, Odette. If my Dad comes downstairs I’m not getting in trouble for y’all. I’m straight snitchin’,’” Nicole said.

When Sarana returned, Nicole looked her up and down.

“Let me smell you. Go sit in the corner! You’re making me nauseous,” she said.

Sarana obliged. She was Maude’s friend, not Nicole’s, and not comfortable enough to resist. So Maude did, on her behalf. “I don’t smell a damn thing,” she said. Maude

disliked smoking, but she tended to avoid conflict.

“Nauseous,” Nicole reiterated. It was her house, and so her last word.

The girls got back to the movie, and Nicole finished up Rosalie’s braids.

Such direct policing was not particularly common. When girls challenged their friends, they often marshaled more than one justification, as Nicole did, when she mentioned nausea, getting in trouble, and concerns about her friends’ health. The policing was not merely aimed at cajoling Odette and the others. Rather, it allowed Nicole to make moral claims, state her own commitments, and model to her younger friends what she thought was good behavior.

Falling Into Line?

Pushback and policing from friends did not stop girls engaging in “risk behaviors.” But they may have curbed these habits somewhat. The girls cared what their close friends thought of them, much more than they worried about judgement from adults, like parents. Their peer groups were the contexts in which they made decisions about how to act.

One summer afternoon during a cookout behind the apartment block, Odette stood with some of her friends by a folding table covered with silver trays. The girls loaded paper plates with chicken wings, ribs, tortilla chips, cheese puffs, and watermelon.

As they took their food and sat down together, Odette slipped away to smoke a joint.

“Odette is *too* happy,” Stephanie said, when Odette rejoined the group

“She’s got so much worse this year!” their friend Neveah seconded.

Odette looked back at her friends..

“At least I’m not having sex!” she cut back. “I have to substitute something. You know, like in that episode of *Sex and the City* when all she does is eat when she’s not having sex. It’s like that, but not with food. I don’t even drink that much,” she added, tossing out another excuse. “I don’t even drink hard liquor, just wine, and hello! Wine is good for you!”

Neveah shrugged.

The conversation moved on. But Odette felt a twinge of discomfort as her friends challenged the positive identity that she felt she deserved.²⁵ Her friends’ statements did not stop her smoking or drinking, but they may have nudged her habits. Unlike the conventional account of peer pressure, where risk behaviors are encouraged, and avoidance ridiculed, Odette knew she might have to explain herself each time she lit up.

Girls set acceptable levels of ‘deviance’ in other ways, too. One afternoon at Aisha’s living room table, Najma regaled Aisha, Joanne and Brittani about a fight she had seen earlier. Her friend Kimberley had “gotten into it” with another girl, Anais, on the street.

“Who won?” Aisha asked, without looking up from her phone.

“Well, Anais walked away. So...” Najma said, hoping for enthusiasm about her friend’s victory. “Kimberley barely had any cuts,” she continued. “Anais had a bump on

²⁵ Odette wanted to claim a self-identity as a morally worthy, aspirational young woman. Symbolic interactionists, microsociologists and sociologists of emotion show the labors people undertake to achieve congruity between their sense of self, culturally valued self-presentations, and the responses of others (Goffman 1959, 1967; Garfinkel 1967; West & Zimmerman 1987; for a review, see Turner & Stets 2006). When someone’s identity is verified by the responses of others, they feel positive emotions, like pride. However, if an identity is not verified, a person can feel negative emotions like guilt, shame, and embarrassment (Turner & Stets 2006). Sociologists of emotion argue that the more intense these negative feelings are, the harder a person will work to bring into line behavior, identity, and others’ responses. This suggests that small acts of push-back and policing could have an effect over time, generating a slight emotional discomfort for the recipient, and encouraging her to modify her self-presentation to receive praise and validation.

her frikkin' *face*... Kim hit her so many times in the face I was like, Oh damn, I'm proudda you..."

Aisha and Joanne looked up at Najma.

"Look at you with your ghetto self," Aisha said, smiling ever so slightly.

Najma went on: "After the second time, Kimberley wanted to go for a third time, but I was like, 'Let's go.'"

Brittani scrunched her forehead. "Anais is ratchet. She's irrelevant."

Najma listed other teens who'd witnessed the fight.

"Anais's just irrelevant and stupid," Brittani said.

Najma looked at her friends' faces. "But no, Kimberley's not a fighter. This was her first fight," she said, suddenly defensive.

"She fights with her sisters," Aisha challenged.

"Yo, have you seen her sisters? Reena is so deez... She doesn't look out for Kimberley. She's a snitch," Najma scrambled.

Without directly criticizing Najma, the other girls let her know that they disapproved of fighting.

Gossip has a powerful social regulatory function.²⁶ When the girls criticized other people, they also made statements about what they would tolerate.²⁷ These statements drew boundaries that may have directed their behavior in certain ways. Boundaries do not just

²⁶ E.g., Vaidanathan et al. 2016. Although gossip typically has negative connotations, research also finds it can serve prosocial purposes, including increasing group cohesion (e.g., Feinberg et al. 2012; Dunbar 2004).

²⁷ Marking people and practices as *profane* was one way the girls cajoled one another into line, and narrowed the 'space of possibles' (Bourdieu 2000: p234; 1993: p30). Bourdieu describes how symbolic power can delimit the universe of positions that actors can take, and define the limited set of imaginable actions.

construct groups as similar and different; they also shape people's understanding of their responsibilities toward these groups.²⁸ The symbolic boundaries that the girls drew not only downplayed their differences of beliefs and behaviors, but they likely limited them, too.

Growing Up and Growing Apart

As the girls grew older, some experimented with what social scientists call risk behaviors. Some started drinking, or smoking weed. Some didn't. Others started, then stopped, then started again.²⁹ Studies of adolescent behavior rarely feature such heterogeneity. Instead, existing research would have predicted that the girls either found new friends that matched their new habits, or all adopted the same practices. But neither was true. Risk behaviors were not a "contagion" among the girls.

Rather than finding new friends (selection) or falling like dominos (socialization), the girls accommodated a degree of difference. The *selection* model of peer influence, in which people individually seek friends who mirror them, gives an account of friendship that is unrealistically voluntaristic: the girls did not curate their social ties with a cool rationality. But nor were they powerless victims of group norms. This, in turn, challenges the structural and network determinism of the *socialization* model, the other path to social

²⁸ Lamont 2000.

²⁹ This nuance is usually missed by point-in-time, binary measures of behaviors that are typical to the statistical peer effects literature. Ethnography is better equipped to explore local variation, including the variation in each girls' own practices and predilections over time. As sociologist Cindy Ness points out, "The observation of variation that ethnography as a method can accommodate permits a researcher to highlight a range of reactions and competing outcomes and does not force him or her to promulgate the existence of only one local view, of one set of inferred meanings and emotions, and of a coherence of response that ordinarily defies intuition" (Ness 2004: p46).

homophily.³⁰

Instead, the girls took on a project mostly missed by researchers: they developed strategies to deal with difference. Many of the girls made positive identity claims for themselves as individuals that hinged on resisting “risk behaviors.” In addition, they all claimed a positive *group* identity, by contrasting their cliques to “ratchet,” “ghetto” others. This minimized their sense of internal variation, and also likely limited it. When the girls were clearly confronted with disparities between them, they often practiced pluralism, drawing on interactional skill or on wells of kindness to keep difference from disturbing their conversations and relationships. But they also pushed back against things they disagreed with, and sometimes policed one another more stridently.

Together, these strategies helped the girls shield their relationships from newfound heterogeneity. The choice of one strategy over another often seemed spontaneous and variable: sometimes girls sanctioned their friends, sometimes they were amused. Sometimes they got impatient and irritated, sometimes they kept quiet.

Less important than *why* they girls acted any given way at any given time, however, is the fact that none of the girls acted always in accordance with their stated views about things like drinking or smoking.³¹ It is easy to state moral beliefs or opinions about risk

³⁰ Cultural sociologists have argued against privileging structure over culture, whether structure is taken to mean durable social institutions, or the social networks in which individuals are embedded. They have cautioned against “morphological determinism”—whereby patterns of social bonds are seen to direct and determine the actions of individuals (e.g., Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994; Vaisey & Lizardo 2010). Structural-, network- or morphological determinism are often implied by the peer effects literature. However, relationships are developed and maintained through several interactions, each involving situated moments of evaluation, response and action.

³¹ Adolescents in more culturally heterogeneous neighborhoods, typically poorer neighborhoods, are less likely to act in accordance with their own articulated scripts and frames (Harding & Hepburn 2014).

behaviors, and it is easy for researchers to measure such statements. But such fixed and static claims do not capture what happens in real time as teens find their tastes challenged by their close friends. The girls did not judge each other with binary, yes-or-no opinions about right or wrong. No fixed codes or preferences shaped their social relationships. Instead, girls used a ‘practical consciousness’ to preserve their interactions and their friendships, day-by-day and year-by-year.³²

This speaks to the importance of the situation for an understanding of social influence. It also testifies to the significance, for the girls, of their friendships with each other. Conflict can be costly in adolescent relationships, and, given the support the young women shared, losing these ties may have been more taxing than making space for heterogeneity.³³ With pragmatism and moral flexibility, the girls protected their intimacy.

The girls turned to their friends to deal with hardships both mundane and extreme, ranging from boredom to trauma. Only by comprehending the full significance of peer

³² Vaisey (2008) found an interactive relationship between moral biases and social networks among teenagers. He argues that moral judgment is driven mostly by a “practical consciousness,” not by a decontextualized, deliberate process of reasoning. He also found that often, this process of moral judgment was opaque to the respondents themselves. I found a similar dynamic, where moral judgments of peers were situationally contingent, flexible, and pragmatic. Vaisey gestures to the work of ethnomethodologists like Garfinkel (1967) and Mead (1934), who long ago pointed out that social action is not usually guided by “sense already made” but, rather, meaning and action are negotiated through interaction itself (Vaisey 2008). Emirbayer and Maynard (2011) discuss social action similarly. They point to the construction of social order in real time, by actors trying to resolve difficulties and solve problems. Problem-solving has been a historic concern of pragmatists, who emphasize the importance of creative social action, of context, and of situations in the accomplishment of social order, instead of attributing this latter to inert background beliefs (e.g., Joas 1996; Dewey 1938).

³³ On the costs of conflict for adolescents see Laursen 1996. Some sociologists have considered different strategies people use to avoid conflict. One such relevant strategy is the idea of “moral minimalism,” which Baumgartner (1989) chronicled among residents of a wealthy suburb outside New York City. Michèle Lamont found a similar moral pragmatism to exist among certain groups of workers and managers. She found them to have a “flexible moral code with a weak core that is highly adaptable to situations” (Lamont 2000: p45).

relationships to adolescents' wellbeing can we understand how—and why—the girls were able to accommodate and manage difference.

Social scientists, however, do not always recognize or prioritize social and emotional resources shared between friends. And, when they think about similarity and difference between people, they usually think about a specific set of things, particularly demographic characteristics, as well as beliefs and behaviors. But there are many types of homophily. Most research on adolescent friendships focuses on homophily of practice, but the girls had little of this. Researchers also consider demographic homophily, of which the girls had more. But still other similarities were more meaningful to the girls themselves. They had shared experiences and similar senses of humor. They had common patterns of care. They liked each other and they relied on each other, and although these types of similarity were vaguer and more fuzzy, they motivated the girls to stay close as their habits diverged.³⁴

Cliques are full of complexities and concessions. Often, peer groups are studied only as variables: things that predict the likelihood of something else. But this elides the processes that really drive social influence.³⁵ It overlooks the work involved in guarding

³⁴ Some sociologists argue that similarity is often more important in a relationship's early stages than it is later on. When a relationship has already been established, "other criteria related to the provision of social and emotional resources become significant" (Aboud & Mendelson 1998: p88).

³⁵ Sociologist Lothar Krappman explains, in "[s]urvey studies... it is difficult to realize many of the ambivalences, conditions, and counterarguments that can occur within these relationships. This... obscures the true impact of friendship, which is exerted not only by harmonic friendships, but also, or even more, by friends who fight their way through all the complications and contradictions that characterize different kinds of friendships in real peer life" (Krappman 1996: p36). Sociologists Costello and Hope make a similar argument. They claim that "by their very nature," quantitative methods "are ill-suited to tapping into the peer influence process." In focusing on "improving quantitative research design," they argue, researchers have "forgotten to ask more basic questions, such as exactly what is happening in the context of peer interactions that can lead toward or away from deviant or dangerous behavior?" (Costello & Hope 2016: p84). This chapter shows some of these daily interactions and moments of management that make up peer influence.

bonds when new differences test old friends. And, if social scientists look only at those types of similarity and difference most interesting to them, they ignore the other ways in which teens feel closeness and community. They miss, perhaps most importantly, the reason why teens would do so much to save their friendships.

Part 3: After Graduation

8—College Bound: Struggle and Support on Campus

“CONGRATULATIONS GRADUATES,” read the sign over the auditorium doors. Outside the school, vendors hawked small bouquets for ten dollars and stuffed animals for twenty. Parked across the street was a solitary police bomb truck, although unlike the previous year’s ceremony, a week after the Willow Street shooting, guests were not disturbed by news cameras.

Inside, helium-filled balloons twirled in the air-conditioned gym. Basketball hoops were folded up and out of the way, and a cameraman stood high on a podium.

In a row of seats, Joanne’s mother, Carole, slipped a piece of bubblegum into each of her young children’s mouths. The kids wore their Church best: the three boys in shiny satin vests, and Madeleine with white hair clips on two neat braids. As the crowd stood for the pledge of allegiance, Sandley, three, frowned and pulled the blue glob from his mouth.

“Just chew it,” Carole whispered, popping it back in. “Don’t swallow it.”

After the pledge, overhead speakers boomed rousing string music, and the seniors filed down to the front of the gym. Their strides were light with pride and their gowns billowed behind their legs.

In a series of speeches, teachers and school officials praised the graduating class, and spoke of what they had overcome. The Principal said, “I will remember you most as an innovative, focused and resilient group that made the sweetest lemonade out of the lemons you encountered.” Then, the Superintendent spoke: “Three hundred and sixty five days ago, we gathered in this space and remembered Brianna and Angelina... This year, he continued, “more big events—some natural, some man-made—hit us.” The girls nodded, somber.

But when it came time for diplomas, there was only cheer as teens crossed the stage to the roars of the audience.

After the pageantry, the girls found each other outside. They passed their cell-phones to family members and posed for photos together, by each tree, wall, and entryway that held some memory of the past four years. They started uploading instantly, diplomas in one hand, phones in the other.

Mad shit happened to our class as a whole in Senior year and to everyone individually. We are soldiers! #SOPROUD Joanne tweeted.

Quickly, profiles were flooded with statuses and misty-captioned montages. Aisha, for instance, posted a photo of herself with Joanne, Najma and Brittani, with the caption, **LOOK MAMA WE MADE IT These are MY Girls since day 1. My high school experience, MY LIFE, my everything. These are my sisters if there's Anyone I could say has loved me more than my family it is these girls SINCE 7th GRADE I TELL YOU AND I [5x heart eyes] SO MUCH !!!**

Teens resolved to extend the celebrations. Parties stretched through long summer days and hot nights. Spirited by imminent separation, teens leaned into last chance fun. In a flash of independence, Aisha and Najma went together to get their noses pierced. They uploaded videos of their tearful giggles and new studs.

There were formal celebrations, too, like the one at Aisha's church. Diana invited her daughter to bring her best friends to the brunch that would honor Aisha and two other congregation graduates. When the Sunday came, Joanne and Brittani hopped into the backseat of the car, joining Aisha and her older brother, Daniel, who sat behind the wheel.

"Does anyone have deodorant? I hate when it's so hot, and I forget," Joanne said, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. It was in the high eighties and not yet noon.

She texted Najma, who passed her a roll-on when she arrived a few minutes later.

As Daniel drove, Joanne asked for her best friends' attention. With a photo-editing app, she'd knit photos of her friends into individual collages, which she printed and annotated with memories and inside jokes in glinting silver ink. She'd slid each collage into a heavy frame. Aisha clutched the gift and touched her fingers to the glass. She smiled back at Joanne.

At the Church, a center aisle split rows of chairs. A long table was sumptuously set up front, and crosses of grass and flowers were nailed to the walls. The pastor sat in a big lounge chair, as the mostly female congregation greeted one another in full-length, colorful dresses. Aisha darted into the crowd. Her friends stood back, uncertain, listening to the loud Luganda all around.

"Damn, African women have shoe game!" Najma said, sharp and admiring.

An MC tapped the microphone at the front of the room. He spoke in Luganda and translated to English after every few sentences. The guests sat on cushioned red chairs as the three graduating congregants, together with Joanne, Najma, and Brittani, walked down the aisle to applause. At the fancy table, they were served grape juice in plastic flutes. The girls adjusted their caps and gowns, and sat up straight.

The Pastor took the microphone. His low voice filled the room. "What a huge honor it is to graduate high school in the greatest country in the world."

"Hey," Daniel leant to me while the congregation clapped. "Our Mom got Aisha a laptop for a graduation present," he whispered. "But no one knows. So don't say anything!"

"Let us pray," cried the Pastor.

Then he called up the mothers of the three Church graduates to speak. Diana went

last. Her red dress shone with threads of gold and her dangly earrings shook with the vigor of her speech, which outdid the previous moms and the Pastor.

“Aisha has been a very good little baby to me,” she said, in accented English. “She’s kind of spoiled, not through me, but through her aunties. But why I loved Aisha? She knows God.” The room clapped. “As a single mother, it’s not easy to raise up kids. Sometimes you come home when you’re grumpy, you don’t even want to talk to anyone. But I really praise God because I’ve tried my best, and I’m still trying.”

Next, the girls were called up. Aisha, usually buoyed by an audience, timidly palmed the mic. “I came here seven years ago, with no clue what America was gonna look like,” she said, voice trembling. She readjusted the microphone. “I’m sorry if I cry. I’m very emotional. If it wasn’t for my mom, I wouldn’t be here. I didn’t know how the world worked, and then when I realized my mom was a single mother and helped me get through so much, and my two brothers—” Aisha dropped to her knees in honor.

Aisha stood and wiped her tears. Then she thanked two aunts, the Pastor, his wife, and the Church. She turned to the table. “And I wanna thank my three friends: Joanne, Brittani, Najma. I love you guys so much.” The adults murmured approvingly. “Joanne was my first American friend ever, in seventh grade. Brittani I met also in 7th grade. We were always together. And then Najma is the one person who will have your back through anything, all the time, anywhere.” She looked at her friends. “They understand the in-between. Like, being Ugandan and being American. That is not easy. They understand.”

Aisha pointed at the young children staring up from the front rows as she addressed them. “Have friends that understand you, who have been where you have been,” she urged, new tears rolling down the rounds of her cheeks.

Her friends spoke similarly, also moved by the day's momentousness. Joanne was sobbing before she started. "We've all had experiences," she said. "Like sometimes people don't understand... I came from another country... And I also have a single mom." The congregation applauded.

Najma, her voice and body language guarded, spoke firmly: "I understand what Aisha feels and Joanne feels... I'm just very happy to be here."

Finally, Brittani walked up, sniffing back tears. "Hi everyone. I'm really nervous. I thank God for getting me through high school with all my friends. I also grew up with a single mother... It's been a real great struggle but we fought through it, my friends."

The girls comforted one other and wiped each other's smudged make-up before lunch. In a side room, ladies ladled rice, beans, stewed meat, and fried greens onto polystyrene plates. The graduates ate at the decorated table, by a big cake in the shape of an open book. Then the music began. As songs thumped and women kicked off their heels to dance, the teens at the table let loose, too, their raucous talk masked by the music.

Some adults approached the table. They offered the church grads congratulations and, occasionally, a white envelope, into which teens quickly peeped to note their haul. Diana placed a heavy bag by Aisha's feet and walked away. As the crowd ate, danced, and talked, few eyes were on Aisha as she glanced into the bag and gave a small nod.

Aisha's friends buzzed around her. "What is it?"

"It's a laptop," she said, standing up to go talk to some new people.

"What type?" Joanne asked, trying to prolong the excitement.

"Not a Mac," Aisha shrugged. "It's kinda ghetto."

