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It's not you, it's— Hookup Culture and Sexual Subjectivity

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It's not you, it's—
Hookup Culture and Sexual Subjectivity
-Anne Vetter

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	2
<i>What does the word hookup mean to you?</i>	3
<i>How did we find ourselves here? (An Introduction):</i>	4
<i>Methodological and Theoretical Background</i>	8
<i>Questions About</i>	18
<i>Questions about pleasure</i>	18
<i>Questions about ritual</i>	24
<i>Questions about attractiveness</i>	39
<i>Questions about desire</i>	46
<i>Questions about access</i>	59
<i>Questions about belonging</i>	70
<i>Conclusion: Questions beyond</i>	84
<i>Glossary</i>	90
<i>Works Cited</i> :.....	91

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Any ethnographic work belongs to many others beyond the ethnographer. This is true here.

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I don't have the words to thank Mary Beth Mills, my research advisor. Each week, Mary Beth held space as I exploded with questions, ideas, trying to grasp all of it, use all of it, know all of it. With the utmost kindness, care, and intention, she guided me through my own processes, challenged me constantly to do better, and be better. She taught me the so-called secret languages of the discipline; she turned a mind hungry for anthropology into an anthropological mind. It takes a great deal of trust for a student to be able to write so vulnerably in an academic setting; I never doubted my trust in Mary Beth for a second.

Chandra Bhimull, my reader, I think will find herself in these pages often. I don't mean that in the sense that I am merely quoting her (which I am) but that she should see the ways her words and teachings and silences have fallen into me like stones in a river; forever changing the flow.

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What does the word hookup mean to you?

Like, uh, like, not necessarily a one time thing, but something that just kinda happens. It's like, sex, or, um, you know kinda intimacy without the attachments or emotional aspects of a relationship. It's kind of just the act. -Male/White/Straight/Sophomore

I feel that a hookup is when you have a sexual interaction with someone, but you don't have to go all of the way. I wouldn't say kissing is a hookup, but that's me. I think most people at Colby think a hookup is having sex. -Male/Latinx/Bisexual/First Year

When I hear the word hookup I think of a range of activities that may or may not be sexual with two people. -Female/White/Straight/Sophomore

For me, hookup means making out all the way to sex. -Female/White/Straight/First Year

I think in college context, I assume that when people say they hooked up with someone it could mean anyone. When a stranger uses the term, I think sex, but I think I alter the definition for each of my friends based on their sexual histories and inclinations.-Female/White/Straight/Senior

It's whatever you want it to be. -Female/White/Queer/Senior

I don't know. A sexual encounter with another person... with two people who are not explicitly dating. -Female/White/Queer/Senior

I don't have any sort of specific standards, but I would say if you engage in sexual activity with someone of any sort, like even just making out in a room. I don't know, I don't have any sort of set parameters. But it's an emotional and sexual interaction. -Male/Biracial/Straight/Junior

I think it depends on who the two people are. -Male/White/Straight/Senior

I would say I hooked up with somebody if I did more than make out with them. If I were to make out with someone on a dance floor, I wouldn't... wait, maybe I would call it a hookup. I'd probably say I sorta hooked up with them. -Female/White/Bisexual/Senior

Um, like making out and having sex. -Female/Biracial/Straight/Senior

So a hookup could be anything. The magic about the word hookup is that it is so vague; it's a spectrum. -Female/Black/Queer/Sophomore

How did we find ourselves here? (An Introduction):

I want to begin this project by being honest in a way I have not let myself be, even alone. This thesis came to be because of a man. This is not to say this thesis has continued to be because of this man, or for this man, but it was because of this man or more accurately because of my struggle to understand my interaction with this man that I started to ask the questions that have guided this research. Here's a story:

It was a Thursday night at the end of April and I'd been hooking up with this man for about 4 weeks. I had feelings for him. He did not have feelings for me. Neither of those statements were explicitly said, but both of us were aware of the situation. A dynamic like that is obvious in your body. I felt it every time I went to bed with him; kissing was like diving into a pool that you thought was deep, but turned out to barely come up to your knees. I wanted more than I was getting, he would not give it. That evening, I went to Bar Night to look good and be seen, pretend not to notice him, wait for him to notice how little I noticed. He didn't talk to me all night, didn't even look at me, until just past midnight when I was waiting for a cab with friends to return me to campus. By that point, I had wrapped myself into a fury, convinced that *that's it, never again*. Then, he walked over, asked me if I wanted to go back to our friends' house a few blocks away with him. I was shocked, pleased, validated, confused. I'm still ashamed at how quick the *yes* came out of my mouth when he asked me. We'd slept there together a few times before, on an air mattress in a spare room upstairs where the room turned red just before 5 with the rising sun. Every time, I'd walked myself home while he'd slept in.

That night last April, I walked the dark and unpopulated streets with our friends, and it wasn't until we were inside their house that I realized that this guy hadn't come back with us. After 20 minutes, one of our friends called him, found out he'd

stayed behind, pulled into conversation with his ex-girlfriend. Who had been watching, when he approached me to ask me to sleep with him. *But he's on his way now*, our friend assured me. In that moment, my mind shifted sharply, adjusting as clarity set in like cold water. This man had asked me home with him because his ex-girlfriend was watching and wanted to say something to her about himself without words, and here I was, waiting for him to show up, to have mediocre sex with him on an air mattress, to stay awake as he slept deeply next to me, to get up at 6 to walk the mile back to campus. Staying and waiting for him was against what I believed about myself and what I deserved and wanted from someone I was seeing. I could have called a cab; it was still early enough. I could have called a friend; plenty of them were sober enough to come pick me up. But I stayed. And I didn't have an answer for why.

In moments like that night, I felt pulled forward by something beyond how I understood myself, or wanted to understand myself. That's not to say I didn't have agency, rather to say that the agency I had was informed by forces I couldn't see or name. Around me, I saw patterns of interaction; when I told friends about me and this man, many of them had stories of hooking up that were eerily similar, or they at least had heard of someone who had experienced desire for someone else, or the desire to desire that person, even though they knew it was bad for them. But it all felt so personal, it all felt so individual.

In the wake of that night I had to ask, *why hookup culture? How does it continue? Who does it benefit?* As my wondering found focus in this project, my questions begot more questions: *how does hookup culture allow students to make meaning about themselves and others? What are the patterns of hookup culture and how are they enacted and embodied? What cultural work does hookup culture do on this campus?*

Everything I have learned in this research process can be encapsulated in one statement the reader of my thesis said to me this fall, when I tried explaining to her why so many women on this campus continue to sleep with men who treat them with disrespect. *You students think it's about you, but it's not about you. Or, it is about you and it's also about something bigger than you*, she responded. Her words sat with me that day, as they have sat with me this whole year, and brought me back to last April, to me waiting for this man to show up and sleep with me so I could tell myself something about myself. I wondered, what did it do for me to stay? What would it have done for me to leave? What would I have lost, individually? What would it have disrupted if I'd pushed back against that treatment, resisted?

