1 The Mobility Puzzle and Irreconcilable Choices

I met Angie in the summer of 2010, when she was an eighteen-year-old high school student. A Latina, she lived in Port City Heights, a housing project located on the outskirts of Port City.[1] Port City, a small northeastern town, has one of the highest poverty rates and lowest four-year high school graduation rates in the United States.[2] Angie's paternal grandparents had brought her as a six-month-old from Puerto Rico to Port City. She said her grandparents took her because they thought they would be able to offer her a better life than her parents could. This happened after her parents split and her mother starting dating a man who was caught up in alcohol. Angie still lived with her grandparents when I met her. Her mother now lived in Philadelphia with Angie's five sisters. Angie's father moved in and out of her grandparents' home. Some nights he came home drunk. One night, as Angie and I sat on her old but comfortable loveseat, enjoying some chicken nuggets, her father banged on the door. Angie looked at me: "This fuckin' fat-ass nigga is scratching my door like he a fuckin' ghost! What alcohol does to people!" Sometimes when her father was drinking, he ate all the food she had made for herself and stole the money she had hidden at the bottom of one of her clothes drawers. Despite the conflicts within her family, it was a place of comfort and support for Angie.

Angie remained focused on her future. She had worked two jobs since she turned fourteen, and although she liked to spend some of her money on nail art, tattoos, and trips to Philadelphia, she saved for college, a car, and emergencies. She planned to get a college degree, find a good job, start a family, and live the middle-class American dream.

A self-described "short and thick" woman, Angie liked to dress well at all times, in colorful blouses and tights, though she did not own many clothes or accessories. Some blouses were torn hand-me-downs with missing buttons or small holes that she would keep closed with safety pins. She always ironed what she wore. Angie also styled her hair differently every day and made sure her nails always shone with artistic polish designs. Like many young people her age, Angie liked to go to parties and dress up, but claimed that it was not to attract boys.

Becoming pregnant was out of the question. Even having sex, especially with the "wrong" boys, Angie said, was dangerous. She had heard from her teachers and employers, her church, and the nonprofit organization that helped with college admission that becoming pregnant or a "gangbanger" was a sure ticket to poverty and that people "like her" were "at risk" of the same. Angie said: "Niggas in Port City only want to talk and think about their baby daddies. That's how they like it. I have my dream man, but he ain't gonna be from this ghetto-ass place." Angie felt that she was different from her peers and on her way to becoming upwardly mobile since she was not a parent or a gang member.

Angie earned average grades in high school and her plan always included higher education. She had heard over and over that she would need a college degree to move beyond the struggles her family faced. But her aspirations were irreconcilable with the reality of her unpreparedness. Still, she remained hopeful, stating, "I don't have the grades for UConn [University of Connecticut] for now, but I'm gonna start at the community college . . . . I don't gotta take the SAT [Scholastic Aptitude Test], I can take the placement test and later transfer."

After she graduated from high school in 2011, Angie packed her bags and used her savings to move to Florida. Once there she was going to attend Miami Dade College and live with her aunt and two cousins. Her aunt offered her a job at the food truck she owned to help her niece pursue her dreams. Angie explained to me that the food truck was very popular in

Florida because restaurants were crowded and expensive. During the cold, snowy northeastern winter, Angie would imagine a busy, warm day working on her aunt's food truck under the tropical sun. It made her giddy with anticipation.

She was unhappy about leaving her family and friends, but she wanted to be far away from her father's alcohol and drug binges and felt that her best chances for a better life lay outside of Port City. She reasoned: "You gotta work for success and it's hard, people don't wanna get outta here. Like, nigga get outta here."

I stayed over at Angie's house the night before she left for Florida. We awoke at the crack of dawn. I was sleepy after staying up until three a.m. and chatting. But Angie implored: "No, we gonna miss the flight! Get up! Get your ass ready!" We picked up coffee at McDonald's on our way to the airport, which is approximately an hour's drive from Angie's home. "I'm leaving for college!" Angie shouted to the server as he handed us our coffee through the window. So that warm summer morning I drove Angie to the airport and she was on her way to Florida.

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Two weeks later, Angie called me from Florida the day she filled out her Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) at Miami Dade College. She was ecstatic. However, only a few days later, Angie told me her aunt could not deliver on her promise to hire her. According to both her and her aunt, Angie then applied for over ten other jobs, but no one contacted her. A few weeks later, she called me and announced that she had reached the end of her patience and could not continue to listen to her aunt and cousins "talk about [Angie] being lazy." Not long after this phone call, Angie unhappily decided to return to Port City. The defeat and fatigue Angie felt for not making it in Florida did not last long. Soon after she returned home, Angie was surrounded with family, friends, barbeques, and the beauty of the northeastern fall. Life fell back into place. I also regularly visited Angie again, just like the old days—or, as she put it, "before the taste of Florida."

Soon after, Angie and I visited Port City Rivers Community College, and she enrolled in classes and continued to pursue her dream of a college

degree. But she had already missed a few weeks of classes, and she often heard about job opportunities from friends who worked at the mall, local bakeries, and hair salons. The work hours in these prospective jobs conflicted with Angie's class times. Angie decided to withdraw for the semester and take on three jobs. She claimed it was an easy decision because she had already missed a few weeks of the semester, was recovering from moving back home, and, most importantly, needed to focus on work to make up for all the money she had spent trying to attend college in Florida. That semester flew by quickly for Angie between her three jobs, what she called "friendship dramas," and family gatherings.

The following semester, Angie seemed to be on top of her life. She reenrolled at the community college right on time, and was determined to acquire a driver's license so that she could get more easily to two jobs that she needed, if not three, while attending classes. But given her lack of funds, Angie found it difficult to gather the money necessary to complete the mandatory eight-hour driving course. In addition, both she and her friends and family who had offered to teach her to drive or let her use their car lacked time for driving practice.

Angie did have some success that semester: she passed her remedial college classes. Although drained by fatigue, she was euphoric: "Success makes you tired, but I'd rather be this kind of tired." Angie's third semester in college also looked promising. She enrolled in her first introductory college-level courses and went over the textbook for Introduction to Sociology during the summer (I had given her a copy) while working three jobs. She persuaded her uncle to teach her to drive that summer, completed the mandatory course, and bought a used car. However, halfway through the semester, Angie's car broke down.