"Girl!" Najma said to her back. "I don't even have a computer!"

It wasn't what Aisha had dreamed about, but it would do. It was the most grown-up thing she had ever owned.

Next Steps

Along with most of their classmates, the girls applied to college during their senior year. College seemed like the obvious next step. Like many American teens, the girls subscribed to the “college for all” discourse that has proliferated in recent decades, with the result that most young people nationwide expect to attend and graduate college.¹ In part, their motivation is economic; today, a majority of jobs, including those in the fastest-growing occupations, require post-secondary credentials.² College graduates also earn around two-thirds more than those with only a high school diploma, and they are less likely to face unemployment.³

But college has taken on other meanings, too. As the transition to adulthood has lengthened, and traditional markers of independence like getting married and buying a home have become delayed—or unattainable—for poor young adults, college has turned into a new marker of autonomy and success.⁴

College fed the girls' identity claims. The young women saw themselves as smart

¹ Goyette 2008; Reynolds et al. 2006; Rosenbaum 2001; Schneider and Stevenson 1999. Most racially and socioeconomically marginalized young people aspire to a college degree and white-collar job (e.g., Brock 2010, Nielsen 2015, Rosenbaum 2015)

² This is expected to rise to two-thirds of job openings by 2020 (Carnevale et al. 2013). See also Institute for Higher Education Policy 2005; Perna 2007; Goldrick-Rab & Shaw 2005

³ U.S. Department of Education 2014

⁴ The use of educational aspirations to make moral claims is observed in the USA and internationally (e.g., Frye 2012; Silva 2012; Nielson 2015).

and aspirational, sharing an “ambition imperative” that linked status to purpose and drive.⁵ In the 1970’s and 1980’s, some researchers claimed to have identified an “oppositional culture” among low-income, minority youth. These teens allegedly disinvested from education when faced with blocked opportunities. Anthropologist John Ogbu suggested that poor youth of color shunned school success to avoid being seen as “acting white.”⁶ But scholars have since rejected this idea, finding instead that teens of all races and ethnicities value education. Researchers find that African-American young people report some of the highest levels of commitment to education, and that high-achieving African-American students are seen positively by peers.⁷ The girls, too, praised ambition and academics.

Aiming high was important. Joanne, for instance, judged the neighborhood boys who didn’t seem to try. “A lot of people ‘round here don’t try that hard,” she said. “They don’t do anything or get anything. And it’s like, community college is good too, but you wanna live here your whole life?”

To Joanne and her friends, college conjured pride and a bright future. They supported each other’s goals of leaving home. They toured campuses, shared scholarship opportunities, and passed on what they heard from older cousins and friends: which schools had popping parties, and which were a little too crazy.⁸

⁵ Nielson 2015

⁶ Fordham and Ogbu (1986) was among the most forceful, and most critiqued, exposition of this idea, but it appears in other work too, like Willis’ (1977) ethnography of working class “lads” in England, who rejected educational aspiration when faced with hurdles to success.

⁷ E.g., Carter 2003; Harris 2011; Tyson 2011; Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey 1998; Cook & Ludwig 1977.

⁸ In Bettie’s (2003) account of young women in a California high school, the college-track low-income and minority girls built a social group from middle class peers. Bettie also found that

They also held one other accountable. One Friday night while Vincent cut Aisha's hair with his electric razor, Joanne joined her best friend on the bathroom floor. Aisha stuck her legs straight out and pointed her feet toward each other, one sock striped, the other covered in little hearts. "Did you do your scholarship application?" Joanne asked. "You know I'm a be on you about that!" The following night, Joanne offered to explain the online application portal to Najma.⁹

The girls spent fall of their senior year working on their applications. They, they waited. In January, the first large envelopes started to appear in the mailboxes that poked up from piles of snow in the middle of the projects. Inside, formal offers were laid out on smooth and heavy paper, smartly adorned with university letterhead.

Joanne and Najma were watching a pirated download of the final *Twilight* movie when Joanne's first letter arrived. Carole carried it in as she came home from her Saturday shift at the hospital. Najma hugged her friend, then took to Twitter. **Congrats to this hoe right here @Joanne she got into umass boston!** she wrote. Over the next several weeks, girls posted screenshots of welcome emails or acceptance letters, or announced each other's achievements online.

But the girls had less support and information than they would have liked as they

college-bound young minority women were often busy, introverted girls, who, "did not have the social life that is considered to typify the high school experience" (2003: p165). The girls in Cambridge did not have to pay such a social price, and their friendships with socioeconomically similar peers supported their academic aspirations.

⁹ Such peer processes are less well-documented in studies of how young people promote academic achievement among their friends. Typically, studies focus on how school friends mediate adult influence. For instance, having a best friend with a college educated mother (Cherng et al. 2013), or having a peer group characterized by higher levels of parental education (Crosnoe & Muller 2014) can promote college readiness and college completion. But the girls helped one another independent of adult actions or characteristics.

applied to college. As the landscape of post-secondary institutions has flourished, it has grown harder and harder to navigate.¹⁰ This is especially true for first-generation students, who often struggle to construct effective trajectories. Most of the girls' parents lacked the time, English, or know-how to help their daughters develop pathways, or deal with paperwork. The girls did have school counselors, unlike many low-income students. But at CRLS, students complained about unfocused, unhelpful counselors, stories which likely limited how much the girls relied on resource.¹¹

Instead, the girls used a sort of slapdash pragmatism when it came to choosing schools.¹² Price was typically the first concern, with location an important second. To these factors, the girls added other stray scraps of information and intuition. Odette, for instance, applied to Fitchburg State because they had once mailed her older sister a pamphlet.

For a brief moment, some of the girls hoped they might all leave together. Joanne remembered, "We were real naïve for a little bit and thought we could go to the same school and be roommates." But in the end, the girls made different lists. As Aisha explained, "We knew Joanne was going to Harvard or something. Najma was okay, so we knew she could get into the state schools."

As they drew up shortlists, many of the young women felt confused. For a while, Aisha had dreamed of going to college in California, far from Diana's discipline and

¹⁰ Roska et al. 2007

¹¹ These counselors were not like the attentive staff that diligently direct the post-high school trajectories of students in other, more elite schools (see e.g Khan 2011: p172 - 178)

¹² Some girls used a similar approach when it came to choosing courses of study for themselves or their friends. Odette said of Rosalie, "I think Rosalie should do criminal justice, 'cause she's such a good spy. Like, whenever she wants to find something out, she'll go to Instagram, Facebook, and she'll be like, 'What's happening with this guy?' She'll be able to find out."

Boston's winters. But she applied nowhere outside of Massachusetts. "I only applied to dumb schools because I didn't know what to apply to," she said. Senior Natty spoke similarly: "I don't know what to look for in a college... One of the schools I'm trying to apply to is a private school, but I can't say it off the top of my head."

Then, as offers started coming, some of the girls looked to their peers for information. Najma, for instance, tweeted, **Curry College or St. John's??** and classmate Kayla posted, **University of Rhode Island or Bryant??? #imtorn**

The girls often struggled to rank schools, though they mostly agreed that community college was an inferior choice. At a banquet celebrating high-school seniors who were graduating from the city's Workforce program, Nicole scowled at the printed card listing the colleges to which students had won admission. "They really shouldn't put Bunker Hill," she mocked. "It's a community college. Of course you're gonna get accepted! If you don't, you should really reevaluate yourself."

Heads turned to Maude, who would start at Bunker in the fall. After a moment, Maude shrugged. "That's what Lourdes said," she said.

The girls who accepted—enthusiastically or reluctantly—a place at community college explained their decisions differently. Brittani felt like she had no choice. She was thrilled to win acceptance at Simmons, her first-choice school, but her mom's debt stopped her getting the loan she would need. Brittani would be joined at Bunker by Aisha's friend, Sheena, who explained, "I don't wanna take out like a twenty-thousand-dollar loan, and also, my grades are bad."

Maude was long-winded when she talked through her choice: "I knew I still wanted to go to school, but I knew I wasn't ready for the big school, going away right away," she

said. “I knew I had more to do. So, I chose to stay home and do community college. ‘Cause with me like, money wasn’t a problem, but at the same time it was a problem. I didn’t wanna go to a big school where I knew I couldn’t pay the rest and then be in debt for the rest of my life.”

The girls did their best given limited guidance from their parents and school. They helped each other as much as they could, encouraging one another to dream big and apply to college.

Not all of their classmates enjoyed peer support. Natty, eighteen, was a cousin of Odette and Maude’s, who grew up with two brothers, a sister, and a mom who worked long hours washing dishes. Natty remembered being a happy child, but a number of moves between elementary schools left her with a vague sense of drift.

Like Odette, Natty found that boys made her feel better. Also like Odette, an attraction sparked between her and Vincent. The two started flirting, and a while later, Odette walked in on them in Vincent’s bed. From that day on, she called Natty her “ex-cousin.”

“Natty doesn’t have much close friends,” Odette’s best friend Stephanie said. Natty didn’t disagree. Most of Natty’s friendships dissolved through high school; her habit of seeking affection boys both stemmed from, and caused, her social isolation.

Natty found a new boyfriend, Keshawn. He worked at a grocery store and was Natty’s primary source of support when her mother was treated for breast cancer and after the deaths of her friend, Bree, and her ex-boyfriend, Bryan. “He’s been there every step of the way,” Natty said. “If I need someone to talk to, he’ll talk to me. He tries to take my mind off it. Like, he took me roller-skating.”

Yet Natty felt that her relationship stopped her building new connections, especially at school. She explained, “I’m not really trying to talk to people... Keshawn doesn’t make a big fuss about it, but he is like, ‘Are any boys in class trying to talk to you?’ I’m like, ‘Stop being jealous. I go to school for school.’”

Natty had ambitions, and her older sister tried to help her apply to a four-year college. Natty said, “She’s always kind of been like my mom. She goes to my school meetings. My mom stopped that like seventh grade.”¹³ Yet despite her sister’s encouragement, Keshawn’s complaints troubled Natty. “He’s getting nervous because he knows I want to go away to school, not just live at home and go to school. He thinks crazy stuff like, ‘You’re going to cheat when you go to school,’ and stuff like that.”¹⁴

In the end, Natty decided to enroll at Bunker Hill, though she couldn’t exactly explain why. “Going to a four year was on my bucket list. I don’t know why my first step was towards community,” she said.

Natty needed her boyfriend for social and emotional support: he helped her through crisis after crisis. She depended on Keshawn, and so she felt torn. Natty’s success would unbalance their equilibrium. Meanwhile, her former friends, including Odette and Stephanie, pushed one another to leave home. They encouraged individual successes through a dynamic of *collective lift*, and their shared dreams of a future beyond the

¹³ Ray (2018) and Bettie (2003) show the role of siblings in helping poor young people manage trajectories through adolescence. This was less common among the girls I met. Odette for example, did not know which schools her younger sister, Maude, had applied to, and did not help her prepare applications.

¹⁴ Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) show how romantic relationships can affect the college experiences of young women. They found that boys could pull girls away from college, or try to control the time young women spend with their friends.

projects.¹⁵

Although her former friends did not have as much guidance as they needed, and although they made big decisions mostly alone, the girls other helped one other where they could. They gave each another pointers and information, and, perhaps as importantly, encouragement and validation. In the end, all nine girls in both cliques graduated high school, applied to college, received offers, accepted places, and enrolled.

Of the nine, seven went to four-year universities. Odette, Nicole, Najma, and Rosalie went to private New England colleges, and Aisha, Joanne and Stephanie went to state schools. Maude and Brittani went to community college. By graduating high school and starting college, the girls took a big step towards breaking the cycle of poverty. But their path would be steep.

Leaving Home

In recent years, access to higher education has ballooned for first-generation and low-income students like Aisha, Joanne, and their friends. However, although almost half of low-income young people enroll in postsecondary education at some point, studies find that only 11% can expect to earn a bachelor's degree after six years.¹⁶ This is much lower than the 55% of more advantaged students who can expect the same. Some researchers argue that the real difficulty now facing young adults is not college access, but college completion.¹⁷ This is especially true for poorer students: the gap between the percentage of

¹⁵ Jinx, one of the Hallway Hangers in *Ain't No Makin' It*, describes the bind caused by an absence of a sense of collective lift: "We all don't break away because we're too tight. Our friends are important to us... If we can't make it together, fuck it" (MacLeod 1987: p120).

¹⁶ Goldrick-Rab & Roksa 2008

low-income and high-income students who earn a bachelor's degree has doubled over the past 35 years.¹⁸

Research has tried to explain these disparities. On the whole, low-income and first-generation students arrive on campus less ready for college-level coursework and less skilled at time management than their middle-class peers.¹⁹ However, even controlling for things like academic preparation, poor students still drop out of college at higher rates. This means that it is often on-campus experiences that determine students' ability to continue.²⁰

These on-campus experiences are institutional, financial, logistical, and emotional. First, vulnerable students are typically concentrated in less selective, under-resourced schools that have lower graduation rates.²¹ Two-year colleges enroll a disproportionate number of poor students, and these students face especially long odds: just five percent of low-income, first-generation students at public two-year colleges earn their bachelor's

¹⁷ Rosenbaum et al. 2015

¹⁸ Low-income, first-generation students are nearly four times more likely—26% to 7%—to leave higher education after the first year than students who have neither of these “risk factors” (Engle & Tinto 2008). Engle and Tinto's comprehensive report also finds that in public, four-year institutions, only 34% of low-income, first-generation students earned bachelor's degrees in six years, as compared to 66% of their peers. Private, not-for-profit four-year schools have an even bigger disparity between low-income, first-generation students and their wealthier peers: 43% to 80% earning a degree after six years. At public, two-year institutions, only 5% of low-income, first-generation students go on to achieve a bachelor's degree, versus 24% of their more advantaged peers. Within statistics like these, there are also notable racial disparities. At two year institutions, 17% of white students achieve associate's degrees, but only 11% of Black students do the same. At four-year institutions, 63% of white students receive bachelor's degrees six years after college entry, compared with only 41% of Black undergraduates (Snyder and Dillow 2012: Table 379).

¹⁹ E.g., Engle & Tinto 2008; Terenzini et al. 1996; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin; Warburton et al. 2001; Bui, 2002

²⁰ E.g., Berkner & Chavez 1997; Choy et al. 2005; Chen 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin 1998; Warburton et al. 2001

²¹ Light & Strayer 2000; Alon & Tienda, 2005; Bowen et al. 2009

within six years, although two-thirds plan to.²²

College can also be expensive. Not only can “sticker shock” deter low-income students from attending or continuing college, but poor students who remain at school usually experience greater unmet financial need throughout their studies.²³ Aid packages can help, but federal Pell Grant and Work-Study programs have not kept pace with recent increases in tuition and living costs, leaving many poor students with financial struggles that can lead to leaving college.²⁴ Relatedly, poor students are more debt averse than their better-off classmates, and are more likely to drop out as debt accumulates.²⁵ And, many low-income students prefer to work than take on greater debt, but jobs can take time away from coursework and campus integration. Students who work more than twenty hours per week have lower college persistence than those who work less, and up to sixty percent of low-income, first generation students work over that amount.²⁶

Students must also clear logistical hurdles. Colleges can be complicated bureaucracies. Young people have to file baffling paperwork, and forge bonds with unfamiliar adults. Even controlling for high-school achievement, low-income students are usually less confident with these tasks. Middle-class children are generally socialized to advocate for themselves, and in turn, they come to believe that institutions will solve their problems. This expectation helps them access resources, allowing privileged students to

²² Engle & Tinto 2008

²³ Engle & Tinto 2008

²⁴ Kim 2007; Chen and DesJardins 2010; Alon 2011

²⁵ See e.g., Cunningham & Santiago 2008

²⁶ Engle & Tinto 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005

benefit more from things like group study, extracurricular activities, faculty interaction and support services.²⁷ Teachers also respond positively to a middle-class, pro-active interactional style, so a reluctance to seek help can limit academic achievement.²⁸

These types of on-campus dynamics can contribute to the shame and confusion that many low-income students report. Poor students describe feeling alienated, isolated, and unsupported by faculty.²⁹ Some report discrimination.³⁰ These negative emotional experiences can both hamper success and contribute to the decision to leave school.

For young people to convert their *values* about education to academic achievement, students need to feel included, and that they fit in.³¹ But ‘fitting in’ is often bound tightly to social class; more advantaged students are more likely to become academically and socially integrated.³² As well as on-campus emotional challenges, low-income students also report greater emotional obligations at home, too, with higher rates of family or care-

²⁷ E.g., Lohfink & Paulsen 2005; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin 1998; Pascarella et al. 2003; Pike & Kuh 2005; Richardson & Skinner 1992; Terenzini et al. 1996

²⁸ Working class students have less dominant cultural capital on which to draw on in the classroom. Schools and colleges privilege this type of capital, and the norms and behaviors associated with its expression (See e.g., Lareau 2003; Carter 2005; Willis 1977; Streib 2011; Calarco 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Aries & Seider 2005; Armstrong & Hamilton 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). Differences in students’ ability to engage authority figures in academic contexts affect their access to institutional resources, as well as their acquisition of cultural and social capital, their educational experiences, and their post-graduation mobility (Calarco 2011; Carter 2005; Stephens et al. 2012; Stuber 2011; Lareau 2003; Rivera 2015; Collier & Morgan 2008).

²⁹ First-generation students are more likely to view the campus environment, particularly the faculty, as less supportive and less concerned about them (Pike & Kuh 2005; Terenzini et al. 1996), and more likely to report having experienced discrimination on campus (Richardson & Skinner 1992; Terenzini et al. 1996).

³⁰ Richardson & Skinner 1992; Terenzini et al. 1996

³¹ Carter 2005

³² Ostrove & Long 2007; Carter 2005; Berger & Milem 1999

related responsibilities, and higher rates of dependents.³³

But dreams are resilient.³⁴ Despite several obstacles, many low-income students are tenacious and determined. Many “stop out”—stopping and starting their schooling over many years—instead of dropping out. Between twenty-five and thirty percent of undergraduates “stop out.”³⁵ Although their probability for eventual graduation is low, students cling to their hopes of better things.³⁶

All of the NC girls were from low-income homes. Most were the first generation in their families to go to college. In addition to the well-studied hardships that threaten students like these young women, the girls faced another challenge, too. They were leaving each other behind. Would their friendships survive the distance? How would the girls adjust to their new homes without their best friends?

College

Odette

Odette was a year older than her sister Maude, and Maude’s classmates Aisha, Joanne, Najma and Brittani. In Odette’s senior year, she applied to one college. “I hate doing applications. I’m just so lazy,” she reasoned. The school was Colby Sawyer, a private school in New Hampshire that her counselor suggested. Odette knew the name; Nicole’s

³³ Rosenbaum et al. 2007: p2; Bozick 2007; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin 1998

³⁴ This challenges Clark’s influential ‘cooling out’ hypothesis, according to which underprepared students go through a ‘cooling out’ period in college, revising their goals downwards towards more realistic outcomes (Clark 1960). See also Alexander et al. 2008

³⁵ Berkner 2003; Carroll 1989; Park 2013

³⁶ DeilAmen & Turley 2007; Giudici & Pallas 2014; Goldrick-Rab 2006

brother went there. Plus, she liked the sound of going out of state. Her mom opposed the move, so as Odette worked on her application, she told a white lie or two. She claimed she had already been accepted, and that it was free.

Luckily for Odette, she got in. She even won a scholarship, news she learned the same day her nephew, Emery, was born. “It was kind of a magical day,” she said.

Odette could not wait to leave. She was excited for the freedom, and the parties. She also looked forward to the landscape—all the green and the “nature.” She made plans, deciding to major in nursing. Nursing would be stable and interesting, and helping people came second nature to Odette. Quick to laugh and doggedly optimistic, she loved to make others feel good. Outside of class, she hoped to join the dance team and take a cooking class.

With an online personality quiz, the school matched Odette with roommates, five girls, including a fellow nurse and a physical therapy major. One was an equestrian, another from Maine. With money diligently saved from work, Odette took the subway to Best Buy in Boston, and hauled back a laptop in a big bag, sweat beading down her spine on a 95 degree day.