In seeking to answer these questions, I have discovered that this thesis is about systems, about social power and norms, and the very real ways that they are experienced in and enacted by the bodies of individual students. In other words, this thesis is a naming of what many students on this campus already know without words, a linking of story to story to story, a marking of patterns that underlie the forms of sexual subjectivity driving participation in hookup culture. Ultimately, by making visible the systems of power that inform and shape choices deemed individual and free, this thesis explores what is at stake in the current sexualized system through which many students craft selves and relationships of belonging. Moreover, in naming what is already known but rarely articulated, this thesis also opens up the possibility of enacting and telling different stories ... stories that can enable and validate ways of crafting sexual subjectivities that are more equitable and affirming for all.

The writing that follows is divided into two parts. I begin with some methodological and theoretical background. In this section I explain how I came to

write the thesis I came to write. The second section is called *Questions About* and is a narrative account of my field work, going from question to question to question, bringing the reader along on my process this year. I end with a short conclusion that points to how question-asking of oneself, of the spaces one lives in, and of others is both a powerful and necessary tool in disrupting structural violence. In addition I have included a glossary of Colby and generationally specific terms.

Methodological and Theoretical Background

This thesis began, truly, as a proposal I developed over the summer and updated early in the fall semester. I spent the fall semester working on a literature review. I read multiple book length ethnographies on hookup culture in the United States, as well as countless articles about hookup culture that explored the role of texting, class, race, alcohol, gender, sexual pleasure (Allison & Risman: 2014) (Bogle: 2008) (Frietas: 2013) (Sanday: 1990) (Spell: 2016) (Wade: 2016) (Wilikins: 2012). I read ethnographies focused on sexual subjectivity, embodied subjectivity, and socially informed desire. As the questions I asked of what I was reading became more complicated, I began to read histories of race in the United States, queer theory, autoethnographies (Adams & Jones: 2011) (Allen: 2013) (Anderson: 2006) (Boyarin et. all: 2003) (Brodkin: 2016) (Chang: 2008) (Crapanzano: 1986) (Demby: 2016) (Diversi & Moreira: 2016) (Fanon: 1967) (Frankenberg: 1993) (Goffman & Lemert: 2008) (Harvy et. all: 2004) (hooks: 1992) (Jensen: 2005) (Khosravi: 2010) (Norton: 2015) (Painter: 2015) (Rankine: 2015) (Ward: 2015). At the end of the fall semester, I had written a literature review that presented the arguments that are at the core of this thesis. In addition, I developed a series of interview questions and compiled a list of key field sites.

I started taking field notes in January. I say that I started taking field notes and not that I started fieldwork for reasons I will explain later. I would go to spaces that were both familiar and new to me, sit, observe. Mostly, the fieldwork in which I was actively taking notes took place on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. Thursday nights, I'd go off campus to the Colby Sponsored *Bar Nights* at local bars where students flooded in, filled up all of the space and bought discounted beer and mixed drinks. Friday's and Saturday's, I'd primarily root myself in the Senior Apartments. My

fieldwork took me to pre-games, to dorm room bathrooms, to parties in apartments occupied by no one I knew. Sometimes, I'd sit in the Spa around midnight, watch as people passed through. I took notes on my phone. Even when I sat in one place for a long time, people rarely asked what I was doing. When they did, I was honest. Almost always, other students asked me what I observed, what I thought about how they were dressed, how they were interacting, how they were occupying that space. Sometimes, these curious students requested they be interviewed and some became interlocutors in this project. In my field notes, I noted patterns primarily, and due to the drunken nature of many students I observed, I did not write down the names of people I saw. I did, however, note their gender and, if I knew it, their race. If, during one of these encounters, a student drunkenly told me something they thought I'd find interesting (this happened often,) I'd follow up with them later, when they were sober, to ask whether or not I could use their story.

I conducted formal interviews with over twenty students. The interviews lasted on average an hour each. For the first seven or so, I stuck fairly strictly to a series of questions I developed at the end of the fall semester. However, I kept hearing similar answers, or answers at least that supported each other and only reflected part of what I wanted to write about in this thesis. At that point, I became more pointed with my questions, asking specific students about specific experiences, customizing each interview. Most interviews took place in my room, others took place in my study carrel in the Anthropology Department, only one took place in a truly public space, in the Colby Pub during the daytime. All of the interviews were recorded with consent.

Some students I approached directly to request an interview. These were students who either had shared with me a unique perspective on hookup culture that

challenged what I believed or who had told me story previously that had shaped my thinking during the research. Other students sought me out, often after I explained my thesis to them, or after a mutual friend had mentioned my research. Other students, I found in other ways. At one point, I put a plea on my Instagram page, seeking additional participants among sophomores and first years, the population of campus I had less access to through social networks. The plea worked. At other times, I reached out for help in finding different perspectives: I asked friends and acquaintances if they knew any *senior men* or *sophomore women* or *queer first years* who would be interested in talking. I conducted one impromptu group interview, one night, when a conversation I was a part of turned towards my research.

This research followed me everywhere on campus. When other students found out what I was researching, many offered up stories. Sometimes, I'd receive texts from people I barely knew with intimate details and confessions. I collected narratives outside of my formal interviews from friends, strangers, classmates and many of these stories are used in this work, with permission. My close friends constantly asked questions about the theories I was developing and their questions complicated and guided my research. As a student at Colby, hookup culture is everywhere around me.

While the students I interviewed ranged in age, gender, sexuality, race, class, and religion, certainly there were some demographic characteristics more represented than others. White senior women, and white women in general, were the most eager to work with me and to share their stories. This also reflects my own race identity; as a white-identified and -identifiable person at Colby I am primarily embedded in spaces that are white and are dominated by white people. I am more keyed into white social networks. The overrepresentation of white students in this work is no doubt partly due

to these aspects of my own identity and access. I believe that it also reflects the greater willingness and desire of white students on campus to talk openly about their sex lives, a form of privilege that is itself conditioned by the norms of hookup culture.

It took me until April to understand what this thesis was really about, or, rather, to know where I was going with this thesis. All year, I'd find myself in my advisor's office repeating *I never thought this is where my research would be going*. Repeating, *my brain is going to explode*. But still, all of the time, I felt like I was questioning myself deeper and deeper into a hole that had no bottom. I felt like my ideas were scattering marbles that I was constantly struggling to herd into a straight line. And then, in April, after finishing an early draft of this paper, I found the critical focus of the story I am telling. I realized that this thesis interrogates white female subjectivity in hookup culture. And I realized that this thesis is a call to white women, especially to white straight wealthy women, that I am asking us to decenter our individual experiences of violence and to understand how we are also culpable in perpetuating larger systems of violence on campus. The need to share what I had learned became pressing.

But, how best to share it? I realized, however, that it took months and months of research and critical reflection to come to this conclusion. I know that if I could go back nine months and tell Anne in September that *your thesis that you think is about the violence you experience is actually about the violence you perpetuate*, she might have a hard time understanding why. How had I gone from asking questions like *why is there so much bad sex at Colby?* to asking questions like *how does race shape the ways that students are able to feel like they belong at Colby?* My answer, as it almost always is for the anthropologist, was in my field notes. My answer was the train of questions I wrote down almost daily

throughout the whole year. The questions that fed more questions that fed more questions.