While she tried to manage work and school by asking for rides or using public transportation, everyday exhaustion began to add up. Angie's routine consisted of standing on her feet at work, then attending classes that required substantial in-class assignments and homework. After class, she often tried to go back to work when her employer gave her hours, but bus rides to work were unreliable; promises of rides from friends were often broken. Eventually, Angie accepted that she had to choose between continuing her classes and keeping her jobs: without convenient transportation she couldn't have both. She chose to keep the jobs. This decision did not seem

life-changing to her; the manager of the bakery where she worked often mentioned that Angie had a knack for the "food industry" and should attend Cordon Bleu, a well-known culinary school. This seemed like the "smarter" option to Angie given the struggles of attending community college while working, and the fact that a college degree seemed a very distant reality. She announced that she would drop her classes, save up money, and devote all of her energy to her plan to attend Cordon Bleu the following year.

That did not happen. And although Angie eventually decided to go back to the local community college, often enrolling in nutrition classes, she usually dropped the classes soon thereafter, overburdened as she was with school and work and lacking sustained academic support at the community college. She imagined that her work at the local bakery would complement her nutrition classes at community college and ultimately afford her the opportunity to climb up the ladder in the "food industry." Sometime in the summer of 2013, when her grandparents suggested that she forget about college and work at an elderly care center with steady hours and pay above the minimum wage, Angie rebuffed their suggestion: "Ima do it [attend college] again 'cause I done it before . . . . I left Port City to make it on my own . . . . None of these niggas in my family ever done it [enrolled in college]. I am wiping no old people's butt." Moving back and forth between college classes and work was new to Angie and her family: no one in the family had graduated from high school before. For the same reason, however, it also seemed like Angie was upwardly mobile, breaking the cycle of oppression in which her family was stuck.

Angie acquired a variety of resources through several organizations and institutions such as school, family, church, and local nonprofits that allowed her to enroll and continue at community college and participate in the low-wage labor market. Within these institutions and organizations Angie also learned that is was imperative to avoid early parenthood, drugs, gangs, and violence in order to become socially mobile. However, although support for specific goals was available, the mobility puzzle Angie confronted was intricate. Angie faced irreconcilable choices as she attempted to solve this mobility puzzle. She needed a job to continue college, yet work conflicted with school. Her family gave her support and comfort, but her father also created obstacles for her. While abstaining from "risk behaviors" such as drugs, pregnancy, and gangs and attending community

college made it easy for Angie to identify as socially mobile compared to many of her peers, the community's preoccupation with preventing risk behaviors often overshadowed the goals of providing educational and occupational opportunities. The promise of a college degree and a white-collar job did not look viable despite Angie's investment toward achieving them.

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This book focuses on the lives of marginalized youth like Angie—a group not captured in academic debates on urban poverty, which foreground drugs, gangs, violence, and early parenthood—who continuously seek to become upwardly mobile. Like Angie, the majority of economically marginalized black and Latina/o youth coming of age in the contemporary United States aspire to earn a college degree and well-paying white-collar job.[3] However, racialized poverty deeply impacts the possibilities of educational success and work opportunities. Children growing up in marginalized households and neighborhoods attend resource-poor schools, while their parents and guardians work long hours at low-paying jobs and struggle to put food on the table and access healthcare. As sociologist Annette Lareau (2003) illustrates, class positions influence life chances starting at an early age. Middle-class parents engage in the "concerted cultivation" of their children. They expose their children to a variety of experiences that develop cultural capital essential to navigating social institutions later in life. They also use elaborate language that fosters reasoning skills, and parents convey a sense of entitlement among their children. By contrast, poor and working-class families that are constrained by their economic position engage in what Lareau calls the "natural growth" of their children. They struggle to provide their children with the basic necessities such as food, clothing, and housing, but allow them to organize their own days and engage in unsupervised leisure activities. Working-class and poor parents also teach children to navigate institutions with a sense of constraint and deference to authority. While neither approach is inherently more valuable, concerted cultivation provides middle-class children with comparative advantages to succeed in school and the labor market, which replicates and rewards middle-class cultural capital.

Marginalized children begin their journey toward college and good jobs at a disadvantage. Yet, as they move into adolescence, like Angie, they begin to learn from their parents, siblings, peers, neighbors, teachers, politicians, nonprofits, and media that they can act on these circumstances to overcome them.[4] Specifically, they learn that they are "at risk" of becoming teen parents, drugs users, and violent gang members who reject academic goals and work ethics.[5] Youth learn that if they work hard in school, cultivate a strong work ethic, earn a college degree, and avoid early pregnancy, drugs, gangs, and violence—that is, if they play by the "mobility rules" and avoid risk behaviors—then they can become upwardly mobile.[6] This at-risk discourse now informs how government agencies, schools, and community organizations orient their efforts to target poverty.[7]

By avoiding early parenthood, drugs, gangs, and violence, enrolling in college, and joining the labor market, marginalized youth like Angie often make what seem like concrete gains when compared to some of their peers. Angie enrolled in college, stayed out of prison, and did not have parental responsibilities. In fact, another youth in my study, Sandra, was even invited to interview with a Harvard alumna. Yet, youth who follow the mobility rules nonetheless often end up as low-wage service workers. The institutions and organizations that youth navigate in their everyday lives act in conflicting ways. They support youth, but simultaneously create impediments.

In the realm of family, which is the subject of chapter 3, some youth create elaborate exchange systems that facilitate their survival and mobility. However, the nature of the exchange between family members is often obligatory, constant, and sometimes one-sided, which may become burdensome and exhausting. This type of a relationship can uncomfortably blur the line between an exchange and unconditional relationships and further constrain youth's opportunities.

Their romances generate support, but are tenuous and emotionally draining under the constraints of poverty as youth often struggle to balance school, work, and relationships. Dominant risk narratives about black and brown youth's sexuality, which construct all women as potential teen mothers and welfare dependents and all men as sexual predators, impact the ways in which youth engage in intimate romantic and sexual ties.[8] The young people often police their own bodies and the bodies of

their friends and sisters within heterosexual romantic ties to prevent early parenthood. The young women use their romantic and sexual relationships to construct their own identities as socially mobile, morally superior, and without children, and in the process, they both stigmatize, and distance themselves from, their peers who are teen parents. This creates rifts in their community. I explore romance in chapter 4.