Odette’s scholarship program brought her and her fellow scholars to campus a week before the semester started. “We got some tools,” she said. “Getting used to the library, knowing who to go to to help us out. We went to this lady’s house. We met the president. It was really cool.” Unguarded and expectant, Odette tried to settle in.

The first few weeks were a rush. “I was so happy to be away from anybody calling me, like, ‘Where are you?’ and not having to worry about, ‘Oh, I can’t have this person over or that.’” The liberty was heady, and Odette leaned in.

The first few disappointments were small. Odette was let down that the dance team didn't hold auditions to filter the dilettantes from the skilled. Classes, too, could be perplexing, like when a teacher gave her a 1 out of 5 for a speaking presentation because she wore sweatpants. "It was about hip hop. I was teaching them to dance. It was completely appropriate for that occasion. What does she think I'm gonna wear?" she said.

Over time, Odette started to miss her friends, especially Stephanie. "Just having someone to relate to certain things, like, if you're watching a show or a joke, like, 'Oh, only Stephanie would get this,'" she explained. Stephanie was living at home, back in NC, going to UMass Boston, and Odette wished they could hang out like they used to.

Odette's spirits waned. She found that smoking a little weed could soothe her nibbling stresses. When Vincent, her ex back in Cambridge, kept texting her, Odette smoked a little more.

To balance this new habit with her deadlines, Odette looked to Diego, a classmate from Oakland. He smoked hard and worked harder. Diego was kind, and they made each other laugh. The two became close friends. Sometimes, they slept together, but mostly their friendship was platonic. With no pride or jealousy, they looked out for each other, like when Odette brought Diego home to Cambridge over Thanksgiving when he couldn't pay to fly back to California.

Diego lay on Odette's bed in her parents' house and looked at the walls, plastered with her certificates for high school achievement and summer programs.

They discussed what Diego's major might be.

"I write really good, and I present really good," Diego said.

"Really *well*," Odette corrected, smiling and shaking her head.

Later that night, Odette hung out with Diego and Stephanie. Some NC guys stopped by, to ask if they wanted to smoke.

“Are you gonna get a bag of ten, do a two-for-two?” Odette asked Diego.

“Look at you, knowing all the words,” Stephanie said.

Back on campus after break, Odette’s mood fell. She couldn’t keep up with biology, so she withdrew from the class, which landed her on academic probation.

“I kind of got depressed,” Odette said. The nurse blamed the cloudy weather.

When little blossoms pushed up from the hard earth and bloomed in the trees, Odette was newly determined. Her grades crept up at the start of Spring semester as she found a rhythm with work. She tried to enjoy some of what college could offer: zumba, yoga, peace and quiet.

One March evening, Odette was walking home from yoga when her phone buzzed. It was Nicole, calling to tell Odette that Bryan had been killed. She remembered hearing the words in slow-motion, “just like on the TV.”

Odette froze. She had been worried about Bryan for a few days. Earlier that week, she woke from an eerie nightmare and then got a call from Junior, an NC friend. “We’re looking for Bryan,” he had said. “Have you heard from him? When was the last time?” Odette felt queasy. “I had a gut feeling,” She said. “I knew it wasn’t going to end well.”

The grief hit Odette hard. She had grown up with Bryan, and she remembered the light-up sneakers he wore when he first moved to the neighborhood. Odette replayed their final encounter: they had talked as he was leaving his mom’s house in JP. She pictured him turning and walking away. She ruminated on what Bryan experienced the day he died, on what his last thought might have been.

I can't even study... I really want to go home :(Odette wrote on Facebook, and Stephanie and seven other friends liked her status.

She asked a professor to excuse her from class. He refused, since Bryan was not a blood relative. Odette skipped anyway, and rushed back to Cambridge. Her friends needed her, and she needed them.

Then came midterms, and a panicked burst of all-nighters couldn't make up for time lost. Then bombs exploded at the finish line of the marathon in her hometown. Then she watched as a manhunt for a former classmate locked down the city.

Odette was sinking. "At school, I wake up, I smoke. And then like at 2 o'clock, after we eat and relax and smoke again, and then with dinner, and then we smoke," she explained.

Odette found nursing hard and competitive, and she didn't like feeling that she wasn't good enough. She figured it was better to do something with her "heart all in it, to get all those A's and stuff," so she switched her major and made new plans.

"Now, I'm majoring in communications, like PR," she explained. "I could minor in like, child development? I want to be like, a teacher, or something one day, or I could work in a hospital. Like PR. Like *Mad Men* got me thinking about marketing. I could be really good at that because I'm so creative... I could do events, like for the White House, or stuff like that." She opted for a minor in business, reasoning, "It wouldn't hurt me to know how taxes work and all that financial stuff."

Odette quivered with undirected energy. Nobody helped her disentangle the realistic paths from the pipe dreams that flashed before her.³⁷

³⁷ This idea appears in other studies of young people. Ray (2017) also shows low-income teenagers unclear about feasible pathways. She describes respondents' expectations that shift work at a local

The switch did not fix Odette's struggles. She got a D in her writing class for failing to submit the final. Odette had submitted it, late, but by then the adjunct had already left the school. And, she argued with Stephanie, their intimacy stretched thin over state lines. Odette didn't know how to fix it; she didn't really know what had started it.

Still, tireless and optimistic, Odette attacked her sophomore year with renewed zeal. She lined up easier classes: French, helped by her fluent Kreyol, history, and media.

Odette gushed about her plans. "My professor was saying how we're in the age of social media and stuff, and I'm like, my major is actually gonna be important, I'm gonna make money from it!" She patched things up with Stephanie. Robenson helped her move into a shared house off-campus with friends. The "blue house" had a kitchen island and built-in living room shelves.

"I'm excited for this new chapter of my life," Odette said, that old grin dimpling her cheeks. "This is gonna be like: How Odette Got Her Groove Back." She thought about trips she might take, "Puerto Rico for Spring Break, and San Jose 'cause my friend lives there, and for December, somewhere like Texas."

College didn't get easier. Odette couldn't manage her time and didn't ask for help. She spoke to others on her scholarship and found they were struggling too, "mostly because of the culture and the professors," she said. "I feel like a lot of the faculty weren't used to teaching people of color, because for so long they didn't have any," Odette said. She felt estranged from her academic advisor, a white woman. "She didn't really care to push me

bakery would help them climb the ladder in the "food industry," or who feel that "Working as floor crew at a clothing store while taking a fashion class at a community college will lead to a successful career in the fashion industry." (2017: p9). Similarly, DeLuca et al. (2016) interview a young man working as a cashier in Chick-fil-A who hopes the position will launch him into the hospitality industry.

to make it. Like, as an African-American student. I can already tell she didn't want me here." Racial dynamics seeped into her social life, too. "You would find yourself not being able to go to certain parties, because, 'Oh, Black girls,'" Odette remembered. There were students who had "never interacted with Black people," and students who used the N word. Odette said, "It just didn't feel like there was much support."

Around the same time, Vincent started dating her classmate, Abigail. "That kind of stressed me out and that made me sad, and I didn't really want to do anything," Odette explained. Smoking and drinking pushed the troubles away for a few hours at a time.

A month later, over Winter break of her sophomore year, Odette decided not to go back to Colby Sawyer. When asked, she accounted for her decision to leave with the fact that her college had "decided to change the communications department to media studies... I didn't want media studies on my diploma. What is that? Like, what the fuck am I gonna do with that, be a paparazzi?"

For weeks, her stuff from school lay on her bedroom floor. Hanging her clothes back in her childhood closet was a defeat she wouldn't yet concede.

Odette missed the enrollment deadline for the local community college, so she signed up instead for one in South Boston. She got two jobs.

She liked community college. At the end of the semester, at what would have been the halfway point of her four-year journey, she cracked open a Strawberita on her bed. "I met so much guys and people!" she said, sanguine. "And I had a quiz I didn't study for and I got one hundred."

But Odette wanted to transfer. She didn't see herself as a community college girl. She said she had trouble getting hold of a transcript. "It's mad technical, for no reason."

When the transfer didn't pan out, she switched instead into the local community college, and took a job at Panera Bread. She shone in customer service, with her attentive demeanor and endearing dimples, and she got on well with her colleagues.

On a mid-shift break one afternoon, we walked down to the river. Her uniform cap had imprinted a crease in the back of her hair. "This is my favorite place," she said, looking out at the Boston sky mirrored in the calm water.

Odette shared her new plan: she would load up on community college classes the following semester, then transfer back to Colby Sawyer, even though her friends had left the blue house. Odette had called a woman about getting back her old scholarship, and if she could combine that with grants and loans, and commute home on weekends to keep her Panera job, she figured she could afford it. She was worried about the \$1,200 debt she had run up for housing, though, and the \$257 health insurance charge from the first community college when her application wasn't processed before the waiver deadline.

Odette eventually re-enrolled at Colby Sawyer, planning to move back to New Hampshire but take online classes to avoid being penalized for class absences or lateness.

In her final few days in Cambridge, Odette tied up some loose ends. During the year and a half she had spent back at her parents' house, she had met and married Samuel. At the time, the whirlwind of their courtship felt like a glimmer of good amidst all the things making her sad.

After their legal ceremony, Odette's gaze had grown glassy as she thought about the 'real' wedding they might have. "Bringing a New York theme to Haiti," she had mused. "Like the Hamptons, on a beach. A all-white type-a thing."

But week by week, the sheen dulled.

“Relationships is like, they’re hard,” Odette said, two months after getting married. “That’s the thing with Haitians. The stubbornness, the controllingness, that thing about being a man.”

Eventually, Odette was done with the relationship. But she found the bureaucracy confusing. “You can’t just call and say I want to cancel the process,” she said. “You have to write a letter, to whom it concerns, and all that.”

Samuel screamed down the phone that she was heartless. She didn’t know what would happen to his Green Card application. She was no longer responsible.

Determined, Odette rode the red line to meet Samuel at the courthouse one January afternoon. It was ten degrees out, and she wore a black beanie, and bright fuchsia on her mouth. War paint.

“Children or no children?” The clerk asked, without looking up from behind her desk.

“No children,” Odette said. The clerk slapped down a thick heap of papers.

In the elevator down, Odette and Samuel stood in bristling silence. When the doors opened, she walked wordlessly into the snow. Samuel held the papers to his winter coat and watched her leave.

“I’m glad that’s over,” Odette said outside, kicking the toe of her black Ugg boot into the powdery snow that had settled on cracked brown earth. “Well, almost,” she pursed her lips. “There’s a fee to pay, and a summons, which is... well, I don’t really know what that is.”

Odette knew a friend, a young mother, who got government assistance for her own divorce. “I should get it too,” she frowned. “I go to school. Plus, I live in public housing.

Give me a break.” The ice crackled underfoot as the winter light leached from the greying sky.

Back in Panera before her shift began, Odette took a seat at the window. “It’s easy to take time off school,” she sighed. “But it was a good experience,” she said, of the past three semesters at home. Her optimism strained as the day darkened.

Odette looked out across the street at Harvard’s columns, cast hues of gold by the streetlamps. “I just want to end where I started.” The frost had crept over the window, blocking her view.

Joanne

High school never felt like enough for Joanne. Her curiosity outran her classmates’ and she wanted more. In senior year, Joanne aimed high, applying to a “reach” school on early action. One Wednesday afternoon in her fall semester, her brother Vincent drove her to Brandeis for a campus visit.

Vincent used Google Maps on his phone to navigate, and Joanne bopped along to Miguel’s *Adorn* on the radio. She noted the surroundings as we approached, nodding at the KFC, Dunkin’ Donuts, and Walgreens.

As we pulled up to Joanne’s first choice school, Vincent peered out at the grass and fancy brickwork.

“Do Black people go there?” he said aloud, narrowing his eyes.

“I’m hoping they’re in need of Black people,” Joanne laughed.

Vincent shrugged. Two years earlier, he’d left for college in New Hampshire. When his financial aid dried up, he moved back home and tried online classes. Then, he joined the National Guard. He planned to join the police force, or maybe become a chef.

“I did a net price calculator, and I can be going to this school for forty-four dollars. It’s need based,” Joanne said. She planned to do work-study.

“Work-study sucks,” Vincent said, and warned his sister about hidden costs. Maybe a state school would be a better choice, he suggested. “You could do grad school at Brandeis.”

“No, that’s Columbia,” Joanne said. “Grad school is Columbia University.”

Vincent tried to object, but Joanne was not hearing it. “Whatever. I’m used to working and going to school and doing a thousand other things.”

A peppy white undergraduate in denim shorts and a Brandeis T-shirt guided us around campus. Joanne liked the four-story library and the building that looked like a castle. She asked the guide what a typical day looked like.

“I don’t know typical,” she replied. “But today I had class, then a lecture, then lunch, now I have this tour, and then dinner, and after dinner another class.”

“Oh, so you’re not really that busy then?” Joanne asked earnestly, planning where her one or two paid jobs might fit.

The tour guide giggled and turned away.

Joanne didn’t get into Brandeis. It stung, but other offers and scholarships piled in. She got in everywhere else she applied, including UMass Amherst, a highly ranked, flagship state university. She accepted their offer. “I picked the one that was the furthest away,” she said. “My mom wanted me to stay close. I wanted to *go*.” Soon, Brandeis didn’t seem so special: “I can’t even tell you why I picked Brandeis,” she said. “I don’t remember.”

In her graduating class of over four-hundred students, Joanne was one of sixteen

recognized as a ‘Super Senior’ by CRLS. In her profile on the website, she listed as her career aspiration, “CEO of my own non-profit for adolescents.” But she cringed at the pictures. She didn’t know people would dress so formally, and she had worn sweatpants.

The summer after graduating, Joanne returned to her job in the lab, preparing for the move to Amherst on her days off. She planned out expenses on her cellphone, with a color-coded list of what she would need. Pillows, notebooks and post-its ranked among the most urgent purchases. Snacks, a raincoat and toiletries went under “it can wait.”

Joanne dealt with snags as they came, like when she had to go to the Social Security Office because, as she put it, “the government fucked up my citizenship status.” Joanne had been a United States citizen since she was seven years old, but the administrative error jeopardized her financial aid.

She opted for a random roommate match. “She’s Chinese,” Joanne said quietly, receiving her assignment. “I feel like she wanted another Asian person... I don’t make assumptions, but I’m pretty good at reading people.” she said. “She thinks I’m white, probably. I haven’t told her that I’m Haitian or Black! I’m gonna break it to her slowly... I don’t know if she’s gonna be alright with that.” Joanne’s pursed her lips. “She’s from Northboro. Everyone’s white. White, rich.”

Anxiety and excitement bubbled together. Joanne read everything she could about Amherst. “I want to do poetry, and join this leadership for Colored women thing... I enrolled myself in a psych class!” Later on, she hoped to study abroad. “Barcelona, junior year,” she smiled. She figured a scholarship would cover the \$4,000 gap between her aid package and the program cost.

Nobody was worried about Joanne. But as the date drew near, she grew doubtful

about the distance. Aisha was headed to Salem State, a public, four-year university twenty miles north of Cambridge. Najma would commute to Curry College, a private school about as far south. Brittani would be living at home to attend Bunker Hill. But Joanne's school was almost one hundred miles away. "I feel like I'm moving to Australia," she said.

One August evening, after a trip to Burger King, Joanne stood with her best friends around the open trunk of Najma's car. The girls appraised its storage capacity. As she pointed at the space, Aisha wielded the half burger she had wrapped for later. "Don't underestimate how much stuff you need," Aisha said. "Even bring toilet paper, because you never know."

Days later, Vincent and Carole left Joanne and her boxed-up belongings in her new room, nervous, and brimming with promise.

Her best friends marked the occasion with online tributes. Aisha posted a photo of Joanne, squeezed between herself and Brittani, their faces scrunched in theatric emotion. The caption read, **SO WE'RE SENDING OFF OUR CHILD #JOANNE TO THE #ZOOMASS OUR LITTLE MONKEY !!! I WOULDN'T be surprised if you are in the top #1% you are brilliant and have so much to offer the world ... I love you so much be perfect out there let everyone know YOU DAA BESTEST !! I don't know what I'm going to do without that #Haitianfood but its ok !! See you in #Salem during Halloween and please please STAY SAFE!! I NEED YOU ALIVE !! I LOVE YOU TOOO TOO MUCH !!! [cat sad crying, cat happy crying, halo]**

Back in Cambridge, Najma posted a photo of the two girls in sparkly jewelry and sleeveless black shirts. Her caption said, **I miss not being able to meet up when we get five minutes to ourselves from our daily duties. I dislike the fact that were not in the same neighborhood. I hate change and I'm trying to understand that this is how life is gonna be like for the next four years. I'm behind you and always am. I hope UMASS Amherst gives**

**you a great experience and drives you towards success. #throwbacknotthursday
#missmybestfriend #loveyouJoanne**

Two months later, I Skyped with Joanne in her dorm room. She moved her laptop around to show me her room, pointing at her bed, her planner, and her snack drawer. “I’m so organized!” she said, proud.

Accustomed to noise, Joanne slept soundly through the parties in the parking lot outside her block. Partying was not a priority. “They’re all gonna be crazy animals and I’m gonna be a nun,” Joanne said. She found places to hide away and keep up with classwork: “In the main library, the higher you go, the quieter it is.”

The classes weren’t what Joanne expected, though she had read each syllabus closely. She didn’t like her sociology professor, and she found psychology tough. She also struggled to find time for classwork between her other commitments. Joanne took a community service position tutoring poor children on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In addition, she had a work-study position at the media lab. She enjoyed that job—it was “kinda a perfect fit,” she said—but she was less sure about the paid gig she’d accepted at a wings joint: not because she was a vegetarian but because the twice-weekly 4:00 p.m.—1:00 a.m. shifts left her tired in class the next morning

With her busy schedule, finding friends wasn’t easy. “I didn’t meet people who would tell me, ‘Hey, come to this,’” Joanne said. But on Skype, she told me about a girl she clicked with in her math class. “She asked for my number the first day!” Joanne said. “She was like, ‘Can I sit next to you?’ She’s a real sweetheart. She’s very nice.”

“That’s great. Are you having a good time?” I asked.

Joanne paused. “Yeah...”

I waited.

“I mean, it’s alright. It’s an alright time.” Her tone hardened. “I dunno. I dunno if I’ll ever have a really—I feel like there will be good moments, but I will always be stressed out. My main focus is academic,” she said. “My goal is to graduate cum laude. I don’t plan on partying unless you guys come to visit me.”

Joanne didn’t meet as many people as she thought she would. She missed her friends from home; missed the warmth and comfort of their words and silences. She compared that sense of ease with how she felt with her roommate, who put Joanne on edge. “I was the only Black girl on the floor, and the only Black girl in the whole building,” Joanne said. “I was like, ‘Oh, I’m your speck of diversity.’” Joanne began to feel like “the exotic animal that everyone stared at.” She had similar struggles in the psychology department. “I couldn’t meet people of color older than me doing things,” she said.

Midway through her first semester, Joanne filed a request to switch accommodations. An acquaintance with a car helped her move across campus; in return, Joanne helped her write a paper. She bonded with her new roommate, and her mood inched up. “She’s very friendly, she’s my kinda person,” Joanne said, cautiously optimistic. “She studies classical ballet. She’s white, but she’s whatever about it. She doesn’t look at me.”

“I’m happy. I’m good now,” she said, near the end of her first semester. “I wasn’t good before, because living in that place I felt like I was on exhibit all the fucking time. I’m a normal person. I like conversation, and these people just would not talk to me.”

Joanne quit the wings job and performed a few poems at open mic shows. Gradually, she found some study buddies who let her personality shine. “We’ll be in the library doing homework, mad intellectual work, writing these sophisticated-ass papers, and then we’re just talking mad smack!” she said. “Me and my friends be ratchet just to have

fun. Then it turns into this intellectual response.”

When Winter break arrived, Joanne came back to Cambridge with a new ear piercing and a fiercer edge. The piercing, a stud that twinkled in her tragus, “gave Grandma a heart attack.” But Joanne liked how it looked, and she also liked the star-shaped tattoo she got with the names of her family on her back. She loved being back with them, and back with her oldest friends.

In January, Joanne braced herself and returned to campus. But the second semester was worse than the first. Joanne was hardy. Years of pain management and therapy had left her able to “meditate on the spot.” But though she knew how to handle migraines, the grim pall of depression was new and frightening.