This leads me to how I have chosen to write this ethnography. The following section, *Questions About*, is a semi-fictionalized ethnography. A semifictionalized ethnography is a condensation and reorganization of ethnographic work into a single narrative (De León 2015: 43). You will find in this narrative a blurring of experiences and representations. I do this for several reasons. This blurring is not to represent any one singular subjectivity but to point at the ritualized and patterned nature of hookup culture as a system. Things happen, again, and again, and again. Violence bubbles up, desire surges, the school moves on. In some stories, I cannot erase certain identifying markers (race, class, gender, sexuality) nor could I in a thesis that is so deeply about race, class, gender and sexuality, but I can let these stories live beyond the lives of those who shared them with me. This is a small school, and I want to protect those with whom I worked. It's a transgression and a risk to speak as honestly as many of my informants did about hookup culture. I want to make sure that my informants remain safe after sharing their thoughts so openly with me. I use italicized text to signal speech, both my own and of my others. I incorporate long quotes into paragraphs rather than separate them from the narrative and indent them, as I do with longer quotes from scholarly sources.

I have reframed what I learned in my fieldwork as a story that follows my own self-questioning throughout the research process. I decided that if I had to follow a train of questions to get to my conclusions, then the most effective way to bring my reader to this conclusion was to share with them those questions and my process of answering them. My life will be up for examination here; I am as much interlocutor as

ethnographer. In this sense, my fieldwork began when I started at Colby. Every party, every partner, every Saturday morning breakfast shaped the way I understand myself on this campus, has shaped my sexual subjectivity. I have been engaging in hookup culture for close to four years, whether I was single and sleeping with other students or in a relationship listening to my friends' stories.

This positions me as a native ethnographer, a researcher who is a member of the community she is working with. Being a native ethnographer both allows me to access to what non-native ethnographers might not as easily see and demands that I interrogate those experiences with extraordinary care. Being a native ethnographer means that I didn't need to "build rapport" with informants; many of the students I talked to already knew who I was.

Bringing myself and my experiences into this work so intentionally serves this research in multiple ways. This thesis, primarily, is focused on sexual subjectivity, whether I use that term explicitly or not. The most concise way I can describe the semi-fictionalized ethnography that follows is that it is about my gaining awareness of my own sexual subjectivity. Debra Curtis describes sexual subjectivity:

Sexual subjectivity, to borrow from Sally Alexander, "is best understood as a process which is always in the making, is never finished or complete" (1994:278). By emphasizing the constitutive process—how sexual subjectivity is produced—we can attend to the ways individuals attempt to construct their sexual lives within dynamic and particular social structures.(Curtis 2004: 96)

For Curtis, studying sexual subjectivity illuminates how individuals understand their sexual selves, how these selves are often contradictory, and how individuals identify despite or because of these contradictions. Studying sexual subjectivity allows an ethnographer to describe how individuals, or subjects, make sense of the sexual possibilities available to them. Michel Foucault argues that the subject is an

embodiment of practice. Other anthropologists before me have employed this reading of Foucault's work (Curtis 2004: Gough 2005). Annette Gough (2005) writes about reforming her ideas of subjectivity after a mastectomy. She explains that her narrative builds upon Foucault's concept that "power is corporeally revealed because events are 'written' on the body: they shape the way we perform, or act out, our bodily selves (Gough 2005: 254). Rachel Spronk offers further definitions of sexual subjectivity rooted in Foucault's work. She asserts that Foucault, through analyzing "how the social context generates the self as an object of domination illustrates how subjects embody social structures and how sexuality is a discursive reality" (Spronk 2014: 5-6.)

Other anthropologists studying sexual subjectivity admit that there is an intangible aspect to their field of research. As Debra Curtis observes, "much of the anthropological literature on sexuality, although ethnographically rich in its description of community building and sexual cultures, fails to attend to the complex processes by which sexual subjectivity is produced" (Curtis 2004: 95). And according to Rachel Spronk, "There is an elusive part of sexuality that is difficult to objectify, both for informants themselves and for researchers" (Spronk 2014: 8). Spronk is referring to the embodied experience of sex, sexuality, and desire, which she argues is difficult for informants to describe and difficult for ethnographers to observe. Traditional methods of ethnographic data collection, such as interviews, cannot fully cover the embodied experience of sex. Curtis writes, "not having access to [intimate spaces] may be an inevitable obstacle in sexuality research no matter how loosely structured and open-ended our interviews are crafted to be" (Curtis 2004: 112). Given these elusive and intangible dimensions of research into sexual subjectivity, for my own work I have found Annette Gough's notion of *embodied subjectivity* particularly useful:

I deploy the notions of “embodied subject” and “embodied subjectivity” in this narrative from a poststructuralist position in which subjects are nonunitary, multiple, and complex; subjectivity is “an abstract or general principle that defies our separation into distinct selves and encourages us to imagine that, or simply helps us to understand why, our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience” (Mansfield 3). (Gough 2005: 254)

I believe that an examination of my embodied subjectivity on Colby’s campus provides unique (although not the only possible) insight into the field of sexual subjectivity. Embodied subjectivity “provides me with an experience, not only of my own body, but also of the ways in which my body is perceived by others” (Gough 2005: 252). I am queer, Jewish, non-binary. In this sense, it is important for me to be open and share my individual embodied experiences of violence. Yet, I am white. I am wealthy. And in almost every space I enter, I am perceived as a cis-gender woman. I believe this makes it just as imperative for me to share the moments where I did not experience violence personally in my body, but where I have learned to look for it. Learned to look for the ways I was culpable. I hope that through an analysis of my own experiences, I can better understand how white supremacy and other hegemonies are enacted and embodied on campus, in part through hookup culture.

Hookup culture is a system that works through, is enacted by, and embodied by individuals and individual *bodies*. It is a system that is rooted in larger systems and structures of white supremacy, classism, misogyny, homophobia, anti-Semitism. Yet, it is experienced personally (as subjectivity) and felt in the body. In understanding how to write about embodied experiences, I found Kathleen Stewart’s perspective useful:

“The notion of a totalized system of which everything is always already somehow a part is not helpful (to say the least) in the effort to approach a weighted and reeling present. This is not to say that the forces these systems try to name are not real and literally pressing. On the contrary, I am trying to bring

them into view as a scene of immanent force, rather than leave them looking like dead effects imposed on an innocent world” (Stewart 2007: 1).

Stewart’s work is concerned with *affect*. Affect is force, felt viscerally. Affect is a pull to act, or think, or stay static. Affect is a liminal state, an emergent time and space filled with potential. Affect is before language, before thought. It can pass between bodies, fill rooms, surge momentarily, or linger. It happens at the level of everyday life and is experienced in the body. Reading Stewart, I thought back to that pull I describe in my introduction, that seemingly inexplicable need to do things in hookup culture despite my better judgment, things that only made me feel more conflicted. While this thesis isn’t merely an exploration of affect, moments of affect are essential. To write about what is prior to language is a difficult challenge. Of her own work, Stewart writes, “my effort here is not to finally ‘know’ [affects]—to collect them into a good enough story of what’s going on—but to fashion some form of address that is adequate to their form” (Stewart 2007: 4). This means leaving some moments without closure, leaving much open. Writing about affect leaves open space for the reader. I’m asking you to come in at every turn, to enter this text with me and others. I refuse to turn many of these moments I describe into *things*, rather I let them pause in their own potential.