In chapter 5, I show how community organizations and institutions that provide resources to marginalized youth can also constrain teens' opportunities. For example, schools and nonprofits encourage and support teens toward higher education. Yet they also adopt a culture of control,[9] policing youth constantly through haphazard searches, camera surveillance, and punishments for minor school policy violations such as not following dress codes or coming late to class.[10] They regularly instill fear in the youth by implying that they could very easily become teen parents, gang members, or drug users if they do not adhere to the rules of the educational institution. They justify the close policing of the teenagers as necessary to future success, claiming that without it the youth would engage in risk behaviors. These policing efforts are, in fact, detrimental to students' present and future chances of success. They disrupt the very trajectory that schools and community groups are trying to encourage. As I will demonstrate, nonprofits devoted to "youth development" in Port City dedicated more time and resources to training and disciplining "violent" youth and preventing early pregnancy than to assisting with college applications, providing transportation, or addressing food security. In addition, the teenagers internalized this disciplinary emphasis. Instead of pursuing education at four-year universities, some of them joined the military to "become disciplined." These fear tactics lead many youth to equate academic success with simply staying out of trouble. Meanwhile, college assistance programs are inadequate, pushing higher education further out of marginalized youth's reach.

Conflicting choices are also at play in the work world—as I highlight in chapter 6. Marginalized youth work during the school year for extra money, and to cover some of their basic necessities such as food, clothing, and school expenses. Many youth financially assist their families with day-to-day living expenses as well as to buy brand-name clothing, costly prom attire, and new phones, engaging in conspicuous consumption in order to

participate in trends and local cultures. The demands of low-wage, part-time work interfere with teenagers' educational trajectories as they put more hours into their jobs than attending school to make ends meet. Employers often encourage young workers to take introductory-level culinary, technology, or fashion classes alongside their jobs at local bakeries and coffee franchises, electronic stores, or clothing stores, based on the premise that they will eventually climb the ladder in the food, technology, or fashion industry. In reality, Port City youth struggled to balance school and work, dropped classes, postponed college for semesters or even years, or moved from four-year universities to community colleges. They reenrolled when their work hours permitted, or when they were able to save money for classes, cars, computers, and food. As youth find themselves moving between low-wage service work and intermittent college enrollment, they construct work as a form of dignity. They also draw on the flexible meanings of emotional and aesthetic labor involved in service work in order to seek some continuity between their low-wage jobs and college aspirations: for example, imagining 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.[11]

Conflicting intimacy and institutions shape an uncertain life for marginalized youth. In chapter 7, I show how they navigate their haphazard and uncertain trajectories to adulthood and the everyday struggles of poverty such as hunger, illness, and evictions by internalizing uncertainty as inevitable, and constructing meaning systems that are equally haphazard. Because more privileged youth can count on their basic necessities being met, they are able to plan for the future. Marginalized youth learn to manage their uncertain life situations through systems that are equally unpredictable. This adaptation to unpredictability often hinders them in their efforts to realize their aspirations—sometimes leading them to take, or justify, actions that otherwise did not fit their mobility projects.

Youth may hold on tightly to their aspirations of upward mobility through college educational and white-collar work, but many of their efforts toward class mobility conflict with one another, and they never move up. In the process, as I show in chapter 8, youth renegotiate what it means to be middle class. These definitions of mobility are couched within racialized, classed, and gendered discourses that center on framing "hard work"—

which they attempt to demonstrate and accomplish through low-wage work and college enrollment—as a viable piece of the bourgeois heteronormative life-course. Youth also assume a middle-class identity through conspicuous consumption practices. In this reframing of mobility, the pursuit of a college degree as a route to mobility is temporarily, at least in their eyes, set aside, replaced by the consumerism that their work enables them to access more easily. In chapter 9, I argue for moving beyond at-risk discourse, and provide some insights into potential local-level policies that could support marginalized youth's educational and occupational goals.

I describe in this book the processes through which marginalized black and Latina/o youth, who try to become upwardly mobile by following the mobility rules and avoiding risk behaviors, end up as low-wage service workers. Drawing on three years of ethnographic observations in Port City, I report on the lives of Angie, twelve other young women, and three young men. I analyze their everyday interactions within various spheres of their lives, including family, romance and sexual relationships, school, and work. I illustrate how these young women and men attempt to put together pieces of a complicated and elaborate mobility puzzle. I argue that the institutions and other agents that interact with the youth on a daily basis generally place disproportionate emphasis on preventing risk behaviors at the cost of providing holistic support for marginalized youth's transition to adulthood, thereby constructing marginalized youth in general as an "at-risk population." The emphasis on risk behaviors ignores structural impediments such as a failing education system, the constraints of low-wage work, lack of healthcare, a failing transportation system, and food insecurity.

Critical race feminist scholars have recognized contradictory moments when constructing a particular group as "at risk" becomes necessary to afford them access to basic resources. In her 2011 book, *Reproducing Race: An Ethnography of Pregnancy as a Site of Racialization,* Khiara Bridges argues that the "revolutionary" moment of universal healthcare is achieved in New York City's Alpha Hospital by designating marginalized pregnant women as so pathological as to warrant the denouncement of a privatized system. This, in turn, reinforced marginalized women as carriers of disease. The material consequences of risk discourse in Port City did not circumscribe any revolutionary moments, but further depleted the

resources available to youth, making the mobility puzzle almost unsolvable. The puzzle's general picture is clear—a young individual gets a higher educational degree and avoids early parenthood, drugs, gangs and violence, which will lead to a good, white-collar job, a suburban home, stable family, and life satisfaction. However, some puzzle pieces are incompatible and others are missing. Still other puzzle pieces are misrecognized by the youth as they fail to comprehend the requirements for, and nature of, educational and occupational opportunities.[12] Moreover, putting one puzzle piece in the wrong place can drastically alter their trajectory as the formidable constraints of poverty ascribe great costs to seemingly inconsequential choices and leave no room for minor mistakes. Further, the inordinate focus on risk behaviors also reinforces race, class, and gender structures. It ignores the sociocultural and historical processes through which black and brown youth are marginalized via the problematization of teen motherhood, criminalization of their styles, and overpolicing of their neighborhoods.[13] As I discuss in the next section, youth's educational and occupational experiences and trajectories reflect broader labor structures and educational changes in the United States.