Joanne was blindsided by the “social anxiety” and “ruminating thoughts” that seized her. “It was like an out of body experience,” she said. “There would be moments where I would just sit in my room and eat Cinnamon Toast Crunch, and my friends were like, ‘Why are you sitting in your room eating Cinnamon Toast Crunch?’ Because it is what I want to do. I want to sit in this room and eat Cinnamon Toast Crunch. I shut myself off into a shell of a room.”

When Aisha learned how Joanne was struggling, she was alarmed. “She’d just be in her room by herself,” she said. “She would go to class and come home, go to class and come home.” Aisha’s instinct told her what to do. “I was just like, ‘Honestly, I feel like you shouldn’t be alone.’ I just chilled there and did my homework and stayed for the week.”

During her week at Amherst, Aisha was unsettled. “You have to watch things you say,” she said, after her trip. “She gets easily... like anxiety... and she’ll hyperventilate and spaz out and start crying. It’s not Joanne at all. It’s... the whitest thing that’s ever

happened to her.”

Aisha’s best guess was to attribute Joanne’s illness to her belittling and “very oppressive mother,” Carole. Aisha did worry when Joanne refused to take the medication she’d been prescribed, but then again, she didn’t know if the situation was really serious. “I didn’t get diagnosed with anything,” Aisha said, half joking and half proud.

Joanne didn’t fully grasp what was happening, either. “I was going through a lot mentally, which I didn’t really understand,” she said. “I think it’s hard when you don’t understand what is happening to you.”

Nor did she know what had prompted the crisis, though she had some guesses. “I think I will never know. I think it was always there, but it was magnified when I was by myself. I was one in a sea of a billion, even in the lecture hall.” She went on: “I was always under this pressure by not letting my mom down. Academic-wise it was so go go go go go, and then keep going. I never took a pause, and I think it really affected my health, which is why my anxiety came out.”

Joanne’s GPA dipped into the 2.0’s. When her first-year scholarships expired, she couldn’t get new aid.

As the semester ended at the close of her freshman year, Joanne put her things into boxes. Driving away from campus, from its trees and its library, she knew she would not return.

Back home, Joanne picked up a hostess job at Legal Seafood. There was a lot of time to think on the bus, forty-five minutes each way. Joanne hoped to keep up with classes online, unwilling to let go of UMass or Columbia or the non-profit. But the commute and the shifts and her anxiety were exhausting. The dreams would have to wait.

Aisha

Aisha was the first of her clique to leave. Her six-week residential orientation started shortly after graduation. On campus, Aisha shared her new world with her old friends over social media, showing off her dorm, lecture halls, and squealing classmates. Hundreds of daily tweets catalogued her hours, starting with the first day:

SALEM STATE LETS GO

My mom is aggy she this everything is like church like i really can't wear shorts ?

Salem State breakfast really better be poppin

My brothers gps skills are like not on point

U know you are in Salem when you hear a rooster

SALEM STATE needs renovating n new computerss like damn

SO TIRED

TO ORANGE LEAF WE GO!

THIS GIRL SAID SHES OBSESSED WITH ME and has a girl crush on me ayeee

NOW GOING TO COMMEDY NIGHT :)

I want to separate myself from the group but its like everyone is drawn to me... :/

The summer orientation helped Aisha find her footing before the semester started with its strains and high stakes. It was “very systematic,” she said. “You had a time you had to be in bed. You’d go to classes, you’d go to study. It was teaching you mad time management and stuff.” Aisha learned the names of buildings and settled into a daily routine. When work proved demanding, Joanne helped her out a couple of times. “Just ideas like how to start an introduction. Sentence structure. Things like that,” Joanne said.

In summer classes, Aisha learned how to get the faculty on her side. When she got a zero for talking in an English class, she approached the professor with her face scrunched. Later, she repeated the performance for me, quivering with crocodile tears as she pled,

“This class is really important to me, and I work really hard.” Aisha laughed at how she had unsettled the professor: “He was like, ‘I think you’re being a little dramatic.’ But I swear, you have to advocate for yourself!” Aisha intuitively knew what sociologists like Annette Lareau have discovered: that a middle-class habitus is recognized and rewarded by institutions.³⁸ It worked. Aisha had long been used to playing adults, and she could sense what they wanted from her.

Aisha was even more interested in managing her classmates. Before leaving, she tweeted, **At salem all the friends I will have will benefit me somehow.. I hope i meet one with a beach house no lie.** On campus, she took her time, watching. “I’m not the most observant person,” she told me, a few weeks in. “Like, I won’t remember what you were wearing. But I’m good at reading what kind of people are gonna benefit me.”

From the hot throng of campus life, Aisha found some people who piqued her intrigue. During a quick visit home, Aisha told Joanne about some of the girls she had met. Mila’s beauty routine totaled an annual \$18,000, Aisha figured. Mila lived in a big house, and advocated buying expensive clothes that would last. “Her parents are pres... pris... prescription doctors. And in a private hospital, too. Not like, Mass General.”

Aisha brought her old skills to a new place, using her social media proficiency to stylize herself into a covetable confidant. In her stream of posts, she was lively, gregarious, and swarmed by others. Anthropologist Penelope Eckert found that students who *appear*

³⁸ Lareau 2003. Elsewhere, Julie Bettie also shows how self-esteem can be (mis)recognized as a type of middle-class capital. She argued, “When the accomplishment of middle-class norms is linked to mental health and understood as an individual trait (i.e., this girl has high self-esteem), which is often the case in popular discourse, rather than linked to structural inequalities (i.e., this girl has race and class privileges), it gives cause to question the distinction between having self-esteem and being arrogant” (Bettie 2003: p109).

to be having the most fun often end up as the most popular members of their social groups.³⁹

Aisha set this cycle in motion with her self-portrayal online.

And, as classmates flocked to Aisha, she held most would-be friends at arm's length, another strategy that had served her in high school. She chided peers who weren't as discerning, and recoiled from those too quick to seek connection. "I don't care," Aisha said. "If a girl opens up to you that quick, they've got a problem. If they tell you how many abortions they've had, how many miscarriages, their body count," she balked.

Mid-way through orientation, Aisha decided she wanted some space. She went to breakfast alone one morning, without her crew of seven fast friends. One of them hollered, "Why you sitting by yourself? This is our crew!" Aisha frowned. "I was thinking, 'I have friends back home. I have friends back home...' I tried to stay low, but everyone knows who I am. Again. It's still like high school." Aisha's unavailability only heightened her allure. She had the upper hand, and this brought choice and social freedom that had eluded most of her friends from home.

At the end of the summer, Aisha briefly returned to Cambridge. A new friend drove her back. She tweeted, **Yo this is why you are friends with ten million people i would've taken train home .. but this shorty gave me a ride.**

Back in NC, Aisha went straight to Joanne. "College isn't for everyone," she joked, and Joanne shot her a look. Aisha was anxious about the workload and sad to leave her friends. But she swallowed her worries and returned to Salem for her Freshman semester.

While some of the other girls were awed by the newness, Aisha picked up where she had left off.

³⁹ Eckert 1989: p87

The four girls planned to delay visiting one another for a full month, “to get used to it,” Joanne explained. They would reunite at Salem State for a Halloween party in October. In the meanwhile, social media would keep them connected.

Each day, Aisha shared hundreds of seconds of short video clips on Snapchat. Her friends watched her through their screens. They saw her at parties, dancing between sweaty bodies and strobing lights; they heard her scream joyfully as she trooped over campus at 4:00 a.m.; they saw the carrot cake muffin and yogurt that she captioned **college breakfast**; they learned the faces of her new friends, and the faces of the next ones, and the next. They kept track of her evolving style: lips in dark berry one night, eyes lined in silver the next.

Far from her mother’s keen eye and sharp tongue, Aisha flourished, growing to fill the new space allowed her. Her energy shone, as did the diamante stud that she had pierced into the back of her neck—both daring and private—in a flash of freedom.

Aisha messaged her friends when she missed them. She tweeted at Joanne, **i just LOVVEEEE YOU WITH ALL MY HEART !! OK ?** And, after Joanne and Najma visited, Aisha sent a Snapchat video, where she told her viewers, “I’ll never ever vibe with my school friends the way I do with my home friends, but I hate when my school friends try vibe with my home friends. *Stay in your lane.*” A written caption pasted over the video read: **sorry your friends are wack**. But still, her classmates were eager to please.

Aisha sparked romantic interest, too. Tentatively, selectively, she tiptoed toward the type of relationships she’d shirked in high school.

Wilson watched Aisha for a while. Like Aisha, Wilson was a performer: a singer. She saw him at parties, and she thought he was cocky. One night near the end of their first semester, Wilson made his move. “Yo, we have to dance together. You owe me a dance,”

he ventured, plucky.

“I don’t owe you anything,” Aisha said.

But she danced with him. Just one song, at first, then another, and another until the crowd in the room felt no more present than a memory. After that, she saw a lot of Wilson. He charmed her, and they made each other promises. With him, she felt ready. She had made it out of high school, she reasoned. She didn’t need to wait until marriage.

Aisha was grateful when Winter break quickly followed. Sex had been one thing, a decision for herself that she could control, but falling for someone was entirely another. Vulnerability was not Aisha’s strong suit.

At the start of Spring semester, Wilson and Aisha found themselves at another party. Despite her reservations, she yielded to her attraction as he held her on the dance floor. When the party was busted, they fled and hid together. Later, they broke night talking and laughing over peanut butter and jelly.

Wilson started visiting Aisha in her room. Her roommate hadn’t returned for the semester—she couldn’t afford it—and Aisha enjoyed the privacy. Wilson tried to woo Aisha, bringing along some of her favorite snacks. “I told him he didn’t have to,” Aisha said. “I hate when people feel obligated to do things for me.” But she liked their time alone.

She felt a sense of loss when their classmates learned of their romance. Soon after, the two started squabbling. “Why do you drink?” Wilson asked Aisha. “No,” she remembered responding. “Just because I sin differently than you doesn’t mean that you’re better than me. You’re having sex with me! I went on the scripture thing. I hate when people try to play Bible with me.”

Aisha put up with their disagreements until Bella appeared, trying to win Wilson

back. Bella started bothering Aisha, making all sorts of claims. Eventually, hurt and self-preservation drove Aisha into a new pair of arms when she visited UMass Amherst.

After the break-up, Aisha withdrew from the buzzing campus world she had built for herself. She slipped away after class and called out sick from extracurriculars. She hid in her empty room, where she journaled and wrote poems.

“I had to re-teach myself to be myself,” she said.

Aisha had opened up to Wilson in a new way. To move on, she did what she knew best: she cut him out, fast. When she started hanging out with her friends once more, she warned them, “If you guys chill with him, I’m not chilling wit’ y’all. You *know* I can make new friends in two seconds.”

A line of suitors clamored to replace Wilson, but Aisha had more urgent concerns. At Amherst, Joanne was depressed, and back home, Najma wasn’t doing much better. Aisha did what she could to support her friends through the rest of the semester.

Soon after, Aisha returned to NC for summer break, proud of her 3.3 GPA. At school, her radiance had drawn people close, and from the range of peers who sought her time, she built a group of friends whose company she liked, and who could help meet her needs. Whenever I asked Aisha about college, she answered with story after story about people—people in her dorm, in her classes, at parties. Where Odette often sought comfort in boys, and Joanne turned inward under strain, Aisha found support from new friends, the same thing that helped carry her to college in the first place.

Sophomores Rising

A few months later, Aisha gathered her clique at her home. She wanted to cook a

‘back to school’ dinner before the new semester split the girls up once more. This time, only Aisha would be leaving.

Aisha chose a Friday night when Diana was out of town, and welcomed us into her kitchen wearing a knee-length navy dress with metallic beading. Beside her in the kitchen, Joanne primped her own outfit. Her white dress clung to the body that she seemed to inhabit with a new permission.

“I need to change. I look like a flapper,” Aisha said, stepping back from the stove.

Joanne pulled the spatula from the spaghetti and pointed it at Aisha. “Flappers represent a time when women became more independent, so you better feel it!”

Brittani, in jeans and a t-shirt, felt a little glum. She missed Aisha when she was gone. Over the past year, she had tried to keep up with her friends’ new lives: “Snapchat keeps me connected. Instagram keeps me updated with how their college life is going.” And the girls kept in touch. “We still talk to each other about anything. We know that whatever it is, we’ll help deal with it,” Brittani said. But it wasn’t quite the same.

Some weekends, Brittani visited Salem, but couldn’t help comparing Aisha’s college experience to her own. At community college, Brittani felt she had “missed a little Freshman experience.” She wanted more opportunities, like classes in African-American studies, dance, and ceramics. She hoped to join Aisha by transferring to Salem State once she got her associate’s degree.

In Aisha’s ground-floor apartment, Brittani stood by the ebony dining table as Aisha and Joanne cooked. She adjusted the vase of perky, red faux flowers in the center. Beside the vase, Aisha had placed a photo frame. In it was a shot of the whole group in the park, taken the day we celebrated Joanne’s 18th birthday with a picnic, a year and a half earlier.

Amidst the nostalgia and ambivalence, Aisha tried to make the night nice. She placed five shell-shaped, gold plastic placemats on the table. On the placemats, she lay down white ceramic plates edged with a floral print, and topped each with the upturned V of a folded paper towel. From a drawer she rarely opened, she pulled out five metal forks and five metal spoons, and inspected the silverware piece by piece for blemishes. Finally, she brought out the fancy glasses, shiny and rimmed with a golden lip. She carried them to the table. “Do they go on the right or the left?” she asked aloud. “I think right,” she said to her friends’ blank stares, “‘Cause you reach with your right hand.”

Aisha looked at the scene she had set and smiled.

“I got juice for y’all!” she remembered, walking to fetch the handle of peach drink from the kitchen. For a final flourish, she dipped a plastic spoon into a glass jar, and dropped one sticky red cocktail cherry into each cup.

From the kitchen, Joanne hauled through two hefty plastic tupperware containers filled with steaming pasta. She set them down and explained the menu. On the left, spaghetti with meat sauce; on the right, alfredo with chicken and broccoli. Joanne also brought out a small bowl with her own dinner, a specially prepared vegetarian pasta.

The girls sat around the table, one seat empty.

They wouldn’t eat until Najma arrived. The girls were apprehensive. Things had grown strained over the year, starting right after Aisha and Joanne left Cambridge, when Najma let them know she felt alone. “You guys forgot about me!” she had protested.

“We didn’t,” Aisha explained to me later. “But home is the last thing you think about.”

In Cambridge, Najma spent hours alone on her daily commute, sending Snapchats

from her car in traffic standstills.

By Thanksgiving, she had grown weary. “School is hard,” she sighed, as she pushed mac and cheese around a paper plate in Joanne’s kitchen.

Soon after, Najma tweeted, **Nothing feels more comfortable then being around people you trust.**

Aisha and Joanne took issue. The three girls tweeted at each other:

Aisha: @Najma who can that be? cause me and @Joanne aint around!!!!
#feelingreplaced

Najma: @Aisha @Joanne text me I gotta tell you a glimpse about my car accident

tAisha: @Najma @Joanne i DID text you last you never replied..

Joanne : @Najma @Aisha I got no texts from you :(

Before long, Najma was spending most of her time with an NC boy, Jayjay. “He’s just a bum, he doesn’t go to school,” Aisha said, appalled. “I have no choice but to be happy for you,” she went on. But she was worried. “You’re gonna get caught up, and it’s gonna be too late,” she feared.

Jayjay’s dealing seemed haphazard and amateurish. “Najma will transport bud for him, and hold bud for him,” Aisha explained. “Not even like a no-big-deal-everyone-smokes. It’s more like a you-get-one-to-two-years-for-it type stuff. The Najma I know would not do stuff like that.” Aisha recalled the time, a couple years earlier, when Najma had yelled at a guy who made a quick sale while she was in the car. “I don’t know what happened in between us leaving, but the Najma we know is not this Najma.”

Soon, Najma’s misery was etched on her body, as her clavicles and cheekbones poked through her formerly plump frame. “She’s been smoking a lot,” Aisha explained. “You can see the scoliosis in her back. We thought she was dealing crack, those dark

circles.” Aisha searched Najma’s sallow face for the girl she had left behind.

Najma wrote on Twitter:

It’s hard going from having someone to talk to all the time to not having anyone at all

Damn I am really losing weight

Just so fucking stressed ...

Eventually, sordid rumors about Najma echoed back to Aisha, and at that point she decided to act.

“We tried to stage an intervention,” she explained, later. “We started out like, ‘Well Najma, what I like about you is how you’re very strong and willing to help anyone even though you’re poor. And then I was like, ‘Joanne, what do you like about Najma?’ That’s how interventions go, right? I seen it in a movie. You start out with what they are good at, then you do the bad stuff, and then you end up with the good.”

Aisha remembered how Najma bawled: “I don’t eat anymore. I don’t feel good anymore. My parents don’t have money for me.”

Najma felt isolated, and Aisha thought Jayjay was making things worse. “She’ll go a mile and a half for this guy, who is a nobody,” she lamented. “Najma is so broken, like self-esteem broken, money broken, home broken. She needs somebody who will build her, not tear her down.”

Joanne also wanted to help Najma, but she didn’t know how. “She had a lot going on in terms of financing for school and having all of her friends be away,” Joanne reflected. “This is unknown territory. I don’t know how to talk to you about these things, and I don’t really know what’s going on, so I feel it’s not my place to really tell you what to do with your life.” And, Joanne’s own struggles had eroded her ability to be as supportive as she

wanted. “How do you know the signs of certain things, when you are so caught up in your own world also?” she said.

At the dinner party, Aisha hoped the girls could forget their friction and enjoy a final night together. Aisha, Joanne and Brittani scrolled through their phones as they waited for Najma. They tried to tie knots in the cherry stems with their tongues. They swayed to the songs Aisha played through her laptop hooked up to the TV.

Finally, Najma’s white Honda rumbled in the driveway. Aisha ran to the door. To set the tone, she twerked in the doorway to greet Najma before shepherding her to her seat.

At the table, Aisha reached out her palms, and the girls joined hands. Aisha closed her eyes, bowed her head, and prayed.

Then the girls dug hungrily in, struggling to serve spaghetti with the ladles Aisha had put on the table. Glasses were refilled, and a second round of cherries shed wisps of festive pink into the peach juice. A calmness fell around the nobly-dressed table.

When first helpings were finished, Aisha told her guests to stand for selfies. She wanted to recreate the photo in the frame on the table. We lined up in the same order as we had during the picnic.

As the girls returned to their seats, Aisha tapped her glass with a silver spoon to quiet them. The girls copied Aisha, bringing their spoons to their glasses and enjoying the unfamiliar jingle.

“Nobody better break my glasses!” Aisha said, with a raise of her eyebrows.

“Just make the speech already!” Joanne said, as Aisha cultivated a swell of anticipation.

“Wait until my Snapchat comes on!” Aisha replied, and the girls fell to silence.

“Okay,” she began. “Humans!”

“Loyal subjects!” Joanne laughed.

“Peasants!” Brittani offered.

Najma, expressionless, looked around the table at her grinning friends.

Aisha put three fingers to her lips, acting out the war salute from *The Hunger Games* movie. She watched Joanne and Brittani crack up laughing. She was in command.

“Can you just get emotional so I can cry and run my eyeliner?” Joanne said, suspecting what was really behind her best friend’s delay.

“Ok,” Aisha started, her voice low. “Um, I wanted to have this dinner for the people I love... because you guys mean so much to me. You are so positive in my life.”

Joanne dabbed her eyes with the paper towel.

Aisha continued: “I wanted to have this dinner and bring us all together. It’s so difficult thinking about going back to school without you guys,” she stammered. “Okay. Don’t cry, don’t cry,” Aisha told herself. “I just hope that we stay in contact during the school year. But I just wanted to have a dinner and that’s my toast.”

Aisha sat down. She looked small in her chair, smaller than the girl who had danced over our screens for the past year, that vibrant freshman swamped with friends.

Attentive to the flow of focus and energy, Aisha had a suggestion. Everyone, she offered, should say “our goal for next year, and one thing you accomplished this year.” She paused, and reflected on this idea: “Wow, I’m getting whiter and whiter.”