I want these stories to be read. I believe that a native ethnographer has a certain responsibility to her community. In the conclusion of this work, I ask questions about transgression, about challenging hookup culture from within. So much of challenging this system, I believe, comes from communication, from sharing stories, from connecting the patterns into a system. It comes from finding ordinary moments with the potential for resistance, of thinking both of the self and beyond the self. I think this thesis is my attempt to do that, or begin to do that for myself. And it is an invitation for

others, especially those who can move with ease on this campus, to do the same. For that reason, I have attempted to write this work in a way that many students, not just those who study anthropology, can read. This is “not simply because stories are ‘accessible’ (a problematic term that implies a ‘dumbing down’ of complex material for the masses) but because the call-and-response mode of storytelling extends an invitation to others to join in the discussion” (Walley: 2015: 628). In some parts, I am more successful than others. I haven’t completely unlearned the need to sprinkle jargon among stories to legitimize my authority. I don’t trust my own body as much as I trust the academy. Maybe later.

Toward this end I have from the beginning conceived of this project as a trans-media ethnography, an ethnography that takes on multiple forms. As one part of this work I have created a zine to stand in collaboration with this essay. ‘Zine’ is a term for a small, self-published magazine that serves as a site for self-expression, for sharing personal and political narratives. I believe that the zine I am creating is no less an expression of my year of field work than this essay. While I use this analytical essay to share a specific set of theories I have developed, I believe that I can use my zine to better share other stories and moments collected this year. This stands in line with what transmedia ethnographers before me have claimed. For example, Degarrod writes, “by including visual art, I have aimed at expanding the ethnographic text to include those elements and textures found in the experience of fieldwork that defy translation into written texts, and also as a way of bringing ethnographies to communities outside the academic world” (Degarrod 2013: 404). My goal with this entire trans-media ethnography is to enable members of this community to ask questions of themselves, of their habits, of this place.

Questions About

Questions about pleasure

Mostly, my pickup line is pretty consistent. *Do you want to go back to my room and have a drink with me?* The first time I use it, it's my Junior spring. I'm at a bar off campus. Everyone's drinking these things called rum buckets, which are mostly juice, but since everyone has them, everyone keeps ordering them. I show up with a few friends in a taxi around eleven. Earlier, back in my room, as I am deciding between tight jeans and a skirt, I ask my friend Lily, *do you think I could hook up with Ian?* She's on my bed, drinking a beer. *Oh, for sure. You're totally his type.* I decide to wear the skirt; even though it's March, it's starting to warm. At the bar, I'm nervous; it's my first time single in years, and I'm not used to hitting on men. Only women. But, I see Ian, say hello, we go outside and smoke a cigarette. *Do you want to go back to my room and have a drink with me?* He says *sure*, and we steal the cab that's been stalling outside the bar, waiting for someone else inside. It was that easy. We get back to my room and I try to guess the minutes before I'm supposed to make clear the reason why both of us are sitting on my bed, drinking rye. I give it about five. *Can I kiss you?* I ask. We do. Maybe 15 minutes later, he asks me if I have a condom. When it's over, I think to myself, *that's it?* After two years of sex with someone I'd loved, the whole thing had felt more like mutual masturbation than anything else. The rest of the spring, most of my sexual experiences feel about the same, sometimes worse.

That summer, when I'm working to put together my thesis proposal, I can't stop thinking about the embodied experience of sex, about pleasure. Of the myriad moments from my spring that I could mull over, pick apart, I can't stop thinking about

orgasms. I know that there's more to hookup culture than the sex, but to me, the sex is the center, moonlike and eclipsing all other details. It makes sense; for me, sex is the most tangibly named embodied experience of the whole process. Certainly I was feeling things when asking someone home, when waking up the morning after, when talking about it. But, in remembering, it's harder to place these feelings and they seem less important. Over and over again in my mind, I play the moments when I knew I wanted to be touched differently but didn't ask, or did ask and was ignored. *Good sex isn't that hard* I keep telling myself. *Why is there so much bad sex?* The question rings again and again in my head. It feels burning, so important and in need of answering.

Back at school in the fall, I go to the Pub for the first Pub Night back. It's packed with seniors, all bronzed and fresh from a summer somewhere. *What's your thesis about?* a woman asks me. *It's about hookup culture and how students use it to make sense of themselves,* I answer, *Pretty much, I'm trying to figure out why there's so much bad sex on campus.* The pub is loud, so we're pretty much shouting at each other. A group of women, standing nearby, come over and soon, we are riling each other up, indignant and sharing statistics about the orgasm gap. Women share story after story of terrible, terrible sex; men who refused to go down on them because *your bush is too big*, men who lasted minutes and passed out immediately afterwards, men who made women walk home at 2 am so they could *get some sleep before an early practice*. The stories seem to all be the same, just different names, different semesters. We are all white.

That weekend, in the bathroom of my friend's apartment, I am fixing my lipstick in the mirror. It's Saturday night, maybe ten o'clock. A friend of mine, not a close one, is there with me, steadying herself against the wall. She's drunk. *You know*, she tells me, *I've never had an orgasm with someone else.* She almost whispers it, even though there's no

one else in the room. *I don't think I can.* Later that night, I see her across the room at a party, kissing a tall man in jean shorts. Together, they leave, go somewhere else.

Maybe, it's right then that I realize the question I should be asking is not *why is there so much bad sex?* but rather, *what compels people to continue to have sex they know is going to be bad?* I am frustrated with myself because as much as I am asking these questions, my own actions still transcend my understanding. *The sex here is so bad.* This a lament that leaves my lips often, mostly followed by, *but I still wanna get fucked.* Really, I don't know what I want, but more than that, I don't know what I would gain if I were to hookup. One of the earliest weeks in the semester, I go to Bar Night off campus. I'm wearing a soft pink crop top, really it's a bra, and big, baggy jeans. You can see my armpit hair and I'm not wearing much makeup. There's this guy on the baseball team I want to sleep with. My friend Cate says she knows him well, that she can hook me up with him. At the bar, Cate drags me by the arm over to this guy, starts a conversation, and then leaves us to talk. I'm telling you, I feel beautiful. I feel powerful, like something's shining from the core of me. But, this guy is looking around the bar, not interested in the conversation, barely pretending to listen. Later that night, my friend Cate asks him what was up and he tells her *there's this sophomore here I want to hookup with.* Cate and I see them leaving together 20 minutes later; she's very thin, very blonde, and doesn't have any body hair in sight.