LABOR AND EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Low-wage workers rarely gain financial security, or health and retirements benefits, and typically are unable to build stable careers.[14] However, like the Port City youth, the wide majority of low-wage workers expect and aspire to obtain a higher educational degree, and many remain enrolled in college.[15] Higher education has expanded on a global scale over the last five decades. Research shows that the expectations of obtaining a bachelor's degree and overall fall college admissions increased dramatically over the last fifty years.[16] Angie's college aspirations were not an anomaly.

As manufacturing jobs started in decline in the 1970s[17] and civil rights movements challenged the exclusion of racial and ethnic minorities and women from institutions of higher education, the "college for all" ethos grew.[18] Shifts in public opinion and new federal policies such as financial assistance based on need (for example, the Higher Education Act of 1965) led to the expansion of four-year universities, an increase in community

and online colleges, more federal spending on higher education, and trends toward open admissions in some higher education institutions. These changes allowed some previously excluded groups, including racial minorities, women, and economically marginalized students, greater access to higher education. Socioeconomically marginalized youth like Angie began to enroll in institutions of higher learning, primarily in community colleges such as Miami Dade College or Port Rivers.[19] High schools and other organizations encourage students from wide-ranging backgrounds to attend college.[20] While black and Latina girls have historically held higher educational aspirations than boys, the aspirations of both groups, as well as economically and racially marginalized groups in general, have increased.[21]

The expansion in higher education has been accompanied by the growth of a postindustrial service economy characterized by flexible, contingent, and disposable labor.[22] "Good jobs" in the service economy, for example middle-management positions, are now primarily reserved for those with higher educational degrees. Economically marginalized black and Latina/o youth, like Angie, are usually at the bottom of the service sector. They must often change jobs, remain jobless for extended periods, or work multiple part-time jobs as service sector establishments regularly refuse to offer full-time work and benefits to low-wage workers.[23]

Simultaneously, corporations employing low-wage workers promote the idea that youth who start at the bottom can eventually acquire white-collar professional jobs if they work hard enough.[24] Youth such as Angie are told that working for a low wage at a bakery could provide opportunities for becoming a pastry chef. In reality, within-job mobility for those who start out in frontline service work is virtually nonexistent. For example, low-wage, frontline workers (such as cashiers) make up 90 percent of the fast-food labor force. Only nine percent of workers in the fast-food industry are supervisors at the lower level, and barely more than two percent of fast-food workers hold white-collar jobs in the professional, technical, or managerial occupations.[25] Low-wage workers can, and do, grab on to false hopes of career development. As sociologist Katherine Newman (1999) points out, low-wage jobs indeed require employees to employ valuable and complex skills, and cultivating these skills should ideally allow young workers to build stable lifelong careers. But this is typically not the case as the disposable labor force continues to grow.[26] As I will show, the

skillset that the Port City youth acquired never facilitated upward mobility. All the jobs that Angie found were minimum-wage jobs with no security or benefits.

Alongside expansion of higher education and disappearing job opportunities, in recent years marginalized communities have confronted receding public assistance, underfunded public schools, growing eviction and incarceration rates, and deteriorating neighborhood conditions.[27]

TOWARD A FEMINIST URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY: UNDERSTANDING LACK OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

Class inequality in the United States is greater than at any time since the Great Depression of 1928. The richest 10 percent of American households possess 76 percent of total wealth.[28] Forty-three percent of children grow up in low-income families.[29] Inequality is woven into the structure of U. S. society: family resources, community, and economic and political structures make it difficult for the socioeconomically marginalized to attain upward mobility.[30] Many U. S. Americans, however, believe that individual choices largely shape the kinds of lives people lead, and that those like Angie may become upwardly mobile through determination and willpower.[31]

In contrast, social scientists largely agree that a person's location in the social structure shapes their chances of success. However, no consensus has been reached about the respective roles of larger social structure, individual agency, and local culture in understanding the lack of social mobility.[32] Over forty years ago, economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis in their 1976 groundbreaking book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, explained why individuals find it difficult to get beyond their parents' class position, arguing that educational institutions similar to Port City High School and Port City Rivers Community College prepare poor and working-class students for jobs at the bottom of the economic order through hidden curricula. They posited that the goals of educational institutions and economic systems align perfectly to turn the children of the rich into white-collar professionals and the children of the poor into low-wage laborers. Adding nuance to this structurally deterministic argument, Pierre Bourdieu contended that students acquire different cultural competencies

at home depending on their class positions.[33] Bourdieu goes on to say that institutions such as schools and the labor market value the cultural capital of the dominant classes, which, in turn, increases their chances for academic and job success. Similar theories that highlight the role of large social structures show that neighborhood structures play an important role in determining what kinds of opportunities an individual is afforded, and that these structures shape the intergenerational transmission of poverty.[34]

Highlighting the role of individual agency and culture in sustaining cycles of poverty, micro / interactionist perspectives on the reproduction of class challenge these macro arguments as too deterministic. For instance, in his 1977 landmark book, *Learning to Labour*, British sociocultural scholar Paul Willis wrote about a group of high school students who rejected the achievement ideology offered at school and instead revered manual labor. He concluded that individuals are not mere pawns of the economic structure. Rather, individuals make everyday life choices mediated through local culture: they reject academic goals or adopt interactional styles that reproduce their class positions.[35] In the United States, academia's focus on culture and agency became associated with the well-known and controversial "culture of poverty" debate of the 1950s and 1960s. Advocates of the culture of poverty argument declared that the poor shared a culture different from the rest of America. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis noted: "[O]nce [the culture of poverty] comes into existence, it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effects on children."[36] It is important to note that some sociocultural scholars from the opposing camp argued that limited opportunities and racial discrimination affected poor individuals in each new generation, and marginalized neighborhoods are culturally heterogeneous.[37] Still, the idea that the poor have a pathological culture influenced policies that reduced public assistance, and it deeply informed the American public's understanding of the poor by creating gendered, classed, and racialized tropes.[38]