Joanne demurred. She didn’t want to go first. Najma stepped up: “My goal is to gain weight. I need to pass 120, at least. And I need to bring up my GPA a lot.”

“And what did you accomplish this year?” Aisha asked gently.

“Nothing,” Najma folded her hands in her lap. “This has been a bad year.”

“You have accomplishments!” Joanne said.

“I can’t think of one,” Najma shrugged.

“Something you feel proud of,” Aisha said. “Taking care of your nephew?”

Najma smiled, her recall prompted. “Oh, this is recent. My dad always tells me I’m irresponsible, but this week I got my car checked. I paid for my inspection, and now it doesn’t make that sound anymore.”

“There you go!” Joanne said.

It was Joanne’s turn. “My goal for the year is to save at least seventy-five percent of every check, and just, I don’t know, be a bit more outgoing, a bit more optimistic. Accomplishments? I got a job, that shit was stressful.” The girls applauded.

Next, Brittani said, “I have a lot of goals... Number one is to get a job, and definitely keep my GPA up so I finish this year and transfer to Salem.”

Aisha whooped.

“My accomplishment?” Brittani continued. “I guess... actually making friends from Bunker Hill from volleyball. And I did it on my own, too.”

Finally, faces turned to Aisha. “My goal is to travel for the school year, and become more organized. Also, I want to make new friends from my school. And hey, I’ve accomplished a lot, let me tell you.” Her voice fell to a whisper. “I did the summer program, that’s an accomplishment. I went to college, that’s an accomplishment.” She giggled shyly at her superior list, and at the taboo she was testing by saying these proud things out loud. “Anything that that tried to break me, my brain has been in the right place,” she said. Her friends nodded warmly.

“Okay, we have to take a family picture!” Aisha said, emotion catching once more in her throat. After the second round of photographs, she ended the night with karaoke. The girls sat on Aisha’s couch and floor, facing the TV. On YouTube, they played instrumental versions of their favorite songs, and yelled the lyrics displayed on screen.

“Cards on the table, we’re both showing hearts.”

Later, as the evening came to a close, Aisha held each of her best friends in turn, breathing deeply into their shoulders as she said goodbye.

Looking Out?

At college, most of the NC girls faced crisis after crisis. They ran into several of the well-studied barriers facing low-income, first generation students. They worried about money. They struggled with logistics. They found it hard to fit in. For the girls, adversity was cumulative, and each new problem compounded what had come before.⁴⁰

Most of the young women felt their biggest hardship was money. Girls pieced together scholarships, work-study, need-based grants and paid work, but most still had outstanding costs. Financial strain had emotional impacts. Back in NC, the girls had joked about being broke, and found ways to have fun together for free. But in a new place, with new people and new hierarchies, it could be shameful or stigmatizing not to have enough. It could also leave you on the outside. Joanne met one girl, Shayla, and thought they might grow close. Shayla joined a Black sorority and invited Joanne to consider joining, too. The sisterhood appealed to Joanne in her loneliness. “I might join,” Joanne said at the time.

⁴⁰ Stressors often bundle together, creating cumulative adversity. This concept has been called “stress proliferation,” and developmental psychologists consider the particular risks of the accumulation of stressors (e.g., Evans & Cassells 2014; Evans & Schamberg 2009; Dupere et al. 2014).

“But I dunno... Joining is like, a thousand dollars. Shayla was like, ‘I been have that money!’” But Joanne did not.

Joanne also worked a lot to pay her way through college. While she sold wings at night to drunk customers, her wealthier classmates might have been studying, or doing resume-boosting extracurriculars. They also might have been partying, or finding friends to stand in for those they’d left behind. Researchers often assume that students who do extensive paid work are more likely to drop out of college because jobs interfere with schoolwork. But jobs take time from other things, too. Joanne had little time to study, but she also had little time to rest, make friends, or enjoy campus life. These were privileges she could not afford.

Some of the girls also struggled academically. When they did poorly in class, they sometimes blamed picky, “mean” professors, or protested administrative errors and incompetence. It is possible that academic expectations were not clearly articulated. It is also possible the girls could have tried harder. Either way, the girls’ failures to manage the academic and bureaucratic realities on campus often left them crushed.⁴¹

It seemed like the girls’ needs were neither understood nor met; they could not balance jobs with classwork, they weren’t permitted to miss class for a friend’s funeral. The girls were demoralized when they felt like their institutions didn’t care. It made it that much harder to keep trying.

They also did not know how to seek help when they struggled. The institutional support they had at CRLS—in the form of teachers and counselors who at least knew their

⁴¹ See also Ray 2018: p136

names—was not replaced on campus. Nor could the girls help each other; they had no shared wisdom to troubleshoot fazing bureaucracies or campus alienation.

And so, over time, wells of resilience ran low—and sometimes dried up. Few of the girls gave up entirely, however. Most, like Odette, moved between schools instead of dropping out. To each new college, Odette brought whichever credits would transfer, as well as her identity claims based on striving and success. But her institutional mobility cost her the opportunity to build a stable social life. Not only did she lose some of the long-term professional benefits and opportunities that college friends can offer, but in the immediate term, too, Odette was left feeling adrift and unrooted.

Aisha, by contrast, quickly assembled a new group of friends. With some benevolent manipulation and social influence, Aisha drew people near. She charmed them, and she found a network of peers who could help meet her needs. Aisha was not the only girl who made friends—Brittani, for instance, had her college experience transformed when she grew close to her volleyball teammates—but she was the only girl on track to get a four-year degree from one school.

The ability to find new friends was far from the only factor driving the girls down divergent paths. Some started college with greater burdens; others came with more and more relevant skills. Aisha, for example, was uniquely able to self-advocate to adults. She also benefitted from a residential summer orientation, which helps students socially and academically integrate to college.⁴²

But making friends did matter. There is no doubt that the girls lost something

⁴² See e.g., Lotkowski et al. 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini 2005; Smith et al. 2004; Upcraft et al. 2004; Pascarella et al. 2004

significant when they left each other behind. They lost access to time-tested solutions to many of their problems. Moreover, they lost an intangible, multifaceted closeness—the security of knowing that they had someone to turn to. They lost the sense that they were known, and affirmed. And, although social media was vital to their in-person intimacy, the girls’ friendships could not deliver all their benefits only through mediated interactions.

For many of the girls, the loss of friends felt less pertinent of a hardship than did financial or bureaucratic burdens.⁴³ Mostly, the young women felt that their struggles related to on-campus difficulties. They also felt that their experiences were personal, even while their friends were going through similar things.⁴⁴

Yet separation from friends, and the loss of the support they had long shared, was a factor that shaped the girls’ college experiences. This is something that rarely features in research about low-income students and higher education. More often, it appears in other kinds of writing, like memoirs, including *The Pact*, the story of three friends from a poor neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey, who pledged as teenagers to together become doctors. In *The Pact*, the authors remember an older kid from their neighborhood, Noody, who, unusually, got into a good college. But once there, they recall, Noody found himself “without a built-in support network of friends.” And so, “[h]omesick, Noody returned after his freshman year to what he knew, the Dayton Street Projects.”⁴⁵

Often, adults—including education researchers and policymakers, as well as faculty members and college administrators—do not fully grasp what is lost when

⁴³ In fact, those girls who stayed home and commuted to nearby colleges typically felt the separation most acutely.

⁴⁴ See also Ray 2017.

⁴⁵ Davis et al. 2002: p31

teenagers leave behind their peers. On campus, the girls struggled not just because they had limited resources, information, and support. They also struggled because they had lost what had, at times, been their most vital source of care: their best friends.

9—Conclusion

“I am tired of being poor,” Aisha said, pouring a syrup star over buttermilk pancakes. IHOP gave refuge from the cold January afternoon. Back in Cambridge for Winter break of her sophomore year, Aisha’s mind was on the future.

“So, I’m tired of being poor, but what am I good at? To start a business plan,” she explained. “I was watching YouTube videos by a bunch of people who were poor and made it. What you have to do, is do something you’re good at with the least effort. People always focus on their passions but they don’t focus on what they’re actually good at.”

Aisha pushed around her pancakes and pondered her skills. She considered “starting something creative” with some of her friends. She wanted something that used her brain. She shrugged: “I’m pretty good at talking!”

For Aisha, sophomore year had been harder than the previous one. “I cried so much this semester,” she reflected, swamped by her yellow Salem State hoodie. “First year was hard emotionally. Sophomore year is a struggle, academically. I didn’t eat. The doctor said I lost five pounds. No one told us when we grow it gets so hard.”

But Aisha remained dogged. She kept pushing. And, a few months later, she had found her footing once again as she closed in on the halfway point of her degree. We met up at the end of the school year, when she returned to Cambridge for the summer.

She strode with her usual ease down Rindge Avenue.

“I’m going to Tokyo,” she announced, casually. Her sandals scuffed the sidewalk as she sauntered down the street.

“You are?”

“For study abroad,” she said. Her wide grin betrayed her practiced nonchalance.

“They gave me a grant for the flight.” Her work wages would cover the rest of the trip, a six-week, school-led tour around Japan in August.

“I want the challenge,” Aisha said. Class work could still be tough, but Aisha was comfortable on campus. “School was too easy,” she said, her indifference restored. “I know everyone.” Years earlier, high school—once so big and looming to a recent young immigrant—had closed in on Aisha. College, too, had set her a solvable puzzle.

Over two years at Salem State, Aisha had come to know hordes of people. But she wanted more. When Aisha learned of the school trip to Japan, she researched the “scene.” She told me that the Japanese love of Black music and culture would make her a “VIP,” and help her make “connects” that she could cash in later.

She smiled as we walked, the sun warm on our backs. For Aisha, the world was finally behaving itself. Growing up, she had struggled. There were the fights at home, and the feeling of not quite having, or being, enough. But she had never stopped wanting, or reaching. And now, at last: hope. Not only had she graduated high school, but she was thriving at college. And, she was leaving for a new country, six thousand miles away.

Aisha was driven, gregarious, and resourceful, perhaps uniquely so. Along with her personal attributes, she had also been helped on her way. For instance, at her high school, she took classes like photography that honed her creative interests. She met teachers who admired her and grew invested. She liked her Pastor’s wife, and her basketball coach. And, though she clashed with her mother, Diana’s harsh rules helped keep Aisha on track.

But something else had been important, too: Aisha’s best friends. The girls had grown up together, sharing their lives and their belongings. They had helped each other for years, dealing jointly with deprivation, insecurity, and trauma. Together, they had planned

for better futures, and tried to help each other reach their goals.

The girls' story differs from the one most commonly told. A great deal of research focuses on how tight integration into a peer group can be a risk factor for young people, particularly for poor youth during risky adolescent years, when "turning points" can derail trajectories and limit long-term life chances. Studies focus on the ways social ties can negatively impact young people, charting how "peer effects" spread risk behaviors, and how peer influence threatens teens' wellbeing and success.

Moreover, some studies argue that close friendships dissuade poor teens from pursuing different futures. They suggest that young people hoping to get ahead should practice social avoidance and isolation. This prevalent idea dates at least as far back as *Street Corner Society*, where William Foote Whyte argues, "Both the college boy and the corner boy want to get ahead. The difference... is that the college boy either does not tie himself to a group of close friends or else is willing to sacrifice his friendship with those who do not advance as fast as he does."¹

But the NC girls did not isolate themselves. Instead, they supported each other, both day-to-day and in times of great strain. For the girls, friendships compensated for some aspects of family and neighborhood disadvantage, as shown by the chapters in Part 1. They helped meet each other's material needs, and in so doing, gave each other dignity and inclusion. Together they managed boredom, which researchers have found can lead to petty crime for time-passing thrills. They coped jointly with emotional challenges—like instability, family conflict, and racial and socioeconomic marginalization—that they faced

¹ Whyte 1943: p107. For a more contemporary example, DeLuca et al. also describe adolescent respondents who distance themselves from their peers to get ahead. "Bob and Bridget seem to be on a path to college," they write. "For both, it involved hard choices. Both had to draw a bright line between themselves and their peers" (2016: p123).

at home, at school, in the neighborhood, and in their community. And when girls struggled with heartbreak, stigma, or abuse when it came to boys and dating, they tried to support one another, even when peer support proved less effective in this realm than others.

The girls' friendships were vital sources of support, so the young women fought for their relationships when they were threatened. When trauma struck the neighborhood, in the form of violence or the death of peers, the girls had a patterned response to crises. Their digital rituals for mourning diverged from adult and institutional expectations, but they helped the girls shield their friends from downward spirals, while protecting their relationships. And, when old bonds were tested by new differences as some girls started drinking or smoking weed, the girls used a type of moral and interactional pragmatism to defend their friendships, rather than seeking the behavioral homophily that researchers typically find in adolescent peer groups. The care and aid the girls shared was one factor that helped them achieve their dreams of getting from JP to college. But they all struggled when—in addition to the financial, logistical, and cultural obstacles that researchers find face low-income, first-generation college students—the girls lost the peer support on which they had long relied.

Peers, Adults, and Institutions

Not only did the young women understand each other's needs; they also very often met them. This meant that their friendships had a profound power. However, tropes and cultural messages often prioritize the family as the true source of love and connection. bell hooks condemns the devaluation of friendship, arguing that it can bring deep, even transformational intimacy. "Many of us learn as children that friendship should never be

seen as just as important as family ties,” she writes. “However, friendship is the place in which a great majority of us have our first glimpse of redemptive love and caring community.”² Friendships can offer the “care, respect, knowledge, and all-around nurturance of growth” that families can fail to provide.³

Researchers, too, often elide friendship’s power, typically focusing instead on the institution of the family. Studies of different types of family structure and kin configurations are important and enlightening, especially when it comes to understanding the experiences of hidden and marginalized communities. But to these, we might add a more systematic and serious investigation of deep but platonic types of intimacy.

This is not to suggest, however, that the girls did not find support from their families. Indeed, they did, along with that from several other adults including relatives, teachers, coaches, guidance counselors, and pastors. Teachers, for example, sometimes read college essays; coaches sometimes gave rides home. The girls were aware of and grateful for this help. At the same time, adolescence is a culture of peers. This meant that the girls looked primarily to one another for validation and esteem. Parents and teachers could not give them status or high school cool. They could not provide cash they wanted, or battle boredom, or talk to them about sex. Adults had different ideas about grieving. For these things and more, the young women were often each other’s primary source of support.

Yet such support is often overlooked not just by adults and by researchers, but also by policy-makers, whose initiatives for adolescent success and mobility often fail to recognize the vital goods shared between young people. Most programs aimed at helping

² Hooks 1990: p134

³ Hooks 1990: p133

poor teens focus on the family or on school-based reforms, boosting the degree of adult intrusion into their lives.⁴ Rarely do adults respond to at-risk adolescents by strengthening their peer groups.⁵ As sociolinguist Penelope Ecker explains, “Rather than encouraging and helping supportive adolescent networks, society focuses on their potential for delinquency and pressures them to disband.”⁶

However, the girls’ story suggests that institutions and initiatives aimed at promoting adolescent success should consider investing in young people together with their friends. Teenagers’ peer groups can contain robust and diverse systems of support. Aiding these networks would give young people better tools for the work they already do, and support the help they already give.

The young women in this book could have benefited from more institutional investment, especially that which added to, or strengthened, their social ties with one another. Stefanie DeLuca and her coauthors found something similar. In their book, *Coming of Age in the Other America*, which followed dozens of teenagers from poor, Baltimore neighborhoods over a decade, they found that the most successful young

⁴ Kaplan 2013: p164

⁵ Stanton-Salazar & Spina 2005: p380

⁶ Eckert 1989: p179. A number of recent studies of poor youth have criticized the long-running emphasis on young people’s perceived “deviance,” and noted its consequences for both research and policy. Stefanie DeLuca and her coauthors critique the disproportionate focus in media accounts, news stories, and social science alike on “risky” kids, noting that these outliers command too much of our attention. As a consequence, we fail to attend to all the other cases—in fact the majority of young people—whose lives do not fit this pattern (De Luca et al. 2016: p199). Similarly, sociologist Ranita Ray criticizes the pervasive labeling of low-income young people of color as “at risk” by government agencies, schools, and community organizations. She shows how the “at-risk” discourse leads institutions to allocate resources disproportionately to the prevention of risk behaviors, at the cost of providing holistic support for young people’s transitions to adulthood. She also notes that describing young people as “at risk” takes an individualistic view, and overlooks the structural constraints that racially and socioeconomically marginalized young people systematically encounter (Ray 2017).

people—and those least likely to be “in the street”—were teens who had, what they call, an “identity project.” Identity projects, defined as “a source of meaning that provides a strong sense of self and is linked to concrete activities to which youth commit themselves,” gave young people the chance to “be about something.”⁷ Importantly, however, it was not just an activity that boosted young people’s wellbeing and mobility prospects. Rather, identity projects linked young people to like-minded peers. “Identity projects have greater force if linked to a subculture, which can connect youth with others like themselves and offer a sense of belonging,” the authors explain.⁸ The authors also note that the most effective identity projects were those connected to and supported by institutions.

This speaks to the reciprocal link between peer and institutional support, something I also found among the young women in this book. Growing up in Cambridge, the girls benefitted from the city’s liberal and redistributive local government, and robust institutions. Although their neighborhood was one of extreme poverty, according to the child poverty rate of forty-two percent, the girls went to a good high school, and had access to libraries, youth centers, and after-school programs. Particularly helpful was Workforce, Cambridge Housing Authority’s after school program. Workforce had diverse programming for local teens. As Joanne explained, “there’s homework hour, and they offer tutoring and helping you get your taxes filled out and things like that.” Joanne also enjoyed the nutrition class that they offered once, and remembered that they helped with financial aid applications when college came around.

But Joanne’s fondest memories of the program involved her best friends. “It’s just

⁷ DeLuca et al. 2016: p66

⁸ Ibid: p76

one big happy family,” she said. “Me and Najma did Workforce together, and then I convinced Aisha to do it. We’re all just like this huge happy family.” Brittani did not join Workforce, but enrolled in a different local program, of which she spoke similarly: “We were like a family basically. That’s where I made my most friends.”

Teens engaged neighborhood resources and opportunities together, not as individuals, but in, and as, groups of friends. In fact, one aspect of peer support among the girls was making resources and institutions—like after-school programs—*make sense*. Other studies find similar dynamics. Sociologist Mario Small showed how, in a Boston housing project, the people who were associated with a neighborhood space or resource was as important for determining its use by others, as were features of the resource itself.⁹

This suggests that institutional investment in young people should build on the power of friendships between teenagers. Some initiatives do just that. For instance, the *Neighborhood Academic Initiative*, which serves 3,500 high schoolers in South and East Los Angeles, emphasizes strong friendships between participants as a central tenet of the program.¹⁰ Or, for post-secondary teens, *The Posse Foundation* integrates recipients of their college scholarships into supportive teams—posses—of ten students. *Posse* scholars have a ready group of friends with similar backgrounds and experiences. These students have a graduation rate of ninety percent, a number which speaks to factors relating to selection and programing, but which also testifies to the importance of peers for navigating life transitions.¹¹

⁹ Small (2004: p135). Other research finds that “collective identity” is a key asset of after-school programs (e.g., Futch 2016).

¹⁰ Kaplan 2013

¹¹ Posse Foundation 2018

Since *Posse* serves relatively few students—a few hundred per year—policy-makers could consider expanding this type of program, which focuses on building tight ties between young people on campus. Alternatively, programs could consider how to help friends attend college together, or to support friendships stretched by long distances.

Hidden Needs

Much of the peer support the girls shared was only visible through close daily observation and interaction. Often, research on adolescent friendships relies on questionnaires, or survey interviews.¹² This is particularly true of research on relationships between minority and low-income young people.¹³ Quantitative studies of friendships can uncover noteworthy correlations and associations. But they cannot fully capture the bustle and stir of life as it is lived; they cannot follow young people from school, to their homes, house parties and hangouts. This book considers what life looked like for two cliques of teenage girls—what they fought over, what they wanted—and reveals what they needed to flourish.