Back at school, Cate and I lie on my bed and I cry. *I'm tired of feeling too queer, too Jewish, too hairy, too big, too whatever for this school.* I'm certain that all of this has something to do with why this man, and many men I talk to on this campus, aren't attracted to me, or are attracted to me and don't act on it. I'm not a viable option, not even a possibility. *Anne, even if you'd hooked up with him, the sex probably would've been*

awful Cate assures me, *men on this campus want to sleep with the kind of woman who looks like she's not gonna make him go down on her. That's not the kind of sex you want to be having.* It isn't, not at all, but something in me still pulls me to try, again and again.

The only conclusion I can come to is that hooking up is about more than just the act of sex. Or rather, that hooking up is not really about pleasure, or *sexual* pleasure, but about something else. That something else, I decide, is performance. In her theory of performativity, Judith Butler works from an interactionist approach to gender; that is, she understands gender as something that is not biologically-rooted, stable, or a core from which one creates identity. Rather, she understands gender as “an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1988: 519). Gender is something we produce through and create through our actions and interactions; it is a process. Butler also argues that “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 1988: 519). In this sense, one *does* one's body, one *does* one's gender; one becomes feminine, or masculine through a series of repeated acts.

For Butler, gender is historically informed and constituted. She understands the “gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic” (Butler 1988: 523). Individual performances of gender fit into and recreate cultural conventions and historical situations; an individual only has so many possibilities from which they can chose. Certainly, some possibilities are more acceptable than others. Butler argues that proper gender performance, as it marks the male and the female, is a strategy of

cultural survival; not performing one's gender correctly could disrupt patterns of reproduction. Thus, she believes, "discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (Butler 1988: 522).

I begin to wonder to what extent sex in hookup culture is a reward for proper gender performance. Think back to what Cate said, that *men on this campus want to sleep with the kind of woman who looks like she's not gonna make him go down on her*. Certainly this does not apply to every man on campus, but it's something that Cate has observed and felt and decided. What Cate is describing is a sexual interaction in which a woman does not advocate for her own experience; rather the experience is guided by the man. His skill is not questioned and his desire is centered. Think about what this says about power, and the power dynamics of sex. Essentially, Cate is describing a sexual encounter that mimics dynamics of patriarchy, a sexual encounter that allows a man and a woman to perform their genders in ways that have been historically constituted as possible, preferable.

I have transgressed in many ways the ways I am supposed to be *woman* on campus. There is so much I could lay out here, and I will later, but let's just start with the body hair. Armpit hair is so rare on women here (or people perceived as women in my case) that I often times have women telling me, *you look so cool with your armpit hair. It's so bold. I could never do it. It would just look wrong on me*. Each of these comments serves as a way to mark how I have deviated from the boundaries of what is defined as permissible for my body on this campus. I begin to question, *what is the range of possibilities on this campus to be sexual?* If I am indeed one of those who "fails to do their gender right," what is my punishment? (Butler 1988: 522).

Maybe this is the wrong question, or not the only one. I realize I should also be asking *what is the range of possibilities for this man who rejected me?* It's not as if I haven't slept with men on campus. I think back to Ian, why I could sleep with him but not this athlete. Yes, maybe it had to do with personal preference, or chemistry, but I don't think so. Ian skateboards around campus, wears shaggy clothes, makes movies. This athlete, he was clean cut, preppy. I'm saying that the same things that made me a possibility to Ian are what made me an impossibility for this athlete. Utilizing Butler's theory of performativity is a powerful tool to help deconstruct gender as both an individual experience and a cultural process. While an individual may believe that their actions and beliefs (such as what they wear, who they are attracted to, even how they use their hands as they speak) are privately formed and personal, they actually work within and recreate systems of gender and identity. What is impossible, or possible, for students in hookup culture comes back to, maybe, how a hookup allows them to say something about themselves. But, how? Performances have to be recognizable, rooted in pattern and repetition.

Questions about ritual

In the Apartments, there's an atrium, an open space on the first floor. One night, I sit there for hours, watching. It's a Saturday night. It's close to midnight. The atrium is in the middle of the building and to cross sides, move from party to party, you have to pass through it. There's a bench, long enough for maybe 15 sitting bodies, but often times, students will sit on the railing above it, or just stand in the wide-walkway, talking. Throughout the night, the space fills and empties, like a heart pumping. A group of sophomore girls suddenly rush in, occupy, and then they slowly move out, leaving a few behind, lingering, still talking. Then, maybe, a group of football players, or skiers, or just whoever, walks through. Some stick around the area, post up for maybe 15 minutes, and then the space empties again. The atrium is never fully empty from the maybe 11 at night to 1 am; while groups move in and out, there's always some residual socializing happening there. I ask some first year women sitting there, why they are hanging out in that space. *The last party we were in wasn't great, so we're waiting to hear from friends where to go next.* So, maybe it's a waiting ground. But also, the atrium is a highly visible space.

I sit there for 3 hours and I feel extremely vulnerable; I'm worried people will think I don't have a party to go to, that I'm just drifting in the Apartments, waiting around to be pulled into something, some room. But, the surveillance this space offers can be used to your advantage. A basketball player walks through the atrium, sees a guy he knows. *Dude! What's up?* His voice is loud, honestly he's almost shouting. Both men stand up, give each other a big hug. It's a kind of greeting that's not occurring in the classroom, or even in the pre-games that take place before students migrate up to the

apartments. I see this happen again and again throughout the night—students (not just men) exclaim big, take up space, show who they know, move on.

The night begins to feel like it's on a loop, repeating, repeating. I begin to understand it as a system made up of a series of highly regulated and recognizable rituals. When Victor Turner wrote about symbols in Ndembu ritual, he defined ritual as behavior that was highly scripted and separate from everyday life (Turner 1967: 19). And I think, still, the word ritual evokes images of religious ceremonies, ornate dress, chants; I think the word ritual carries the average Westerner out of their own cultural context and to the shores of some foreign, *other*. When pressed to name campus rituals, or institutional rituals, most students I talked to could name, *graduation, Doghead, Convocation, senior week* and then were left wordless. Some pushed further and mentioned the weekly religious meetings that take place on campus; Friday Shabbat and Sunday Mass. But beyond that, most students didn't think that there were many school rituals on Colby's campus. This is consistent with Peter Magolda's (2000) research on college rituals which found that, mostly, these rituals were left unseen and unscrutinized (Magolda 2000: 32). Magolda himself struggled to define ritual in the collegiate context, ultimately writing, "my perspective integrates the strengths of both Durkheim (1985), who views ritual as a social function that sustains the status quo, and Turner (1969), who views ritual as a social process that makes transformations possible. Specifically, I define ritual as a formalized, symbolic performance" (Magolda 2000: 33). While Magolda was interested in and examined institutional rituals, he found that the smaller, more everyday rituals did more work to transmit social norms, create social order (Magolda 2000: 34). He called these interactional rituals: "little actions between

individuals that work to symbolically affirm or challenge the location of the individual in the status quo” (Magolda 2000: 34).