Recently, scholars have begun to articulate the interrelatedness of structure, culture, and agency in reaction to the debate around their respective roles.[39] The new argument contests the assertion that poverty invariably reproduces itself across generations due to the values of the poor, despite structural changes in economy and society. Instead, these innovative schol-

ars view culture, agency, and structure as inseparable and avoid using culture as an umbrella concept to explain poverty.[40] They define culture as "narratives," "repertoires," "values," and "toolkits" that individuals are able to mobilize in their everyday lives.[41] Specifically, many of these works theorize the connections between structure and individual agency in marginalized neighborhoods through the mediating role of local cultures. Such cultures, scholars argue, define themselves in opposition to middle-class culture and its valorization of educational achievements, economic independence, marriage, and childbirth.[42] These oppositional cultures, often symbolized by drug use, gang membership, early parenthood, and participation in the illegal economy, are understood as a reaction to blocked opportunities. Some scholars go as far as to argue that oppositional cultures often reflect and extend mainstream patriarchal, capitalist, and violent cultures.[43] The emphasis on the relationship between local culture and the reproduction of poverty allows scholars to avoid overly deterministic reasoning while also distancing themselves from the early culture of poverty debates.

Contemporary scholars also argue that portraying the cultures of marginalized communities allows us to counter the idea that the poor are different from the rest of society by showing the prevalence of mainstream values in economically marginalized communities. Offering nuanced, humanizing understandings of the lives of the poor may help dispel myths about the poor as immoral or lazy individuals, myths that have come to strongly occupy public and political imagination.[44] For example, sociologist Mitchell Duneier (along with Carter) highlights the complex organization of morality among New York City's scavengers, panhandlers, and vendors—some of the most misunderstood and stigmatized residents of the city—in his 1999 book, *Sidewalk*. Sociologist Katherine Newman highlights the presence of middle-class values among working-class Harlem residents in her popular 1999 book, *No Shame in My Game*. Those in her study face distinct opportunity structures that shape their decisions regarding health, parenthood, and work practices, while their family values and work ethic remain intact and resemble those of the middle class.

In understanding the lack of social mobility, the majority of these portrayals of marginalized communities, however, continue to foreground drugs, gangs, violence, and early parenthood as central narratives. They

leave out the trajectories of youth such as Angie, who follow the rules they were prescribed, and continuously struggle to become upwardly mobile.[45] These studies continue to place emphasis on the question of why socioeconomically marginalized individuals either embrace or reject middle-class culture at any given point. In answering this question, scholars simultaneously construct teen parenthood, violence, gangs, and drugs as ubiquitous social problems and risk behaviors in marginalized communities, and privilege middle-class culture, reifying it as static.[46] As a few scholars have begun to point out, such representations, rooted in white hypermasculine traditions even when meant to "normalize" the poor or the "other," work to perpetuate stereotypes. The goal of ethnography, as scholars argue, is not merely to familiarize the "other," but to question what we know.[47] It is then worthwhile to question why urban ethnographers, policy makers, and the public continue to place "risk behaviors" at the center of understanding and targeting poverty without fully acknowledging how populations are constructed as at-risk, whether avoiding risk behaviors will indeed break the cycle of marginalization, and what problematizing certain behaviors means for "at-risk populations."

In this feminist urban ethnography, to tell a different story and ask different questions, I followed a group of marginalized youth who are not part of the negative outcome statistics.[48] They are not teen parents, drug users, gang members, or school dropouts. Drawing on the data I collected, I argue that by focusing squarely on "risk behaviors" such as violence, drug use, and teen pregnancy, and by policing youth, scholars and policy makers are diverting resources that should be invested into addressing socioeconomic disadvantages confronting all marginalized youth. I call for scholars and policy makers to rethink what we know about poverty and how we target inequality. Drawing on intersectional feminisms, I argue that this risk discourse also reinforces oppressive race, class, and gender discourses by privileging middle-class cultural norms, and ignores the problematization of black and brown youth and their cultures. Whether deliberately or unintentionally, such discourses perpetuate a definition of success and mobility that relies on the marginalized urban youth's ability to avoid getting caught up in risk behaviors such as of violence, crime, and teenage pregnancy.

This feminist urban ethnography draws on well-established traditions within women of color feminisms, race scholarship, and urban ethnogra-

phy. Using the data and analytical tools from these traditions, I provide a feminist analysis that considers the gendered, racialized, and classed processes and mechanisms, as well as the sociohistorical and cultural context that constructs teen parenthood, gangs, drugs, and violence as ubiquitous social problems in marginalized communities. This feminist urban ethnography approach, which draws on intersectional feminisms and questions the taken-for-granted understandings of risk behaviors as central to thinking about poverty, enables us to shift the analytical lens away from either the presence or absence of oppositional cultures and risk behaviors in marginalized communities. This shift, in turn, allows us to gain a set of insights into how marginalized individuals navigate and interact with oppressive and exploitative institutions, discourses, and policies in an effort to mobilize resources and attain upward mobility. I demonstrate how factors such as food insecurity, the lack of access to transportation, healthcare, computers, and the internet, dwindling college support programs, overpolicing in schools, and low-wage jobs regularly and clearly interfere with youth's mobility goals.

I focus on the experiences of black and Latina/o economically marginalized girls and boys as they transition to adulthood. My feminist analysis addresses central questions in poverty research on family, early parenthood, educational commitment, work orientation, and meaning making in novel ways. I move beyond dichotomous answers by either rearranging the questions or reconciling oppositional answers. For example, I move beyond the question of whether the poor have stable/resourceful or unstable families, and beyond their family values, by underlining the complexities of family and showing how elaborate support and exchange between family members *itself* complicates relational work within families.[49] My argument moves beyond the trite question of why it is some youth become pregnant, and what their sexual behaviors and understandings of motherhood have to do with them becoming pregnant, to instead show how the construction of teen parenthood as an epidemic in marginalized communities affects *all* youth negatively.[50] Instead of looking for and describing some version of academic goals and work ethic among youth, I show how work and higher education goals and actions became *irreconcilable* as youth navigate educational and occupational institutions in the college-for-all era and growing service economy, thus highlighting

the ways in which educational and work systems interact with one another in the postindustrial era to channel ambitious youth into a low-wage service class.