The girls had a wider set of needs than those we usually emphasize in research on urban inequality. Mostly, poverty is understood as a loss of access to measurable, materially defined resources. But for the girls, economic hardship was insulting, exclusionary, and a threat to their status. When they dealt with being broke, they also met each other's emotional needs. So, too, when they coped with boredom or managed stigma. When the

¹² E.g., Crockett et al. 1984; Richey & Richey 1980; Bagwell & Smith 2013. Savin-Williams and Berndt write, “writers who lament or praise the effects of friends... say almost nothing about how or why this influence or power is applied or why it is effective” (Savin-Williams & Berndt 1990: p299)

¹³ Parker & Gottman 1989: p120

girls heard one another's struggles and gave advice, when they helped with hurt or fear, they traded support no less vital than when they exchanged money or food.

Dignity, belonging, and respect: these are among the most basic human needs. Yet these things—along with goods like empathy, intimacy, and entertainment—are not often what come to mind when we think about surviving poverty. But economic approaches to wellbeing must include such affective goods. In recent years, scholars have called for broader and more comprehensive indicators of wellbeing, beyond material need.¹⁴ As sociologist Michèle Lamont writes, “Much of the focus has been on the distribution of resources and the alleviation of inequality and poverty. It is high time that we give stigmatization and social inclusion their due.”¹⁵ Amartya Sen similarly notes that capabilities are as vital as financial security.¹⁶ Governments, too, have slowly started to recognize and promote civic goods like recognition and inclusion along with economic integration.

By stressing the importance of affective goods for wellbeing, we not only dodge an undue emphasis on poverty's material dimension. We also broaden our understanding of what people need to flourish. By doing this, we can see just how much the girls supported one another.

Many researchers use the notion of “social capital” to capture the benefits of social relationships. Yet the concept does not reflect the primacy of socioemotional and affective

¹⁴ Inequalities in material distribution and in recognition mutually reinforce one another (Lamont 2018)

¹⁵ Lamont 2019: p33

¹⁶ Sen 1999

goods. Typically, it focuses more on material gains than on things like joy and validation.¹⁷ Moreover, the Cambridge girls lacked social capital, according to its most common definitions, which hinge on cohesive family relationships, neighborhood integration, or “legitimated” social goods.¹⁸ The concept’s relatively narrow scope has prompted some researchers to propose alternative ways to theorize social support in places where social capital is low. For instance, education researcher Tara Yosso suggests the term “community cultural wealth,” to recognize the unique traditions, in historically marginalized communities, of fostering aspirations, resistance and more.¹⁹ The story of the NC girls adds to these calls to recognize the power found in bonds between marginalized young people. Only by expanding the types of “need” that we both acknowledge as crucial and perceive in poor neighborhoods do we see how vital peer support can be.

¹⁷ E.g., Coleman 1988. Other scholars have also differentiated social *support* from social *capital* (e.g., Appel et al. 2014)

¹⁸ For Bourdieu (1986), social capital flows only through ties that confer *legitimated* social goods, honor and privilege; socioeconomic and racial marginalization excluded the teens from such relationships. Often-hostile relationships with parents also denied the girls social capital under Coleman’s definition, wherein, “Even if adults are physically present, there is a lack of social capital... if there are not strong relations between children and parents” (Coleman 1988: p111). Portes, too, emphasizes social capital as a *family* asset (Portes 2000). Nor was there neighborhood collective efficacy in the form of shared expectations for child control (Sampson et al. 1999). Gossip, and hence surveillance, did circulate among some of the Haitian parents. But many adults were split by conflict, curbing the clout of their policing. As well as parents who voluntarily refrained from communicating, others were barred by a lack of common language skills; many adults knew only their native tongues. This limited collective efficacy and social capital qua “expectations for action within a collectivity” (Portes & Sensenbrenner 1993).

However, some existing research does point to the *affective* dimension of social capital. Xavier de Souza Briggs, for instance, parses two aspects of social capital: “access to *social support* that helps us cope with life’s stresses and challenges (‘get by’) and access to *social leverage*, the key to mobility or ‘getting ahead’” (Briggs 1998). Strong ties are usually suited more for emotional support, and weak ties for leverage (see also Wellman & Wortley 1990). Yet among the girls, strong ties were the affective roots that sustained the multiple branches of mutual support—support that helped them make material, social and emotional ends meet, and in doing so, helped them aspire and begin to achieve.

¹⁹ Yosso 2005

The Cambridge Girls

This book focuses on the lives of nine young women. Compared with other teens in their neighborhood, the girls were not especially studious, sociable, or coddled. They did not have markedly different personalities or temperaments than their classmates or neighbors. Yet it is worth considering what their experiences can and cannot reveal about the lives of other young people in different places.

Peer support is a feature of most social relationships between teenagers, as shown by the extensive research on the benefits of friendships for adolescents. Yet, because the girls' lives and needs were shaped profoundly by the resources that they had and lacked, peer support likely looks different for young people from different backgrounds. For instance, I have no doubt that the girls' wealthiest classmates found great support from their friendships, too. Yet poverty forced the NC girls to play several more roles than their better-off peers when it came to helping their friends. Teens with fancier addresses did not face as much neighborhood violence; those with bigger allowances did not have to help each other ride the subway; those with college-educated parents did not turn primarily to their friends for help with applications. Relatedly, in poorer cities with less institutional support, peer support likely differs from the help shared by the NC girls. Place matters. It determines what young people value, what they have, and what they crave.

Yet I argue that what is generalizable from the girls' story is the notion that young people help each other in diverse and meaningful ways, ways that have been largely overlooked by adults, institutions, and policy-makers. Although the specific types of support likely vary between neighborhoods, young people are more creative and

resourceful than we often recognize.

Some factors of the girls' backgrounds are worth further examination, however. First, they were young women, and research shows that friendships differ substantially between girls and boys.²⁰ Girls are socialized to be more emotionally expressive than boys, and their friendships are typically more open and intimate.²¹ As sociologist Julie Bettie explains, "what bonds girls" is often "the disclosure of emotional injuries and insecurities."²² For teen boys, emotional intimacy—which underlay much of the girls' peer support—is less likely to be at the heart of peer relationships.²³

In addition, gender shapes the experiences and opportunities of low-income young people of color in key ways. Young Black men in poor, urban areas are more often exposed to the criminal justice system, hyper-policing, and police brutality.²⁴ They face higher interpersonal violence. And they more often have to secure safety and respect through strength.²⁵ However, as sociologist Nikki Jones explains, "Inner-city girls are not isolated from the social consequences of racial segregation, concentrated poverty, and inner-city violence... Girls are touched—figuratively, literally, and daily—by violence."²⁶ Girls face different risks than their brothers and male friends, including "the female fear" of sexual

²⁰ E.g., Eder 1995

²¹ E.g., Crockett et al 1984; Bhurmester & Furman 1987; Furman & Buhrmester 1992; Bettie 2003

²² Bettie 2003: p29

²³ E.g., Youniss 1980, Savin-Williams & Berndt 1990

²⁴ Rios 2011; Goffman 2009

²⁵ Bourgois 1996; Anderson 2000; Dance 2002

²⁶ Jones 2009: p20

harassment and assault, and domestic violence.²⁷ They also face different demands. Girls, for instance, are more often expected to provide family care when parents work long hours.²⁸ This book looks closely at the experiences of young women, charting how they respond to such risks and demands.

A second consideration is that eight of the nine central participants were second- or 1.5-generation immigrants. Odette, Maude, Nicole, Rosalie, Stephanie and Joanne were Haitian-Americans, Aisha was Ugandan-American and Najma was Indian-American. Brittani was African-American. Immigration status very likely affected the girls' experiences and relationships, with their families, with their neighborhood, and with each other. A great deal of research considers the trajectories and outcomes of the children of immigrants. Early studies suggested that second-generation immigrants were vulnerable to a "second generation decline," relative to their parents, caused by downward assimilation into the urban underclass. Researchers identified this trend among immigrants, who, like the NC girls, lived in deprived, inner-city neighborhoods near native-born African-Americans with whom they could be (mis)identified.²⁹ But more recent work finds that children of immigrants are in fact surpassing the education and earnings of their native-born peers.³⁰ The girls in this book may well have benefitted from this "second generation advantage," and many were indeed the first members of their family to attend college.

Yet the girls grew up in a poor, urban neighborhood. They faced racism and

²⁷ Popkin et al. 2010: p716

²⁸ East 2010

²⁹ Gans 1992; Portes & Zhou 1993

³⁰ Kasinitz et al. 2008

discrimination, and most of the girls were Haitian-American, a group that has historically faced severe hostility and stereotyping.³¹ The girls also struggled with conflicting cultural expectations at home with their immigrant parents. In many cases, this led to family tension, undermining the “cohesive conjugal and parental bond[s],” on which success was thought to depend for immigrants in poor communities.³²

Relatedly, NC was not an ethnic enclave, and the girls’ parents worked mostly low-wage shift jobs around the city and in nearby suburbs. Their peer support did not stem from a shared sense of belonging in an ethnic community; the girls in one clique had national origins in four countries over three continents. Future research, however, could consider teenagers’ peer support and social dynamics in ethnic enclaves, or in poor neighborhoods inhabited mostly by native-born whites or African-Americans.

Digital Natives

Social media was pervasive in the girls’ lives. To them, online spaces were not virtual realities, alternative worlds, or subcultures. Rather, they were one feature of a busy social landscape.³³ As a result, the girls had a different understanding of togetherness than that proposed by interaction theorists like Erving Goffman, who emphasized mutual

³¹ Stepick 1998; Zephir 2001

³² Haitian immigrants have among the highest levels of parent-child conflict (Rumbaut 1997: p28).

³³ The binary of on/offline had little relevance to the girls (See also Osgerby 2004; boyd 2014). More studies should investigate social media in this context: as one of many ways in which people connect and communicate. As argued by Lu and Hampton, “To focus on the exchange of support through any one medium at any one moment in time risks missing the broader role that communication technologies play for social support” (Lu & Hampton 2017: p863). This book explores social support and social media more holistically. It shows how social media was integrated into the girls’ perceived and actual provision and receipt of aid, instead of focusing on only one medium for the transmission of social support.

participation in a single flow of messages.³⁴ They were quick and skilled communicators, always involved in several, ongoing conversations over multiple media. They knew how to be physically together while attentively distant.

Yet social media did have drawbacks. For example, image-based pressures plagued many of the girls, consistent with existing research. Although people have always sought feedback from others, the visual focus of most social media sites led to a constant and pervasive self-awareness, especially related to appearance.³⁵ Girls expected to be looked at and photographed at any time, and this could make them feel self-conscious and insecure.

There were other downsides, too. There were, for instance, time-intensive obligations to be an attentive audience member for peers. There was the window social media gave into the lives of their wealthier classmates, whose homes and vacations the girls saw in lurid detail. There were digital footprints the girls may unwittingly have left: researchers worry about the persistence and “searchability” of online posts, which can

³⁴ Goffman 1967: p99

³⁵ The girls found themselves often in a “self-conscious managerial position... with regards to their performative, corporeal displays ” (Khan 2011). At school one day, senior Ella noticed that she happened to be wearing the same outfit as a classmate, Aaron: blue jeans, and a long-sleeved purple shirt.

“Look, we’re matching!” she said.

“Let’s take a picture!” he suggested, handing his iPhone to their friend Bette.

Ella, on Aaron’s left, turned sideways to stand in profile. She bent the knee closest to Bette and arched her back. Then, to create the arm position known to be flattering in photos, she bent her left arm, placing her hand on her hip and angling her elbow. Then she rotated her shoulder, pushing it forward in the socket. She smiled and lengthened her neck, tilting her head away from Aaron and slightly up, to catch the light.

“Okay!” she said through her teeth.

Bette snapped a shot and passed back the phone.

“Ugh, the lighting sucks!” Ella complained, returning the handset to Bette for another try. She made the same set of physical adjustments, tilting her chin up a little further this time.

leave indelible traces of “sins of the youth.”³⁶ Girls also worried about their popularity, which was both measured and constructed by quantified markers like likes and favorites.

Much coverage of young people’s intensive social media use or screen time has a negative bent. In media and research reports, fears proliferate about things like cyberbullying, weakened attention spans, or young people’s diminished capacity for in-person interaction. These risks are no doubt important to consider, since cell phones and social media show no sign of releasing their grip on teens across the country and the globe. Yet we should also acknowledge the benefits young people can find in constant connection.

For the girls, social media was a versatile tool, one that helped them support each other. It offered entertainment, helped them beat boredom, and made them feel popular and cool. For some, like Aisha, social media helped them *become* these things.³⁷ It gave the girls privacy from their parents, and a place to process conflict, stigma, trauma, and more. Online, the girls had space and voice. These things were not trivial. In fact, Patricia Hill Collins explains that the freedom to speak clearly is necessary for resisting oppression.

³⁶ From Psalms 25:7. boyd (2014) discusses the left-behind traces of teenaged mistakes that persist due to affordances of social media including searchability.

³⁷ Eckert (1989: p87) writes that people who *appear* to be having the most fun often end up as the most popular people in their crowds. This was a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts that Aisha expertly set in motion, using, in part, the tools of social media. There was a further layer to her self-presentation, too. Aisha wrote into being a positive persona that she inhabited. She used social media to highlight aspects of her personality and hide others, creating a depiction of herself that felt both valuable, and real. Patricia Hill Collins describes how blues artists and Black women writers created “new meanings” that offered African-American women potentially “powerful tools to resist the controlling images of Black womanhood.” The ramifications of this are significant. “Far from being a secondary concern in bringing about social change,” she writes, “challenging controlling images and replacing them with a Black women’s standpoint constituted an essential component in resisting intersecting oppressions... By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define” (Hill Collins 2000: p123-125).

³⁷ Hill Collins 2000: p111

“While domination may be inevitable as a social fact,” she explains, “it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within social spaces where Black women speak freely. This realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women’s resistance.”³⁸ Hill Collins lists churches and community organizations as possible sites for safe discourse, but the girls could also speak candidly and provocatively with each other in the relative shelter of their online world.

Yet mediated peer support had its limits, as the girls discovered once they split up for college. Snapchat stories and text messages helped the girls keep up with each other’s lives, but meaningful help was less available online. When Joanne struggled with depression and anxiety, Aisha knew to cross the state to join her in person. For the girls, the most effective type of social support mixed daily in-person contact with social media that could layer and extend their interactions.

By the end of Aisha’s sophomore year, she was thriving socially and creatively. She had started performing at spoken word shows, where she worked crowds with her characteristic charisma, and even scored an invitation from Ilyasah Shabazz to perform at the 50th anniversary memorial celebration for her father, Malcolm X.

In her free time, Aisha was also flexing her entrepreneurial muscles, planning and hosting a fashion show at church. She deftly handled the politics, convincing the conservative elders that the fundraising opportunity outweighed what they saw as vanity. Then, she taught peer volunteer models how to walk in her living room, making them strut up and down until they swung their arms just right. The show was a success, and she

planned a second, and a third.

As Aisha matured, Cambridge was changing too. The housing projects where the girls had grown up were being demolished and rebuilt, and construction had scattered their families. Aisha's mom moved while she was away at college, and Aisha was upset when some of her clothes got lost in the move. "You have too many clothes," Aisha remembered Diana telling her.

One late May afternoon, Aisha walked down Rindge Avenue on her way to Brittani's apartment. As she passed JP, she paused and wove her fingers through the chain-link that fenced her old home from the street. Aisha peered through the wire at the hole in the earth where her building once stood.

"These old buildings. They were old. They were dirty. You tried your best, but that thing was dirty. Everything was moldy."

Aisha turned her back and walked away.

As we strolled, Aisha updated me about her girlfriends. Brittani was thriving at Bunker Hill, still planning her transfer to Salem State. Joanne had not yet returned to college, and had added a second job—morning shifts at a nursing home—to her Legal Seafood position. Aisha was rooting for her friend to get back to school, but she thought Joanne's family was unsupportive. Although they had taken out "mad loans" for Vincent to attend culinary school, she said, they wouldn't help Joanne. "They're conditioned not to value women's education. Most women in the family just get pregnant," Aisha shrugged. Then she stopped walking. "But Joanne has *transformed* in self-confidence," Aisha said, stamping her feet as she grinned. "Her confidence went from zero to a hundred," she explained. "I love it. Something about having to figure it all out, and being scared."

Aisha, Joanne and Brittani were still tight, still “ROD’s,” still “Day 1 A1’s.” But they had winnowed from four to three. “I am done with Najma,” Aisha said. “We used to work out because we understood each other’s problems. But now, Najma’s like, ‘I have new friends. They understand me better.’” Aisha recalled their final text conversation. “The last thing I said was, ‘I hope you know I’m not mad at you. If I see you, I’m gonna say, ‘Hi.’ On your birthday, I’ll tell you happy birthday. I hope you have a great and happy life.’” Najma responded, but Aisha ignored it. “She texted a whole paragraph,” Aisha said, icily. “I haven’t read it. When I’m done with things, I’m really done.”

Aisha found her friends lying in the sun behind Brittani’s building. Brittani was preparing a Zumba workshop for the after-school program where she was working for the summer. Joanne sat nearby, playing with her new, thick braids that fell to her waist. As Brittani pouted in focus at her notepad, Joanne rifled fondly through a bag of makeup on her lap. She picked up each piece like an ornament, giving her girlfriends unprompted explanations. “These sponges are really great,” she said. Joanne described her favorite YouTube makeup tutorials. Both girls—Aisha, who wore makeup for nights out, and Brittani, who never wore a dab—listened and nodded. They were happy she was happy.

It was clammy in the cloudless heat. But Aisha jumped around tirelessly, savoring the hours with her best friends. She clutched her phone and broadcast dozens of selfies as well as photos of her friends.

One week later, Aisha Snapchatted as she dragged her heavy suitcase through Boston’s Logan airport and checked in for her flight to Tokyo. On the plane, she peered out the window and took a deep breath. The engines whirred and shrieked as the jet raced down the runway and up into the sky. The trees, the homes, the streets—her streets—shrank

below her as they climbed. Rippled clouds snatched the old world from view, and Aisha was left with the racing in her chest.

Theoretical Conclusions

In this chapter, I synthesize and develop the dissertation's theoretical implications, pointing to interventions in existing scholarly debates and outlining avenues for future research. The chapter is organized thematically. First, it explores the primary theoretical argument of the dissertation: that peers, long maligned in studies of urban poverty, can act as a mobility promoting mechanism. This section considers why this argument has been largely missed by existing research; echoes calls for a broader understanding of "need" in poverty research; explores the conceptual utility of "social capital" for characterizing the young women's peer support; and examines the limitations of our current understanding of "peer effects."

The chapter then moves on to consider the ways in which the young women's experiences, family ties, and identities were shaped by the fact that all but one were second, or 1.5-generation immigrants. It points out what their stories can contribute to ongoing debates about second-generation youth in the United States. Finally, it turns to the theoretical implications of the girls' ubiquitous use of cell phones and social media, considering the ramifications for a) our understanding of neighborhood effects and b) canonical theories of interaction.

The chapter proceeds as follows:

1. Peers and Mobility
 - a. Case Selection
 - b. Theorizing "Need"
 - c. Social Capital
 - d. Conceptualizing Homophily and Peer Effects
2. Daughters of Immigrants
 - a. Family Dynamics

- b. Immigrant Identities
- 3. Social Media and Technology
 - a. Neighborhood Effects
 - b. Interactionism

1. Peers and Mobility

This dissertation argues that during adolescence—recognized by sociologists and psychologists as a crucial period for long-term life chances and trajectories—young people’s peer groups can promote wellbeing, success, and even opportunities for mobility. Youth and adolescence are key periods for the replication and exacerbation of class-, race- and gender-based inequalities, which is one reason why the critically oriented research of “reproduction” theorists focuses on these years (e.g., Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles & Gintis 1977; Ferguson 2000; Willis 1977; Bettie 2003). Moreover, during the teenage years, “turning points”—including pregnancy, high-school dropout, and involvement with the juvenile- and criminal-justice systems—can all set in motion irreparable downward trajectories.