C.J. Pascoe, in her ethnography *Dude, You’re A Fag* (2007) made the same distinction between interactional and institutional rituals. Pascoe argues that what we often understand as normal daily interactions can actually be understood as ritualized interactions used to repudiate and confirm identity and social belonging. Pascoe uses school rallies and dances as examples of institutional rituals and shows how, for example, the dress codes enforced at school events support and reproduce the shared values created in interactional rituals. Interactional and institutional rituals inform and reinforce each other; they work together in the creation and upholding of cultural norms, expectations, and hierarchies.

It’s the middle of September and I start seeing rituals everywhere. If you think about it, the weekend itself is an institutional ritual. I think so, at least. It is a prescribed time set aside, week after week. It is the school making a shift between days; five academic, two social. Classes cease, most Professors no longer linger around campus, nighttime programming provided by the school veers from lectures and club meetings to parties in the student center, free tickets to ski mountains, concerts. It’s an intentional transformation in atmosphere, a clear indication that something is different on campus, that different actions are allowed and available. If you think about it, it’s much easier to drink heavily and stay up until 2 am if you don’t have class the next day. Students *do* do it in the week, but it’s judged, looked down upon. But, on a Friday night, it’s fair game.

Students at Colby have named this shift, explicitly. I remember when I was a high school junior and looking through a giant, giant college guide. On the Colby page,

I remember reading a quote from a student, *Colby's a work-hard-play-hard kind of place*. Now, almost 5 years later, I can't count the times I've heard Colby described that way. In the dining hall, I run into a guy I barely know. He looks stressed and I ask him how he is. *I have so much work*, he tells me, *I can't wait for the weekend. Gotta love that work-hard-play-hard*. During First Year Orientation, I hear another COOT leader tell a freshman, *Colby's a work-hard-play-hard school. Everyone here is really smart and tries super hard in school, but we have a lot of fun on the weekends*. During First Year Orientation, this separation becomes almost a command. I have this memory from August, when I was a COOT parent: It's probably the third night of First Year Orientation that freshmen meet their COOT parents. Someone told me that the reason why orientation leaders are called COOT Moms and Dads is because it *makes the first years feel at home, like they have family here*. There could, and maybe should be, a whole analysis of what happens during that First Year Orientation, but I'll say it simply. It's an initiation ritual, a maturation ceremony. It's a metaphorical passing of students from their families of origin to their new family, Colby. You say goodbye to everything you've ever known and submit yourself to a new space. ***NO PARENTS, NO RULES! ICE CREAM FOR BREAKFAST!*** The upperclass men and women chant, no, *scream* at the new students. At this point, almost all actual family members have returned home, and the first years are moved into the dorms, now members of the community, part of the institution. ***NO PARENTS, NO RULES! ICE CREAM FOR BREAKFAST!*** The words chant illicit ideas of freedom. It's almost like the upperclass students are saying, *no one's going to tell you what to do here, do what you please...we do*. It's almost like the upperclass students are sharing the rules of the space, commanding *fun*. But, still, fun as it's time and space.

The feeling and uses of space around campus shift in accord with the weekly calendar. During the weekday, students walk with purpose through the open outdoor spaces, to class, to meetings, to the dining halls. Professors are in classrooms, Deans in their offices; students interact with librarians, janitors, non-students. Everything suggests that this school, this campus, is an academic place, a place for learning and creating. During the week, dorm rooms and apartment common rooms mean one thing; they are spaces to be inhabited, slept in, studied in. Sometimes, when I talk to Professors about the research I am doing, they are shocked. *I've spent my whole career here trying to avoid hearing about this kind of stuff*, one tells me. Another tells me that it's hard to believe that the students he sees in his classroom, the kind and polite and brilliant students, act the ways they do on the weekends. I describe the concept of handcuff parties (where two students, most often of opposite genders, are tied together until they drink a certain amount) to another Professor who is so shocked and disgusted, she has to stop and process the idea for a minute. It's almost like students have double selves. One self during the daytime, another during the night.

I have lunch with a Professor, a Professor a lot of students really like and who takes an active involvement with a lot of different students on campus. The conversation turns to men and what makes a good man on Colby's campus. The Professor names a few male students he has worked with, saying *we need more men like this here*. He describes them as strong leaders in the classroom and in the community, moral, upstanding, kind, feminists. All of the men are white, all of the men are athletes, all of the men are straight. I don't say it to him, but I know a woman who slept with one of the men he is extolling. I'm going to call him Greg. She said Greg had been exceptionally rough with her, to the point where she felt like if the experience had been

even a little different, she would have felt violated. Later, when she found out Greg had sexually assaulted a number of women on campus, she told me, *I'm not surprised. I saw something in his eyes, just for a moment, that made me feel like he felt like he could have done anything to me. I could sense his hate; from that interaction I could tell he hated women. It was terrifying.* What my friend is talking about points towards the divide between daytime and nighttime that the rituals of the weekend enable, even demand, students to perform identities very different from those they put on display in the classroom.

During the weekend, the campus shifts; it's the students who shift it. Spaces *have* to take on different meaning for the weekend as we know it to occur. Victor Turner understood "performances of ritual as distinct phases in the social processes whereby groups became adjusted to internal changes and adapted to their external environment". (Turner 1967: 20). Sometimes, students will physically alter spaces; set up a pong table, set up a keg, decorate a room for a theme party. And, of course, students drink. They drink a lot. Drunkenness is the modern US college student's equivalent of trance; it's a giving over to a ritual space and time, to the performances of the rituals of the weekend.

Hookup culture and alcohol, it seems, go hand in hand (Bogle: 2008). So much of the work I read points to *hookup culture needs alcohol*. But even as alcohol lubricates the weekend's performances, it is bodily adornment and dress that signal for many students (and perhaps especially for women) their shift into the ritual expectations of hookup culture. See, I like to wear cropped shirts to the classroom. Other women give me such dirty looks when I do; they treat me like I'm barefoot in church or something. Everything about the way that they look at me makes me feel like *that's not something you wear here*. And, really, it isn't. Students, especially women, have different uniforms for

the day and the night. Crop tops mark nighttime. To wear one in the classroom disrupts the meaning of the symbol, perhaps disrupts its power.

Either way, with the shift ushered in with clothing and other symbols, different actions and ways of being become permissible in the same spaces. A queer first year I talk to tells me about being pushed around and stared at in the apartments on a Saturday night. *If that happened to me in Miller on a Tuesday afternoon, people would be furious, but in the Apartments, people just walk by; it's normal.* Dorms, spaces of rest, become the arenas for parties, for drinking. I talked to a first year boy who had sex in a booth in Foss dining hall one Saturday night. *My roommate had a girl in our room, so I figured, why not?*

The hookup becomes permissible with these shifts. One of the most striking moments of my research comes after I finish interviewing another woman on this campus. It's a Saturday afternoon and we meet in my office in the Anthropology wing. We talk for an hour, I ask her all of my questions, record the whole thing. As she's leaving my office, she pauses, turns around, and asks me *would you ever want to hookup with me?* The question floors me completely and it has nothing to do with this woman, it has everything to do with the space and the time. Hookups are not initiated in academic buildings. Hookups aren't initiated at 3 pm. It's not explicitly written anywhere, but I just *know* this. It's a set of rules I can feel in my body. Or, maybe, these are the rules for hookups in *hookup* culture. Afterwards, I'm left asking questions about what constitutes a hookup, or maybe about what constitutes a hookup that is part of hookup culture. There is sex that happens outside of hookup culture; sex between partners in a relationship is a good example. There is casual sex that happens outside hookup culture as well. I once slept with a close friend on a Sunday night. She'd come over to my room,

we had a conversation about our mutual attraction, and it just *happened*. In the months afterwards, we'd talked openly of the experience and it slowly wove its way into the fabric of our relationship. So, what makes a hookup part of hookup culture?