In asking old questions in new or renewed ways, I relinquish binaries that privilege middle-class cultural norms. In centering actors, whose stories do not resemble popular representations of drugs, gangs, violence, and early parenthood and are largely ignored in poverty scholarship, I provide an empirical case that, at least partially, challenges poverty scholarship's myopic vision of what and whom to write about. I show how inequalities are produced and reproduced not through their cultural, economic, and social isolation and adoption of oppositional culture, but through marginalized youth's interaction within institutions such as the family, school, and labor market, with middle-class actors, and with dominant discourses that trap them in a mobility puzzle by focusing on risk behaviors instead of structural impediments that confront all marginalized youth.

ENTRÉE AND OBSERVATIONS

A brief story of how I got to know Port City and the Port City youth, their families, friends, peers, and neighborhood is important to understanding what I learned about them. When I was in graduate school, my close friend's immediate family lived in Port City and I often visited them. In the summer of 2010, I started volunteering at several organizations and institutions in Port City with a vague desire to understand how neighborhood organizations collaborate to challenge inequalities in urban communities. One of the local nonprofit organizations was thrilled to have me because it was understaffed and in dire need of volunteers to meet the growing needs of city residents who used their services. I decided to devote the majority of my time to this organization.

The broadly conceived mission of the organization was to provide material resources to economically marginalized city residents. It was approximately four years old and employed twenty young staff members. None of these youth expressed a particular alignment with the mission of the organization. They claimed that they worked there because the job became available to them, and most of them moved on to other jobs soon

after I met them. Volunteers from the local elite liberal arts college were also there regularly. They mostly came from other cities and states and volunteered because of their desire to "serve the community" or as part of their course requirements for service learning.

The organization rented a space from a public institution with a pantry that they often kept stocked with food—something that the youth appreciated. The building was old and rundown, the chairs uncomfortable and broken. Ceiling and floor fans served us whenever the air conditioning broke down, which happened frequently during the hot and muggy summer.

As I continued to volunteer at the organization, I began to participate in the youth's conversations at work; then, occasionally, I gave them rides after their shifts. We gradually began to encounter various daily events together, and this formed the basis for future conversations, organically leading to general familiarity and friendship. My watershed moment of earning the young employees' trust occurred when I left the organization because the employers had unfairly fired one of the young women (at least according to the other youth).

Eventually, I became close with sixteen youth. Seven of them were black (self-identified) and nine were Latina/o (self-identified), including seven second-generation Puerto Ricans, one second-generation Honduran, and one second-generation Dominican Republican. As I became friendly with them and started to become involved in their lives, watching them apply to colleges and plan their futures, I asked the youth, whom I refer to in this book as the Port City youth, if I could write about their experiences as they transitioned to adulthood. They agreed.[51]

From June 2010 to June 2013, I conducted in-depth fieldwork five days a week during the average week, spending about eight hours a day observing and participating in the lives of the sixteen young men and women from Port City. Each day, I decided who to spend time with based on the youth's availability, their needs (for example, when they needed a ride or assistance with an application), and the intensity or importance of the day's events. I assigned more weight to the events that I expected would produce the largest analytic payoff, such as visits to a college or filling out job applications.[52] I also did homework with them, ate with them, spent time in their homes with their families, went with them to visit out-of-town friends and relatives, followed them to organizations and institutions, and talked

over the phone and exchanged text messages with them. Sometimes I spent time with the group as a whole, other times with a few of them, and other times yet with a single youth. In group settings, I was always careful to talk less and listen more, and, mostly, not to talk at all unless someone spoke to me. In one-on-one situations this was less possible, so I engaged in conversations where I revealed certain matters about myself—which also served to alleviate my own discomfort about knowing so much about the youth with the intent to someday write a book.[53] I constantly mentioned to them that nothing in the study would be written without their permission.

Becoming part of a group during the course of my fieldwork also meant that I had to participate in internal group politics. For example, Franklin Junior and Angie were part of two different dance teams. One day, when I casually asked Franklin Junior about Angie's dance team and what he thought of their performance the last time we all went to watch them, Franklin Junior began belittling the team and scoffed at their performance as well as their teacher: "Ya, whatever, you like that?" As I tried to come up with a polite answer, Franklin laughed hysterically and said to me, "Ay, you mad awkward now, whatchu gonna say? You can't say shit about Angie but you know I'm good at it and judge well." I kept quiet.

When I met both Angie and Franklin at work the next day, our interaction became very awkward. I walked in and Franklin started speaking loudly, with a grin, as if he knew what he was about to bestow on me. Calling to Angie, he said, "Come here, I got news for you." Not knowing what he was about to say, I waited awkwardly. As Angie came out, Franklin said: "Yo nigga, Ranita told me she thinks you guys no good at all! Ask her, we were talking about you and the dance the other day." Angie looked at me and asked, "Why you guys talking about me?" I had no good way to reply. Reassuring her that I hadn't claimed that her dance team was bad, although we did talk about her, would mean calling Franklin a liar. Angie avoided me that day and the following few days. This incident affected my relationship with her and set back our friendship. Angie often made subtle comments about my dislike for her dance team. I would smile guiltily or tell them that was never what I meant to say, but I might have been misunderstood. But like many other kinds of relationship, it recovered with time and work. I made additional efforts to praise her dance performance and dance team whenever I attended their performance. I even

went to their dance practices. It took a few weeks before Angie forgot the incident. Group ethnography thus has its own specificities, and ethnographers often make mistakes navigating internal dynamics.

Navigating group politics while remaining respectful of everyone and attaining some level of insider access was not a straightforward process. For example, Ashley and her sisters, with whom I grew very close, were not fond of Shivana. Shivana read a great deal, and was often judgmental about Ashley and her sisters' perceived lack of interest in education. This irked the sisters, who then made several negative remarks about Shivana, including her "nasty smell." Once after I spent time with Shivana, the sisters snubbed me: "Damn, you smell too, spending time in her house, how do you do it? You can't smell her? Or it doesn't matter to you?" Siete also told me, "[Shivana] converts people." When I inquired, "Converts to what?" Siete responded: "She a lesbian or something." Sometimes, animosity also surfaced in public, when Ashley would make statements such as the following: "Do you wanna hang out with me tonight or her [pointing to Shivana], 'cause we ain't got interest in same things. I like to have fun, not sit at home. I got friends." Given that I grew up in a boarding school in India, where negotiating with various groups was a constant necessity, navigating youthful politics was a skill I had cultivated for years. I would remain silent, change the topic, tell Ashley I would text them both to plan something, or tell them that I was planning to leave early that night. Moreover, the divisions were rarely permanent or severe. For example, by the time I left Port City, Shivana and Ashley started spending their days together, enjoying each other's company.