Amidst research that tries to parse what helps and hinders young people, especially vulnerable young people, like the poor young women of color in this dissertation, the peer group is typically maligned. Researchers agree that peers are exceptionally potent and influential during adolescence, when the “parents to peers transition” leads young people to orient themselves primarily to support systems outside of the home, and when peers take on increasing responsibility for socializing one another (e.g., Coleman 1966; Corsaro and Eder 1990; Youniss & Smollar 1985; Duncan, Boisjoly & Harris 2001). This peer influence is overwhelmingly conceptualized as negative, or as a risk factor, particularly when it comes to the transmission of risk behaviors

through social networks. Quantitative studies measure and demonstrate how substance-related and sexual risk behaviors “spread” through social relationships (e.g., An 2011; Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993; South & Baumer 2000; Crane 1991; Kandel 1978; Akers et al. 1979; Haynie 2001) and qualitative research reveals some of the mechanisms by which “deviance” or “delinquency” are transmitted (e.g., Sullivan 1989; Harding 2011; Gans 1962). Some researchers use charged metaphors of disease or pathology to characterize the spread of risk behavior through close ties between “at-risk” young people as a “contagion” or an “epidemic” (Danicks & Mayer 1990; Case & Katz 1991; Crane 1991).

In addition to these immediate risks, peer ties also represent a longer-term threat to mobility, researchers find, either by dissuading the pursuit of opportunities elsewhere, or by “trapping” people in relationships of interdependency. Some studies find that close friendships can discourage young people from aspiring to brighter futures for fear of losing their social ties. This prevalent idea dates at least as far back as *Street Corner Society*, where William Foote Whyte argues, “Both the college boy and the corner boy want to get ahead. The difference... is that the college boy either does not tie himself to a group of close friends or else is willing to sacrifice his friendship with those who do not advance as fast as he does.” (Whyte 1943: p107; see also Willis 1997; MacLeod 1987). Contemporary studies make a similar point, like DeLuca et al. who describe how adolescent respondents must distance themselves from their peers to get ahead. “Bob and Bridget seem to be on a path to college,” they write. “For both, it involved hard choices. Both had to draw a bright line between themselves and their peers” (2016: p123). Relatedly, a separate body of research, particularly ethnographic studies of urban poverty, examines how interdependence, or close ties to others in a poor neighborhood—though typically necessary for survival—can interfere with any individual’s ability to “get ahead” (e.g., Stack 1974; Desmond 2016; Smith 2007; Jones

2007; Whyte 1943). As a result, poverty research focuses disproportionately on how people—and young people in particular—are typically obstacles to wellbeing and mobility.

This dissertation focuses on a different set of dynamics. It aims not to undermine what has been systematically examined, but rather to challenge our disproportionate emphasis on the ways poor young people can hamper one another's aspirations and outcomes. Working in tandem with other types of support—especially that from invested adults and supportive institutions, as illustrated in the conclusion—the peer support on which the Cambridge girls relied helped them meet a number of their most pressing needs, and in so doing, allowed them to aspire, and to achieve. The following sections explain why this argument has been largely overlooked by existing literature.

a. Case Selection

One reason the peer support outlined in this dissertation has likely been mostly missed is the disproportionate emphasis, in poverty research and especially in urban ethnography, on “risky” young people. A number of recent studies about poor youth of color critique just this over-focus on the most sensational or “deviant” subgroups in research. Two examples are *The Making of a Teenage Service Class* (Ray 2017) and *Coming of Age in the Other America*” (DeLuca et al. 2016). DeLuca et al. implicate methodology, suggesting, “observational studies run the risk of giving disproportionate voice to those few who dominate public space (“the corner”) rather than those youth who withdraw to their bedrooms to play video games, who head to the library to read books after school, or who spend their after-school time working” (2016: p65). They continue, “These outliers command our attention, and we fail to attend to all the other cases that do not fit the pattern” (ibid: p199). Yet most young people in poor neighborhoods, like most young people in any neighborhood, are not fighters, fugitives, gang-members, teenaged parents, or substance

abusers, despite our focus on just these outliers (e.g., Venkatesh 2008; Cloward & Ohlin 1960; Anderson 2000; Harding 2010; Goffman 2012; Bourgois 1996).

This is not merely an intellectual shortcoming that clouds our ability to see alternative sets of peer dynamics, like those illustrated in the previous chapters. It also has ramifications for social policy, which focuses primarily on breaking up young people's peer groups, rather than investing in them. Ray criticizes the pervasive labeling of low-income young people of color as "at risk" by government agencies, schools, and community organizations. She shows how the "at-risk" discourse leads institutions to allocate resources disproportionately to the prevention of risk behaviors, at the cost of providing holistic support for young people's transitions to adulthood. She also notes that describing young people as "at risk" takes an individualistic view, and overlooks the structural constraints that racially and socioeconomically marginalized young people systematically encounter (Ray 2017). Relatedly, Panter-Brick also critiques the "at-risk" discourse, arguing that describing homeless youth in this way promotes a stereotype of young people's vulnerability, and this results in further discrimination and exclusion, rather than helping focus attention on ways to negotiate adversity (Panter-Brick 2004).

I argue in this dissertation that policies aimed at promoting poor young people's wellbeing and success should take into account the primacy of peers. For instance, the importance of close peer ties is one factor that can help explain the striking success of the *Posse Foundation*—who integrates recipients of their scholarships into supportive teams, "posses," of peers with similar backgrounds and experiences. It can also help explain why among families who participated in *Moving to Opportunity*, children who moved at aged thirteen or later had worse outcomes than their peers who remained in high poverty areas (Chetty et al. 2015). Researchers mostly speculated that this finding owed to the move having less time to positively influence teenagers' formative

years, or alternatively to “disruption.” My research suggests that one key part of such “disruption” might well be the loss of peer ties, and the support that flowed through them.

b. Theorizing “Need”

Another reason peer support has been under-researched and under-emphasized in studies of poor youth is the conceptualization of need as material that underlies much research on poverty. Poverty is, after all, an economic relationship, defined as a lack of sufficient financial resources. But basic needs extend beyond physiological urgencies—things like food, clothing, and shelter—and encompass socioemotional goods like dignity, inclusion, and recognition, which are also vital for wellbeing.

In recent years, sociologists and political scientists have called for broader and more comprehensive indicators of wellbeing, beyond material need. In her presidential address to the *American Sociological Association*, Lamont explained that inequalities in material distribution and in recognition mutually reinforce one another (Lamont 2018). Elsewhere, Lamont notes, “Much of the focus has been on the distribution of resources and the alleviation of inequality and poverty. It is high time that we give stigmatization and social inclusion their due” (Lamont 2019: p33).

Until recently, policy has focused mostly on the distribution of resources (likely a result of neoliberalism’s emphasis on material goods as an indicator of value). Slowly, however, concepts like dignity and self-worth are spreading among policy makers, too, as societies reckon with the essential role of recognition in social justice (Fraser 2000; Hodson 2001; Honneth 2012). Governments have started to recognize and promote civic goods like recognition and inclusion along with economic integration (Hall & Lamont 2013). Such “emotional” goods matter for outcomes. Perceived dignity, for instance, has a direct and notable impact on subjective wellbeing (Hojman and Miranda 2017), and so, too, can narratives of resilience shape young people’s

experience and recollection of trauma (Panter-Brick et al. 2015). The study of emotional needs as civic goods seems especially pertinent amidst political discourse characterized by rising levels of anger and racist resentment.

This dissertation echoes calls for greater scholarly attention to affective and socioemotional necessities. If we conceptualize need primarily as economic, the scope of the girls' peer support shrinks. But if we take a more holistic view of wellbeing, one that includes the full range of things people need to thrive, we see that the young women were often one another's primary source of support. They offered each other urgent resources that helped them get through difficult times while staying on a path leading to what they hoped would be brighter futures. Poverty does entail material deprivation. But it can also entail going through life—and, in the girls' case, coming of age—feeling put down, kept out, undercut and undermined. Stiffening beneath the unwanted eyes of store clerks or sprinting home from the subway could feel as grim as an empty fridge. When the girls gave each other sanctuary, when they heard stories of trauma, when they affirmed one another, they gave aid no less vital than when they traded cash. Empathy, advice, validation, and love were among the deepest needs they could meet.

c. Social Capital

Typically, sociologists use the notion of “social capital” to capture the benefits of social relationships. Yet I argue that this concept has two key limitations when it comes to theorizing the versatility and power of the girls' peer support. First, it does not reflect the primacy of socioemotional and affective goods, as described above. Second, the girls lacked social capital per most of its conventional definitions.

An instrumentalism and material reductionism underlies many iterations of social capital (e.g., Coleman 1988; Bourdieu 1986). While the girls' patterns of economic exchange and

procurement did show strategy and utility maximizing on occasion, the young women mostly sought money for the participation, inclusion and status it offered. And, other types of resources, like social and emotional support — and the fulfillment, joy, validation, resilience, recognition and self-esteem that teens shared — are largely absent from the interest-based accounts of social capital popularized by Coleman (1988). The language of social capital does not capture the *primacy* of extra-economic assistance, or encompass and foreground flows of these goods between friends. Some research emphasizes the affective dimension of social support. Briggs, for instance, parses two aspects of social capital: “access to *social support* that helps us cope with life’s stresses and challenges (“get by”) and access to *social leverage*, the key to mobility or “getting ahead”” (1998: 206). Strong ties are typically suited more for emotional support, and weak ties for leverage (Briggs 1998). Yet among the girls in Cambridge, strong ties were the affective roots that sustained the multiple branches of mutual support, which in turn promoted their wellbeing and success.

Moreover, the girls lacked social capital according to its most popular iterations. For Bourdieu (1986), for instance, social capital flows only through ties that confer *legitimated* social goods, honor and privilege; socioeconomic and racial marginalization excluded the teens from such relationships. Often-hostile relationships with parents also denied the girls social capital under Coleman’s definition, wherein, “Even if adults are physically present, there is a lack of social capital... if there are not strong relations between children and parents” (1988: p111). Portes, too, emphasizes social capital as a *family* asset (2000). Nor was there neighborhood collective efficacy in the form of shared expectations for child control (Sampson, Morenoff & Earls 1999). Gossip, and hence surveillance, did circulate among some of the Haitian parents. But many adults were split by conflict, curbing the clout of their policing. As well as parents who voluntarily refrained from communicating, others were barred by a lack of common language skills; many adults knew

only their native tongues. This limited collective efficacy and social capital qua “expectations for action within a collectivity” (Portes & Sensenbrenner 1993).

Kasinitz et al. (2008: 350) explain, “Whereas ‘social capital’ helps better-off groups cope with many types of trouble, being heavily ‘embedded’ in networks of reciprocal obligation among the worst off can be a real disadvantage. In such groups, many of the most successful members describe themselves as ‘loners.’” Yet among the girls in this dissertation— poor young women who lacked social capital—lines of peer support nonetheless existed. As a result, this dissertation adds to critiques of deficit-based accounts of social capital. It lends support to alternative conceptualizations, like Yosso’s account of “community cultural wealth” (2005), which recognizes the unique traditions, in historically marginalized families and communities of color, of fostering aspirations, resistance, and more.

d. Conceptualizing “Homophily” and “Peer Effects”

This dissertation also advocates for more studies of peer effects in real time. When researchers study the transmission of risk behaviors through young people’s social ties, a key concern is the “directionality” of such peer effects. A central question researchers ask is whether peer groups’ homophily of belief or behavior—a foundational assumption of much peer effects research—results either from *socialization* or *selection*.

However, studies attempting to identify the directionality of homophily—that is whether peer effects work primarily through selection or socialization—have two key limitations. First, a focus on quantifying peer effects can obscure the dynamic, day-to-day processes that animate friendships, and blur the complicated forms that social influence really takes. As Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn argue, “Contagion models in general do not specify how... peer influences operate” (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn 2000: p326). There are, of course, exceptions. For instance, Harding’s

ethnographic work shows how neighborhood violence drives younger teens to seek protective relationships from older boys, and in turn, these friendships expose boys to cultural models that “negatively” influence their behavior and decision making (Harding 2009: p459). Yet in general, the emphasis on measurement and quantification reduces thick and living relationships to mere predictors of dependent variables, like whether someone smokes or not (Giordano 2003: p257). This elides the daily social dynamics lived between teenagers. And, friendships themselves are seen as either present or absent, rather than continually negotiated and accomplished.

Second, framing peer effects as a “contagion” or “epidemic” leaves little room for diversity or resistance. This is true at both the individual and the neighborhood level. Studies tend to reify people’s beliefs and behaviors into coherent and stable preferences, when in fact they are often contradictory and changing. Moreover, poor neighborhoods are known to be heterogeneous, meaning that a range of attitudes, behaviors and opinions exist within the same community. Though an earlier generation of sociologists argued that social isolation produced a singular, adaptive and often oppositional ‘ghetto’ subculture in poor neighborhoods, researchers in fact find a great diversity of beliefs and behaviors in poor neighborhoods (Kuper 1953; Gans 1961; Hannerz 1969; Anderson 2000). The notion that heterogeneous “cultural repertoires” co-exist in low-income communities (Harding 2009; Harding & Hepburn 2014), is a corrective to earlier misconceptions that either “types” of people, or rigid “codes” were the driving logic behind certain behaviors. Conceptually, heterogeneity allows for agency, individual-decision making, and divergent outcomes. But what does heterogeneity look like within a single social clique? How is it maintained between best friends? These types of questions are overlooked, largely, in peer effects research, and answered, in part, by this dissertation.

As the girls grew, older some experimented with risk behaviors, like drinking and smoking weed. Some abstained. Others started, then stopped, then started again. Studies of adolescent behavior rarely feature such heterogeneity. Typically, they focus instead on measuring peer effects. Such studies would predict that the girls would either have found new friends that matched their new habits, or that they would have all adopted the same practices. But neither was true. Risk behaviors were not a “contagion” among the girls. Rather, the young women took on a project mostly missed by researchers: they had practices of preservation to deal with difference.

Chapter 7 outlines these strategies. It shows that the girls claimed a positive group identity by contrasting their cliques to “ratchet,” “ghetto” others. This minimized their sense of internal variation. When confronted clearly with these disparities, girls often practiced pluralism, drawing on interactional skill, or on wells of social intimacy, to resist the incursion of difference into their conversations and relationships. But they also pushed back against things they disagreed with, often lightly, to protect their friendships and one another’s feelings. On occasion, policing was more strident. Together, these strategies helped the girls shield their relationships from newfound differences. The choice of one strategy over another was often spontaneous. Girls’ responses could vary wildly: sometimes they sanctioned their friends; sometimes they expressed amusement. Sometimes they expressed impatience and irritation; sometimes they kept quiet, loath to make things awkward.

What was reliable, however, was that none of the girls acted always in accordance with their stated views about things like drinking or smoking. Rather, the girls managed their differences in real daily encounters and social situations. It is easy to state moral beliefs or opinions about risk behaviors, and it is easy for researchers to measure such statements. However, fixed and static claims do not reflect what happens each day as teens find their tastes challenged by their close

friends. The girls did not judge each other with binary, yes-or-no opinions about right or wrong. No fixed codes or preferences shaped their social relationships. Instead, girls used a “practical consciousness” and a moral pragmatism to preserve their friendships day-by-day and year-by-year.

Rather than finding new friends (selection) or falling like dominos (socialization), the girls accommodated a degree of difference. The “selection” model of peer influence—in which people individually and autonomously seek friends who mirror them—is unrealistically voluntaristic. The girls did not rationally curate their ties with a cool instrumentalism. Yet nor were they powerless victims of group norms. This, in turn, challenges the structural and network determinism of the “socialization” model, the other path to social homophily. Cultural sociologists have argued against privileging structure over culture, whether structure is taken to mean durable social institutions, or the social networks in which individuals are embedded. They have cautioned against “morphological determinism”—whereby patterns of social bonds are seen to direct and determine individuals’ actions (e.g., Emirbayer & Goodwin 1994; Vaisey & Lizardo 2010). Structural-, network- or morphological determinism are often implied by the peer effects literature. But as scholars have shown, and as this dissertation underlines, relationships are developed and maintained through countless interactions, each involving situated moments of evaluation, response and action. This dissertation answers the pragmatist call for the “return to experience” (e.g., Emirbayer & Maynard 2010) by focusing on difference not in the abstract but as it is lived and negotiated moment by moment.

Empirically, the dissertation supports findings by Vaisey (2008), who identified an interactive relationship between teenagers’ moral values and social networks. He gestures to the work of ethnomethodologists like Garfinkel (1967) and Mead (1934), who long ago pointed out that social action is not usually guided by “sense already made” but, rather, meaning and action are

negotiated through interaction itself (Vaisey 2008). Emirbayer and Maynard (2011) discuss social action similarly. They point to the construction of social order in real time, by actors trying to resolve difficulties and solve problems. (Problem-solving has been a historic concern of pragmatists, who emphasize the importance of creative social action, of context, and of situations in the accomplishment of social order, instead of attributing this latter to inert background beliefs (e.g., Joas 1996; Dewey 1938)). Building on this theoretical lineage, Vaisey argues that moral judgment between teenagers is mostly practical, and not driven by deliberate, context-independent reasoning (2008). In this research, I found a similar dynamic; moral judgments of peers were situationally contingent, flexible, and pragmatic.

Cliques are full of problem-solving, complexities, and concessions. But these are often missed by studies that attempt to identify the directionality of peer effects rather than chart adolescents' experience of friendship. As Krappman explains, in "[s]urvey studies... it is difficult to realize many of the ambivalences, conditions, and counterarguments that can occur within these relationships. This... obscures the true impact of friendship, which is exerted not only by harmonic friendships, but also, or even more, by friends who fight their way through all the complications and contradictions that characterize different kinds of friendships in real peer life" (Krappman 1996: p36; see also Ness 2004). Costello and Hope make a similar argument, claiming that "by their very nature," quantitative methods "are ill-suited to tapping into the peer influence process." In focusing on "improving quantitative research design," they argue, researchers have "forgotten to ask more basic questions, such as exactly what is happening in the context of peer interactions that can lead toward or away from deviant or dangerous behavior?" (Costello & Hope 2016: p84). This dissertation advocates for, and marshals, qualitative data gathered over years' worth of interactions to show what peer influence, and friendship, looked like in real time. It reveals the

types of conversations and situations the young women managed when it came to risk behaviors.

The description, in this dissertation, of a peer group that tolerated difference, and the account of the moral and interactional pragmatism required to maintain it, raises another question: why would young people go to such lengths to accommodate heterogeneity? The answer I offers is as follows: friendships were crucial. The girls turned to their friends to deal with daily and extreme hardships, from boredom to trauma. If we understand the full significance of peer relationships to adolescents (as shown by chapters 2—5), and conceptualize them as more than a risk factor for negative behaviors and outcomes, we can understand how—and why—the girls were able to accommodate and manage difference. This dissertation argues that the girls’ pragmatism and moral flexibility reflected the value of their friendships. Conflict can be costly in adolescent relationships (Laursen 1996), and given the support that the girls shared, losing these ties may have been more difficult than making space for heterogeneity. Other sociologists have also found that “moral minimalism” can be a strategy to avoid conflict and preserve relationships (e.g., Baumgartner 1989, Lamont 2000).

Finally, this dissertation makes a further intervention when it comes to the notion of *homophily* that sociologists typically believe characterizes social groups. Most research on adolescent friendships focuses on homophily of *practice*, but the girls had little of this. Researchers also consider demographic homophily, of which the girls had more. But I argue that it was other similarities that were most meaningful to the girls themselves. They had shared experiences—including of hardship and trauma—and similar senses of humor. They had common patterns of care. They liked each other and they relied on each other, and although these types of similarity were vaguer and more fuzzy, they motivated the girls to deal with other forms of difference. If researchers look only at those types of similarity and difference most interesting to them, they

ignore the other ways in which teens feel closeness and commonality. They miss, perhaps most importantly, the reason why teens would do so much to save their friendships.

2. Daughters of Immigrants

Of the nine central young women in this dissertation, eight were either second or 1.5-generation immigrants, having moved to the United States as young children. In Odette's clique, Odette and her sister Maude, as well as their friends Stephanie, Nicole and Rosalie had all moved from Haiti. In Aisha's clique, Aisha had moved from Uganda, Joanne from Haiti, Najma's parents were Indian-American, and Brittani was native-born African American. None of the young women were undocumented and nor, to my knowledge, were their parents.