I know it can't just be the spatial and temporal aspects; I'd left parties on a Friday night with my girlfriend to have sex, and that wasn't part of hookup culture. It's not just the casual nature of it; some people will hookup for years and years and their sex remains hookup sex. I start asking around and I can't collect a single definition of what a *hookup* actually is from either my literature or my interviews. Maybe, in a hookup, you don't know each other. Maybe you're at a party and there's music and you're dancing. A first-year, Tanya, tells me about this: she looks around rooms, looking for someone, but no one in particular, but a guy. "Sometimes you just like the way someone looks," she tells me. Then, she gives them eyes (that's what she called it, *giving someone eyes*) and starts dancing. Sometimes, the guy she's been talking to without talking hears her very loud and will come over and dance with her, just come up from behind and start moving with her. Sometimes, he's shy so she says you have to smile more then, maybe get closer in the room. From there, if the dancing is good and fun and makes her feel sexy, sometimes she'll turn around and they'll start kissing in the middle of everything. Dancing and kissing. Sometimes, Tanya will ask him where he's headed after. Sometimes he'll ask first. Tanya mostly hooks up with first years, so they'll text roommates, asking for the room for the night, head to one of their dorms. Tanya said she didn't think people would expect sex the first time, but they do; someone always asks if there's a condom. She only said no, once, the first time, and she said it was kind of awkward. She says yes now. She doesn't usually do sleepovers, she walks herself home and sleeps alone.

It probably starts with a conversation with someone you kind of know. Jason tells me he knows he's going to hookup with someone if they've been talking for a long time at a party. He's drunk, she's drunk. Usually, he's met her before, but they're not close friends. But he knows her, or of her. Maybe she's been in one of his classes, maybe she knows his friends. This kind of flirting you can see across the room: hips turned towards each other and almost touching, girl standing on her tiptoes at times to say something into the guy's ear that he can't hear over the music, he's got his hand on her waist sometimes, maybe her hand is on his arm. I asked him how he knows when to ask someone to leave with him, and he said, *you just get a feeling*.

Maybe, the hookup starts with a text. You've probably hooked up before, if it starts with a text. Once, at a bar off campus, I made out with this senior guy. I knew him, from sight, from friends, from around. I had a class with him two years ago and always liked the way he looked, what he had to say. In the sway of the bodies downstairs, I had no idea how drunk he was, or how drunk I was. I remember using his shoulders to pull myself up to his ears (he was very, very tall) and ask him *do you want to leave here with me right now?* He nodded, we got upstairs, and he threw up on his shoes. I took him home to his room, cleaned him up, left my number on his dresser. Later that week, we got coffee. It lasted 20 minutes and he couldn't look me in the eyes, answered every question with as few words as he could. After that, I figured that was it. But, Saturday night, at 6 pm, he texted me *hey, are you going out tonight?* And I was shocked. Because he had nothing to say to me, but still reached out to hookup. I said *yes* and then he texted me again at midnight when I was back in my room and I invited him to come over. We didn't talk before we started kissing, I could tell I made him nervous, or something. I had to initiate everything and he was timid. Afterward, we said close to

nothing, and I told him I didn't like sleepovers. He said goodbye and kissed me like he knew me. None of that made sense to me.

I've been asking around, how people get other people to come home with them, to leave a party with them. I've collected: *where you going after this?* / *Wanna go back to my room?* *Where are you walking from here?* *I'm headed that way, I'll walk with you.* / *I've been learning this new song on my guitar, you should come hear it.* / *Wanna leave here?* / *Where do you wanna go?* / *Wanna go listen to this album (or watch this movie or see this whatever object) in my room?* No one's asking if someone wants to *go hookup*. Maybe it's because it's awkward to say, but I also think it has to do with rejection. There's no gray area with being direct, but if you ask *where you going after this?* And they respond, *I just wanna go to sleep* you can make your advance seem like general curiosity. Some invitations have less wiggle room than others.

Kathleen Bogle argues that the ambiguity of *hookup* is part of the appeal of the term: "individuals are able to share with others that they did something sexual without necessarily specifying what happened" (Bogle 2008: 87). Students can wield this vague term to shape their narrative of sexual encounters to their advantage. However, the myriad possibilities implied when a student uses the term *hookup* makes it extremely difficult to create sexual norms: "The fact that the *hookup* script allows for such a wide range of behavior leaves students grappling with the norms of the *hookup* script" (Bogle 2008: 93). Thus, without a clear sense of what is normal and what is not, students are left to guess and speculate about the realities of those around them.

Luckily, the practice of students living in dormitories or in close proximity to campus makes this speculation easy. This closeness serves multiple purposes. First, and perhaps most obviously, it puts students into close contact with each other; there are

always a wide selection of potential partners within walking distance. Remy tells me, *I never go out knowing who I want to hook up with, I usually just show up and see if anyone's cute.* From there, she tells me, it's easy. When I ask her how it makes her feel to approach someone she's attracted to, she tells me, *I mean, usually I'm kind of shy, and this sounds so dumb and cliché, but there's a reason they call alcohol liquid courage.*

In one interview, I ask a sophomore how many drinks he usually has on a night out. *I don't know, maybe 10 or 12 beers? Something like that.* I'm not going to take the time to do the math, but I am certain this would put his Blood Alcohol Level above the legal driving limit. But, he doesn't have to drive home. He just has to make his way down the hill from the Apartments to his bed in Hillside, an easy walk that even the most incoherent student can manage. I ask him why and he tells me, *I mean, why not? If I get hungry, I can go to the Spa and get food, if I get tired I can go to bed, if I meet someone, it's not hard to get back to either of our rooms. Drinking is fun and it's easy to do, so why not do it?*

Not only does this proximity make the actual hookup easier and facilitate the drinking that makes it *even* easier, but also it allows for peer surveillance and gossip, both vital parts of hookup culture. In fact, Bogle proposes that, "the pervasiveness of the hookup culture on campus may stem from the lack of privacy and the gossipy nature of life in college" (Bogle 2008: 59). Jenna tells me about this one time a girl she barely knew came up to her in the library to talk to her about a hookup Jenna had had the night before. It was early in the afternoon on a Sunday and Jenna had barely had time to tell her best friend about the hook up and this girl already knew about it. *How did you know? Did James tell you?* The girl replied, *well, not explicitly; I saw James walking out of East this morning looking like he'd been up all night and I know he lives off campus. So, I knew he'd hooked up and not that many girls that James would be interested in live in that dorm, so I*

guessed and asked him and I was right. Jenna's shaking her head as she tells me the story, *this would never happen in the real world.*

I ask a sophomore, Peter, about living in the dorms. He lives in a small dorm with a lot of friends who are also sophomores. *Sometimes, late on Saturday nights, I'll see guys who don't live in the dorm in towels in the bathrooms, washing their faces or whatever.* Peter tells me it's not hard to figure out which girl they're there to see. *You see an extra pair of shoes outside her door, you don't have to be a genius to figure out what's happening.* Sometimes, he tells me, he can even hear people fucking in the rooms next to or above his. He's learned to sleep through it.