Over the course of the three years, I also met the youth's families, friends, boyfriends and girlfriends, teachers, and employers, as well as the local nonprofit employees and other people the youth knew. I spent time at local coffee shops and restaurants, attended community meetings, and befriended several youth in Port City. I interviewed forty youth in addition to the sixteen at the center of this research. These interviews helped me gauge the generalizability of my findings to the other youth of Port City; specifically, I was able to evaluate the extent of the educational and occupational optimism among the youth of Port City and their ultimate transition to the local low-wage economy, thus bolstering the credibility of my findings. Over the three years, some of the young men and women and their families became my home away from home. They invited me for the

holidays because they knew that I did not have family in the United States, provided me with home-cooked meals, and offered me familial support when I was homesick.

FIELDWORK AND THE ETHNOGRAPHER

Eventually, I formed a strong bond with many of the young people I write about, and this bond offered a distinct perspective on their lives. The insider / outsider debate, however, is a contentious one, and there are advantages as well as challenges in studying a community from both positions.[54] My own, multilayered position was one of a brown woman from the global South who was obtaining a graduate degree at an institution well regarded by the youth. It interacted with their position to produce a particular type of knowledge that Clifford calls "partial truth."[55] The Port City youth revered me for my college education, looked up to me for guidance regarding their own educational pathways, and admired me for coming to the United States to attend graduate school. At the same time, they also felt sorry for me as a newcomer from India, asking questions about how "crazy" it was to live in India and talking about the Indian people they knew from school. They also asked me if certain hard-to-believe narratives about India they had heard from other sources, such as the media, were true. This unique position also allowed for distinct insights. Although many of the young men and women were conscious of, and humble about, their class positions, feeling ashamed to admit that they received food stamps or lived in the projects, I often felt that my background (as a person of color from a presumably poor country) allowed them to welcome me into their lives and homes with less intimidation.

In other instances, it was instructive to hear the youth try to explain various aspects of "American culture" to me. For example, during my first few months in Port City, the then eighteen-year-old Curtis, who is Latino, told me that poor people in the United States did not cook steak at home, but could only afford to eat steak when they were dining out at Applebee's and a deal was available. Therefore, when Curtis cooked steak for me at his place soon after, he was telling me that he belonged to a certain class. Additionally, the youth were curious to learn about my country of origin

and drew inspiration from the fact that that I had come from so far away to make a life for myself. Of course, I had not traveled to an unknown, faraway land; I grew up consuming American news and media—for better or worse. My country of origin provided fodder for my initial conversations with the youth. Angie said, "You mad brave for coming here," and Lexus added: "But down there [in India] it's nasty though, right? 'Cause one of the teachers, who I think invented Tylenol, is from India, but he came here 'cause it was nasty there."

While feminists such as Dorothy Smith, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and Patricia Hill Collins have questioned if researchers can or should write about groups they are not members of, my status as a person of color from a different country offered a unique set of advantages. My position both intersected with and diverged from those of the youth, with varying degrees of power embedded in each of our axes of oppression. Some of these differences, similarities, and degrees of power were deployed in daily interactions, while others were identifiable on the structural level. My privilege as a doctoral student who held a greater familiarity with higher educational institutions than the youth intersected with my position as a noncitizen with an accent different from theirs and a lesser familiarity with various aspects of living in the United States than they had. While the supervisors at the nonprofit organization talked to me as if I were one of them, given my status as a graduate student, these interactions were more uncomfortable than welcoming. Most conversations involved their upcoming or past visits to India or their desire to visit India, and the fruitfulness of yoga as a discipline, and the like. They looked to connect with me through white middle-class imaginations of India. Growing up outside the United States also did not make it easy to locate myself in the lives of sixteen youth coming of age in an American city—even though, as a twenty-six-year-old brown woman, I felt more comfortable in their company than in the company of forty-five-year-old middle-class white Americans.[56]

The Port City youth claimed that I looked much younger than my age. Angie and Ashley always told me that this was because I did not have children and was not married, although they expressed bewilderment that I could be "mad old" and yet not worried about getting married and becoming a mother. They often commented on my youthful disposition, claiming that the other twenty-six-year-olds they knew were more "serious."

As a lighter-skinned brown woman with long dark hair who looks younger than her age, I didn't particularly stick out in Port City, even when I spent time with the youth. More often than not, I was mistaken for a local Latina high school student. This meant that I was not generally questioned about my presence among the youth, the youth themselves did not feel self-conscious about my presence, and I was often treated similarly to how the youth were generally treated in the community.[57] I did not immediately receive some of the privileges that fieldworkers acquire by virtue of their position. During one community meeting, for example, I was the fourth person to reach the community center and it was almost fifteen minutes past the scheduled meeting starting time. As I entered the room with Lena and Ashley, an elderly white woman exclaimed (chiding us for coming late and showing her frustration that not many young women had shown up), "See there! This is the most important issue we are facing, youth violence, and you have three old women here. Where are all the young mothers?"— as if she were waiting for us to answer for young mothers. "Maybe more folks will show up, school just got over," I responded. She continued, "Why don't you people show up, are you not worried about your own futures? Why are we here?" Ashley, humiliated and angered by the woman's comments, decided to cash in on my PhD student status:

> We're not parents or pregnant. [Pointing to me] She is a PhD student at UConn and she is writing her paper and everything on Port City kids. So we're not here to learn about everything. She is writing about all this and doing research and whatnot. You should be talking to other kids, not us.

When they were in a group, the youth were often lectured by older people in the community about issues of teen parenthood, drug abuse, importance of education, and violence. However, when the older people learned that I was a PhD student at the University of Connecticut, their tone often shifted. It was challenging for many individuals, who first perceived me as a Latina from Port City, to imagine me as a PhD student. The youth often used my status to redeem the group in public when we / they were faced with blatant judgments.