A great deal of research has tried to theorize the trajectories and pathways to incorporation of second-generation youth, like the young women in this dissertation. Today, the children of immigrants are the fastest growing segment of American youth (Hagan 2008), representing almost a quarter of all Americans under the age of twenty-four (Rumbaut 2005, 2008).

Early theories of immigration focused on the notion that immigrants would—or should—grow increasingly incorporated and assimilated into “mainstream” American culture (e.g. Warner & Srole 1945). This view was broadly critiqued, including for its assumption that there exists a monolithic, homogenous, and unchangeable “American culture.” Opposed to the “straight-line” theory of immigration, Gans (1992) notably argued that the trajectories of second-generation youth were more likely to be negative than the upward-march implied by earlier work. Gans pointed to a “second-generation decline,” whereby the children of immigrants—especially Black and racial minority young people—were likely to adopt negative or oppositional views toward work and opportunity, leading them to lifelong poverty. Subsequently, Portes & Zhou's influential “segmented assimilation” model (1993) added nuance to theories of immigrant incorporation, by

showing how a diverse range of factors –including contexts of reception and parents’ human capital—shaped how young people were likely to adapt and assimilate. Their framework accounted for the enormous diversity of outcomes among the children of immigrants. They found, for instance, that children with strong family ties, whose parents limited their interaction with people outside the ethnic group, were most likely to thrive. Race mattered, too, and Black immigrants who lived near native-born minorities with whom they could be (mis)identified were vulnerable to downward assimilation.

More recent work by Kasinitz et al. finds little evidence of a second generation decline, and, in fact, notes indicators of a “second generation advantage” (Kasinitz et al. 2008). Crucially, the authors note that second-generation youth have succeeded not by “clinging to the networks and enclaves of their immigrant communities. Instead, they have joined the mainstream, at least in the sense that their education and occupational profiles look more like those of each other and native young people their age than they do those of their immigrant parents” (Kasinitz et al. 2008: p16). Some scholars challenge this optimism. Portes et al. for instance argue that downward assimilation is prevalent in the second generation (Portes et al. 2011), an argument rebuffed by Alba, Kasinitz and Waters (2011). Alba et al. note that most children of immigrants “have made significant progress relative to their parents,” (2011: p766), something researchers miss if they conceptualize upward mobility or success only as having graduated from a four-year college and obtaining a stable, professional job.

Tentatively, my data supports the more optimistic stance (cf. Alba et al. 2011; Kasinitz et al. 2008). Although few of the girls graduated from four year schools, many obtained associate’s degrees or some college credits. This was an improvement over their parents’ educational outcomes. Moreover, none of the girls had oppositional or negative attitudes about schooling or

opportunity, as theorized by scholars worried about downward assimilation among Black immigrants living in poor, urban neighborhoods. The girls were driven and optimistic, even while they were critical of race-relations and racism in America more generally. It is true, however, that the girls struggled with school, particularly at college. Their difficulties were not attitudinal, however, or due to a “reactive ethnicity” (Rumbaut 2008). Rather, it seemed like their poverty and socioeconomic marginalization were more to blame. Yet their immigration status likely mattered, too, primarily because of their parents’ lack of English, and understanding of how to navigate American educational bureaucracies. This supports existing research (e.g., Foner 2014), although the strength of my conclusions are limited without having compared their experiences with those of classmates who were similarly low-income but whose parents spoke English.

a. Family Dynamics

In line with existing scholarship, all of the young women in this dissertation (except for Brittani, whose mother was born in Cambridge) struggled with conflicting cultural expectations at home. Immigration scholars have noted how cultural dissonance—differences in beliefs and expectations between parents and their American teenagers—can lead to conflict (e.g., Portes & Rumbaut 1996; Stepick et al. 2001). In many cases, this led to significant family tension, undermining the “cohesive conjugal and parental bond[s],” on which success was thought to depend for immigrants in poor communities (Rumbaut 1997).

Among the girls, the conflict was often gendered. The young women bristled against what they viewed as double-standards when it came to their parents’ expectations for how they should behave, as compared to their brothers or male cousins. Again, this is in line with research that finds that female behavior, especially around dating and sexuality, can be especially provocative in immigrant households (e.g., Foner 2014, Stepick et al. 2001).

Some studies find that Haitian immigrants have among the highest levels of parent-child conflict (Rumbaut 1997: p28). With my data, I cannot speak systematically to this, though I did find that many of the young women marshalled their parents' Haitian nationality to account for conflict at home. Stephanie, for instance, spoke of her "Haitian nightmare parents," and her best friend, Odette, often described what she saw as her own parents' shortcomings in terms of their being Haitian. "The thing is, a lot of Haitian parents don't really know how to talk to their kids, how to have that relationship," she explained. On another occasion, she spoke similarly: "Haitian parents," she said, "it's not really their fault, like they don't know psychology, they don't know sociology, they don't know how it affects kids." But all of the girls whose parents had immigrated struggled to balance their parents' typically more conservative and traditional wishes with their own, shaped by having grown up in America.

b. Immigrant Identities

Studies show that the experiences of second-generation immigrants vary significantly based on factors including country of origin and race (Portes & Rumbaut 1993; Adsera & Tienda 2012; Haskins & Tienda 2011). Most of the girls were Haitian-American, a group that has historically faced severe hostility and stereotyping (Stepick 1998; Zephir 2001; Waters 2001).

Amidst a reasonable degree of racialized "banter" among teens in Cambridge, I heard some negative mentions of heritage on occasion, like in this conversation I witnessed as Aisha walked with two friends. As the three seniors strolled, Mateo asked Camila "What are you?"

"I'm Spanish, Puerto Rican, Haitian and Dominican," Camila replied.

"Damn, you got the killer in you," he said.

"What's the killer?" Camila asked nonchalantly.

"Haitian. Those niggas don't joke," he said.

Camila didn't move or respond.

But I did not see any of the girls express shame, or conceal their identity, as other studies have found among second-generation Haitian youth (Stepick et al. 2001). They were upfront about their heritage, posting celebratory photographs for Flag Day on social media, and sharing memes about Haitian food or Haitian parents or “Haitian people problems.” (Many did, however, joke—or claim seriously—that they would not date Haitian men, some with a caveat that they would if the men were “Americanized.”)

Young people start to build stable and adult identities during the teenage years. Unsurprisingly, adolescence is typically an important period for young people's development of their ethnic identity, too (Waters 1990; Phinney 1990; Quintana et al. 1999). None of the girls were members of ethnic organizations, or, with the exception of Aisha, churches—institutions which have been shown to foster ethnic pride and identity among immigrants (Alba 1990; Portes & Rumbaut 2000; Foley & Hoge 2007). Instead the key contexts for the young women to develop and express their ethnic identities were at home, at school, and with their peers.

All of the girls saw themselves both as immigrants and as Black (except Najma, whose parents were Indian). They alternatively described themselves as “Black” or as, for instance, “Haitian” (Aisha usually used the term “African” rather than “Ugandan” when describing her heritage.) Research finds that second-generation young people tend to emphasize their racial identity more if they go to a mostly white school, and their ethnic identity if their school is primarily Black (e.g., Stepick et al. 2001). CRLS was majority-minority, but not majority-Black, and this was the context for the girls' flexible self-identification.

The young women's flexibility is in line with research that speaks to the creativity and inventiveness of contemporary second-generation youth. In contrast to straight line theory, which

suggested that second-generation young people would succeed through assimilation, and in contrast to segmented assimilation theory, which argued that in fact the second-generation would thrive by resisting Americanization, Kasinitz et al. find that the positioning of the second generation “between two different social systems allows for creative and selective combinations of the two that can be highly conducive to success” (Kasinitz et al. 2008: p354).

As well as being individually creative when it came to their ethnic identities, the girls valued having friends who were similarly positioned between two social systems. At college, Joanne excitedly described some new friends she had made: “Risha is Dominican. Kel is Eritrean, Mary is Haitian as well. Most of them are not American.” Likewise, at the high school graduation ceremony hosted by her Church, Aisha said of her best friends, Joanne, Najma, and Brittani: “They understand the in-between, like they understand being Ugandan and being American and that is not easy. Like socially, like they all understand having the best of both worlds, they all have it.”

Immigration status was a basis for social closeness among the young women. The girls often talked about, or tweeted some variation on, “Immigrant people problems.” This played out differently in both cliques. In Odette’s clique, the girls often talked, joked, or commiserated about being Haitian or having Haitian parents. They sometimes sprinkled Kreyol words into their sentences, using the boundary of their shared language to mark their intimacy.

In Aisha’s clique, however, where the girls came from four countries over three continents, humor and togetherness most often hinged on the fact of being an immigrant, rather than a sense of shared ethnic or national origins. For instance, one evening in Najma’s room, the girls laughed over their experiences of outsidership and humiliation by their “immigrant” parents. Aisha acted out the confusion of her Mom and Aunt, both Ugandan immigrants, attempting to place an order in an all-American setting: Chuck-e-Cheese. She exaggerated her accent and acted out clueless

body language to convey their failure to act “normally” in the restaurant. Joanne responded with a story about her own mother congregating with other Haitians in *Market Basket*. Interestingly, however, Brittani, born and raised in Cambridge to an American mother, then jumped in, sharing a story of her own mom acting embarrassingly in *Market Basket*. The girls laughed heartily, allowing Brittani, at least in that moment, to claim the same intimacy-through-outsiderness. The women experienced closeness based on their shared experience of marginality.

Race was certainly a factor; as Brittani was African-American, she also had experienced racism and colorism as had the other girls. While the changing nature of race in America means that assimilating into “Black America” no longer has universally negative consequences, given the policy and institutional gains of the civil rights movement (Kasinitz et al. 2008), all of the girls discussed and experienced racism and colorism. This, too, was a basis of their closeness, one that both overlapped with and worked distinctly from their immigration status.

Overall, there is no doubt that being (mostly) the daughters of immigrants shaped how the young women interacted with each other, with their families, with their neighborhood, and with their city. NC was not, however, an ethnic enclave, and the girls’ parents worked mostly low-wage shift jobs around the city and in nearby suburbs. Future research, however, could consider teenagers’ peer support and social dynamics in ethnic enclaves, or in poor neighborhoods inhabited mostly by native-born whites or African-Americans.

3. Social Media and Technology

A comprehensive analysis of the social lives of contemporary American teenagers is impossible without a consideration of how social media organizes and facilitates young people’s interactions and relationships. Recent studies find that eighty-nine percent of American teens say

they are online either “almost constantly” or “several times per day” (Pew 2018), underscoring the role social media plays in the lives of young people today.

A great deal of scholarship in sociology, media studies, science and technology studies, and communication studies has tried to theorize the effect of new technologies like social media on human relationships and interactions. Early studies tended either to be technologically deterministic in their attribution of disruptive power to machines (e.g., Meyrowitz 1985; Castells 2000), or to make hard constructionist arguments for humans’ near total agency to receive new technologies and media products (e.g., Woolgar 1992; Pickering 1992). Most theoretical paradigms now take a more balanced view, examining how technologies both constrain and enable certain types of interactions (e.g., Lievrouw & Livingstone 2006; Hutchby 2001; Wajcman 2002; Latour 2005; Sassen 2002). Such a view informs my research; the young women in this dissertation interacted with social media both in ways intended by their creators, and also in novel and creative manners (see e.g., the “domestication” perspective in Berker et al. 2006).

Yet much theorizing still relies on outdated conceptual binaries, like “online / offline” or “virtual / real” (Sassen 2002; Miller & Slater 2000). I challenge the implied assumption that internet interaction is opposed to real or authentic communication. For the girls, online spaces were not virtual realities, alternative worlds, or subcultures. Rather, they were one feature of busy social landscapes. The binary of online / offline had little relevance for the girls and their peers (see also Osgerby 2004; boyd 2014), but few studies investigate social media in this context: as one of many spheres in which people connect and communicate. Most studies that do focus on the daily use of social media spotlight one aspect, platform, or medium—for instance how chronically ill or unemployed people find social support in online forums, or on how Twitter is used to co-ordinate responses to natural disasters (e.g., Sutton et al. 2008; Lotan et al. 2011; Yates & Paquette 2011).

By contrast, this dissertation joins a small but growing body of work that looks more holistically at people's daily engagement with social media.

a. Neighborhood Effects

Even urban ethnographers, who study daily life as it is lived, have been slow to catch up to the ubiquity and intensity of digital communications. Yet cell phones and social media have potentially momentous impacts on our conceptualization of urban poverty. Since Wilson's seminal *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987)—which revealed the “concentration effects” of the geographic clustering of poverty—much poverty research has focused on social isolation and the hardships it provokes (Sampson 2012; Sharkey 2012). A key concern of poverty researchers has long been the daily life and survival strategies of people isolated from mainstream institutions (e.g., Liebow 1967; Stack 1974; Bourgois 1996).

But today's teenagers are part of the most connected generation in history. Nationwide, and with little variation over racial or class lines, ninety-two percent of American teens report going online at least once per day. On a daily basis, more teens interact with friends via text message than they do in person (Pew 2015). Yet sociologists have not shifted their focus to account for the fact that life is played out decreasingly on the street corner, and increasingly on the “digital street” (Lane 2016). When it comes to urban poverty, “the street” has long been a metaphor for the staging ground for social life (e.g., Anderson 2000; Jacobs 1961). However, studies that continue to focus on traditional sites and methods for studying urban communities limit what we can learn about poor young people who are “digital natives,” and who have grown up fully accustomed to social media.

Research that does focus on young people's social media use looks typically at the risks and developmental consequences of constant screen use. Some studies chart the pressures, tension,

and insecurities that life online can involve (e.g., Sales 2016). Online conflict is a particular concern. This includes “drama,” defined as, “performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media” (Marwick & boyd 2014). But “drama” can also take a more lethal form; social media can facilitate the provocation, expression, and magnification of gang fights, including in-person physical violence (e.g., Patton et al 2016; Lane 2018). This body of research is largely negative, and although this dissertation does not aim to undermine the very real developmental and socioemotional drawbacks that constant social media use can have, it argues that we know less about the “positive” potential of new technologies. Relatedly, studies that look at extremes—like fights, bullying, and drama—leave unexplored teenagers’ more mundane, day-to-day social media use. This dissertation begins to fill these gaps.

Finally, social media raises another set of questions for urban sociology and poverty scholarship. Since the foundational works of the Chicago School, which pioneered the ecological approach to social life (e.g., Park & Burgess 1925), the notion that neighborhoods influence their residents’ outcomes has guided almost a century of social science research and policy initiatives (for reviews of the sizable body of research examining neighborhood effects, see Johnson, 2010; Leventhal, Dupéré, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). Despite increasing access to cell phones and social media, poor young people in poor neighborhoods still, mostly, attend poor schools, and experience neighborhood-based hardships, like local violence. Place continues to matter; tremendously so. However, even very poor young people now have, through their cell phones, instant and unlimited access to cultural forms, media products, and information. This has important ramifications for the ways we theorize the impact of space and related social processes. In perhaps the first urban ethnography of young people with digitally mediated social lives, Jeffrey Lane addresses these new conceptual challenges.

“Neighborhood based risks and opportunities associated with urban poverty are socially mediated through the use of popular communication technologies,” Lane argues (2018: ix). This raises important questions. For instance, how does the role of place and space change, or not, with social media? How do neighborhoods matter more or less as people spend increasing time online? This dissertation does not, and cannot, answer these questions. But it joins the growing number of voices asking them, and calling for more research to carefully study what “neighborhood effects” entail when people are more connected than ever before.

b. Interactionism

Social media also calls for an update, or reconsideration, of some of our canonical theories of micro-interaction. This dissertation reveals a style of social media use that complicates some classical theory about group social processes. The girls had a different understanding of togetherness than that proposed by interaction theorists like Goffman, who emphasized mutual participation in a single flow of messages (Goffman 1967: p99). Rather, the girls were quick and skilled communicators, always involved in several, ongoing conversations over multiple media. Goffman argued that, “an individual’s activities must occur either in social situations or solitarily” (1967: p67), but this was blurred by the time the girls spent apart but communicating. So, too, by their time spent together while focusing primarily on their own phones. They knew how to be physically together while attentively distant. Classical interaction theorists would view such interactions as compromised, or unsatisfying. Interaction theorists would view this “external preoccupation” as an indication of an “alienated interaction.” To Goffman, an interaction was flawed if somebody gave their “main concern to something that is unconnected with what is being talked about at the time and even unconnected with the other persons present” (Goffman 1967: p117, p167). But among the girls, the reverse was often true. The freedom and comfort to keep

using their phones, and casually talk to absent friends, was a sign of closeness. For the girls, this ‘distance’ was in fact intimacy.

In recent years, some sociologists have considered the limitations of online interactions for the creation of intimacy and emotional intensity. Emotional intensity is a basic need, and one that people determinedly hunt (Katz 1988). For Collins, building on Durkheim’s theory of collective effervescence, emotional energy is generated in group interactions when people focus on the same activity and sense one another’s involvement. This constitutes a “interaction ritual” that makes participants feel energized and engaged (Collins 2004: p112). “Where mutual focus and entrainment builds up among the participants, self-reinforcing feedback processes generate moments of compelling emotional experience,” he writes (ibid: pxii). Importantly, Collins sees bodily co-presence as a key part of this interaction ritual. Mediated communication is unlikely to generate emotional energy, he argues, because it lacks “the rhythm of immediate vocal participation, which... is honed to tenths of seconds. There is little or no buildup of focus of attention in reading an email, no paralinguistic background signals of mutual engrossment” (2004: p63).

It is true that when the girls socialized with one another over distance, they lacked the biophysical attunement emphasized by Collins. Nonetheless, their online interactions—particularly when they were synchronous (i.e. an instant message thread versus an email conversation)—could very much resemble an engaging interaction ritual. Girls felt thrill and togetherness at a shared focus of attention, even when they were not co-present. Likewise, when they traded memes—internet ‘jokes’ that flared up and spread rapidly before fading—they felt ‘in’ on the moment, a moment that outsiders and adults did not share. This fostered a collective effervescence much like that experienced in-person, and based, too, on mutual entrainment, group

membership, and social boundaries. Similarly, tweets premised on shared understanding—like, *That face you make when...* or *That feeling when...* or *That moment when...*—drew on and affirmed the girls’ sense of community. The girls experienced greater intimacy and intensity through their mediated interactions than classical theory, I argue, would allow.

Relatedly, this dissertation outlines a notion of “digital rituals”—online practices that bonded the girls, both day-to-day and also during grieving—that could give rise to collective effervescence, even at a distance. Digital rituals, including joining hashtags and sharing memes, stretched collective effervescence over space, but not over too much time, as Twitter trends and viral memes or jokes mostly flared up fast and then fizzled. Being ‘hip’ to the latest online thing was an elevating feeling, one that replaced a sense of isolation with a moment of engagement and community membership.

When it came to grieving, the girls’ digital rituals included posting hashtags and images that memorialized lost friends. These rituals offered a set of scripts for responding to chaos and crisis. They funneled despair into symbols, making grief legible. Moreover, these digital rituals fostered social solidarity. Building on Durkheim, Collins describes “sacred objects”—things that are “treated with respect,” have “special qualifications as to who can approach,” and are “emotionally and vehemently and self-righteously defended” (2004: p97 - 98). In his discussion of “sacred objects,” Collins draws on Durkheim’s division of the sacred and profane as a key organizing logic in social life, along with his discussion of the role of ritual and religion in fostering moral solidarity. Sacred objects are totemic—objects imbued with a sacred force, the source of which is the power of society itself. Although Collins focuses on things like priestly books and ceremonial chalices, I argue that the objects of teens’ online mourning rituals were sacred, too. The sacred objects teens used as the visual and discursive foci of their digital rituals—things like

hashtags, pins, and t-shirts—were totemic, too; imbued with the power of the group. The teens had rules over who could use or display them. Durkheim, and scholars building on his work, like Collins and Lamont, note that boundary drawing is a key way to assert community, and in this vein, the teens' rules and boundaries surrounding their digital rituals helped them restate the integrity of their social network when it was threatened by catastrophic trauma.

Further research could revisit other foundational assumptions of micro-interaction and small-group processes to analyze whether, and how far, mediated communication adheres to the theories we have long used to study interaction in everyday life.

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