In restaurants and coffee shops, within organizations, and generally in the city, people would speak to me in Spanish, ask me whether I was from Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic, what grade I was in, and so on. I also

dressed like many of the local youth—I wore tights, skinny jeans, Converse shoes, sweatshirts, and similar clothing. I didn't do this in order to fit into the community for fieldwork; rather, I was influenced in much the same way as we all become influenced by trends around us. I had never dressed in formal clothing in the first place, and at the University of Connecticut I was always mistaken for an undergraduate student. I usually carry a backpack, and some of the youth commented on how "childish" it looked. When all was said and done, I fit in—from an outsider's perspective.

On the inside, however, my time in Port City included several uncomfortable moments, particularly in the beginning—just like in the beginning of any relationship. Age and gender dynamics meant that some of the young men would misread my professional and research interest in their lives and invite me to "hang out" in a romantic or sexual way. This was one of the primary reasons that I became friendly with only three men. Two of the men were very young-looking, more childish in demeanor, and had girlfriends. Curtis initially flirted with me, but then became genuinely interested in developing a platonic friendship. Our interactions were facilitated by my consistent explicit disinterest and his interest in another girl.

I attempted to present myself in the lives of the youth not as some sort of implant from the outside, "objectively" researching them—it would not have been possible to spend three years of my life as a "researcher."[58] I developed emotional and political connections and allegiances. That said, I aspire to limit the role of my experiences, and stories that center me, in this book.[59] Whenever I became concerned about how I might be limited by my own subjectivities, I drew on sociologist Julie Bettie, who states: "The logic of an identity politics in which identity is conceptualized as static and clearly bounded doesn't easily acknowledge the *continuum* of experience, *relative* sameness and difference, and *degrees* of intersubjectivity that allow for emotional empathy and political alliance."[60] In her book *Women without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity,* Bettie points out how her white working-class cultural identity did not always grant her intersubjectivity with the white girls in her study, for example, because of differences based on class identity, something that is not as enthusiastically explored when theorizing reflexive ethnography.

Throughout my fieldwork, I made efforts to be cognizant of my subjectivity, my differences with the youth, and the power relations in which we

Table 1 The Youth at a Glance

Name	Age in 2010	Race and Gender (Self-Identified)	Household Arrangements	Siblings	School-to-work Trajectory between 2010 and 2013
Lexus Martin	17	Black Woman	Single Mother	3 half siblings	Community college and work
Alize Robinson	18	Latina Woman	Single Mother	4 half siblings	Community college—full-time work
Angie Martinez	18	Latina Woman	Single Mother	4 half & 1 foster siblings	Community college—three jobs
Shivana Abraham	20	Multiracial Woman	Both Parents	1 full sibling	Full-time work
A. J.	18	Latina Woman	Single Mother	4 half siblings	Admitted to four-year university—military
Lena Diaz	17	Latina Woman	Single Mother	1 half & 1 full + 1 half sibling	Community college and work
Cassy Alfonso	17	Latina Woman	Both Parents	2 half siblings	Community college and work
Brianna Green	17	Black Woman	Single Mother	1 half siblings + 3 step siblings	Four-year university—dropped out—work—community college and work
Evelyn Salas	17	Black Woman	Foster Mother	2 half & 2 foster siblings	Four-year college admission—military
Ashley Florez	20	Latina Woman	Single Mother	5 half siblings + 1 half sibling	Community college—work—community college and work—full-time work
Letisha Gathers	18	Latina Woman	Single Mother	2 half siblings	Four-year university—dropped out
Curtis Page	18	Latino Man	Single Mother	4 half siblings	Community college—full-time work—community college and work
Sandra Brown	17	Black Woman	Single Mother	0 + 2 half siblings	Four-year university and work
Franklin Junior	18	Latino Man	Single Mother	3 half siblings	Full-time work
Donte Branch	17	Black Man	Single Mother	2 half siblings	Community college and work
Gigi Phillips	17	Black Woman	Father + Stepmother	1 half + 1 half & 1 full siblings	Four-year university—full-time work

NOTE: The number after the plus (+) sign indicates the number of siblings who lived in a different household but maintained regular contact with the youth. I do not include siblings who did not live in the same household or maintain regular contact. Additionally, family arrangements changed frequently. I used a different pseudonym for one of the youth in other publications that were based on this research.

were embedded. Donna Haraway (1988) urges us to practice reflexivity by recognizing the location from which we write. Pointing to the exploitative potential of the myth of "objective knowledge," feminist philosopher Sandra Harding (2015) emphasizes the significance of collecting and presenting data while navigating the possibilities that our research will shape the lives of those about whom we write.[61]

Writing about the lives of sixteen people in a holistic manner can be both rewarding and limiting, as well as, of course, extremely intimidating. It is hard to summarize, conclusively and exhaustively, and then analyze the complexities of life in a particular social and historical context. I have had to abandon various significant and central lines of analysis in an attempt to provide readers with a theoretically and empirically coherent story. One of the central purposes of this book is to provide a multicontextual look at the lives of the young people. Following the works of ethnographers such as David Halle and Elliot Liebow, I write about Port City's young people by separating various contexts that both the youth and our society at large see as central components of daily life, including school, work, family, neighborhood, peer groups, and romantic and sexual relationships.[62]

Ethnographers who write about the lives of those living in the margins of society have to be careful about their representation of marginalized groups because their work risks being appropriated by conservatives for their political agenda. One of the goals of this book is to counter the common representation of drugs, gangs, violence, and early parenthood as central to growing up in urban poverty. I provide an analytically rigorous look at the lives of youth who are deeply invested in higher education, white-collar work, and delaying parenthood. However, writing about coming-of-age experiences in all its complexities means documenting mistakes, mishaps, and various aspects of the young people's lives that may elicit judgments from those who wish to overlook the nuances of my argument, which is that youth growing up in poverty are not afforded the same room for mistakes as their wealthier counterparts. I have not omitted data for fear of judgment, and yet I realize that some of the data could be misappropriated to further perpetuate the stereotypes of marginalized youth that already plague mainstream perceptions.