As I ask around the stories start to melt together. The whole thing becomes extremely predictable. In fact, all of hookup culture seems extremely predictable, scripted. Just as one performs gender, one performs hookup culture. And I realize what makes up and defines these performances is *ritual*. It's the rituals (of dressing up, of going out, of drinking, of flirting) that make a hookup a *hookup*. These performances and rituals of hookup culture are not private. They are recognized and they are sanctioned collectively and reinforced through surveillance. The term performance implies an audience. Yes, I realize that the primary stages for these performances are The Apartments, parties on Friday nights, and Bar Night, but hookup culture has tendrils that reach out to other times and spaces on campus.

One of my favorite places to do fieldwork becomes the dining halls. A group of sophomore women sit at a long table in Dana. It's 11 am, it's Sunday morning. Some of them are still in their pajamas, little half-circles of mascara under their eyes. *What did you do last night? Did you have fun last night? Did you hookup last night?* The questions are met with giggles, with eye-rolls, with stories, always stories. *I made out with this guy Jack*

at the party in the hockey apartment last night. Or, I went home with this kid on the basketball team. Phones are out and the women are typing the names of the men into Facebook, Instagram (I think his last name is...) Sometimes, when the man's picture appears, he pulls a big response from the table *oh! I know him! I've seen him around. He's cute.* Sometimes, there is no recognition and the table moves on, without fanfare. Sometimes, when a man's name is mentioned, the Internet search isn't needed. These men are sometimes seniors, sometimes on the bigger name sports teams, sometimes they are just *known* around campus. When a girl shares that she's spent the night with one of these men, the table begins to buzz and the weight of attention on this girl gets heavier. *Oh my god! How? You are so lucky! Oh my god!* She's said something about herself to her friends without naming it, but so have all of the other women at the table, even the ones who went home alone the night before. All of it means something, without words.

In October, a friend who graduated two years ago comes back to visit. We drink wine together in my room and I tell her about my research. I ask her how she would define hookup culture. She responds, *it's the underlying idea that dictates a lot of weekend behavior that the goal, by and large, is to hook up with someone by or at the end of the night. People often conduct themselves in a way that suggests they know they're being watched, even if they've had a lot to drink; they know there's always the possibility of hooking up with someone, and they're both looking for people and aware of who is looking at/for them.* She tells me that it took leaving Colby and dating in New York to come to that definition. *It's not the same out there, she tells me, no one's watching you in the same way. No one knows you.*

The conversation makes me think of this one story I heard in an interview, from a white senior woman. She told me: *Freshman year, I was in the soccer apartment, and this boy was talking to his friends, and he was dancing against a wall and I was with a bunch of*

girls and he like grabbed my hips to dance with me and I turned around and his friend was like no, not her. And I remember trying so hard to be like fuck you and channel my anger. But I didn't really think about it because I was drunk at that point, but the next day one of my friends asked me if I was okay and it was when we talked about it was when I really got upset. If you're sober enough at these parties, you'll hear some fucked up, overt shit. The things people say when they think you aren't listening... like, oh, I'm trying for that girl but this other girl is trying to get with me, should I just give up and go the easy route? But, fuck, that other girl is so much hotter. I hear a lot of men describe girls by what they're wearing. Like, oh the one in the black shirt is so hot.

The whole thing is making me realize how much hookup culture is about watching and being watched. Kathleen Bogle discusses how aware students in her study were of being watched by others, especially as it related to their sexual lives. She argues that this fascination and obsession with others' lives is a core part of the college experience and hookup culture (Bogle 2008: 73). She believes that this is why so many of the rituals of hooking up, from flirting to leaving a party to talking about the experience with friends afterwards, are so public (Bogle 2008: 73). Hookup culture is a visible and public system. This idea reinforces C.J. Pascoe's belief that we should conceive of:

sexuality as an organizing principle of social life ... [and] not just the property of individuals. Sexuality, in this sense, doesn't just indicate a person's sexual identity, whether he or she is gay or straight. Rather, sexuality is itself a form of power that exists regardless of an individual's sexual identity...After all usually we discuss sexuality as a personal identity or a set of private practices. However, researchers and theorists have increasingly argued that sexuality is quite a public part of social life. (Pascoe 2007: 9-10)

Pascoe implies that there is more to desire than the sexed body. I have to believe; I challenge the idea that students on campus desire each other in a way that is

individually-informed and isolated from a larger system. I'm beginning to understand that what feel like personal standards and desires are actually shaped by the norms created through rituals of gossip and surveillance.

In his research on Balinese Cockfights, Clifford Geertz described culture as a collection of stories humans tell ourselves about ourselves (Geertz 1972: 267).

Analyzing hookup culture through the lens of ritual has helped me understand why students and researchers before me refer to this sexual system as a *culture*. I have come to understand hookup culture as the public way students tell themselves and others stories about who they are, where and how they belong through a visible system of rituals. And as I begin to identify and make visible these rituals for myself – rituals that extend beyond intimate rituals of flirtation, coupling, and sex – I start to see just how much is at stake in hookup culture. It encompasses not only public rituals which transform the meaning of spaces and that mark social belonging; but these are rituals that recreate and produce hierarchies of value relating to gender, race, and class. These are interactional rituals supported and facilitated by institutional rituals and reflected in the structure of the college and the wider society. All of this is kind of blowing my mind; I never thought I would come to understand hookup culture this way.

Questions about attractiveness

Sometime midway through the fall, I get lunch with a friend, another senior woman who is Jewish and white and dubious of hookup culture. A group of men on the lacrosse team walk in to the dining hall, all together. Almost all of them are white, some with long hair brushing their shoulders, most built strong and tall. *Men like that* she says *want to date women who look like their moms*. I laugh, at first, but she's serious. *Think about it*, she says, *they've grown up around women who are thin and white and WASPy and who are probably blonde and dress in whatever preppy brand is a step up from J.Crew*. I ask her, *so do you think it's about learned attraction?* She says maybe. Later, I bring up the idea with another friend who is Latinx and queer. *Oh, absolutely*, he agrees, *but it's not just about learned attraction. It's about practicing for what comes next, after Colby*. Immediately, an image comes to my mind. It's not from anything in particular, but maybe informed by movies, or the spaces I grew up in. I picture a dinner party, occupied by white men who work in finance and their wives. The wives are all smart, beautiful, blonde.

A week later, I hang out with another group of friends. They're talking about this off-campus parties that one of the frats held, some kind of social where you get dressed up and show up with a date. One of my friends is indignant. Apparently, there are these things called *courtesy invites* and usually the men in the frats give them out to their friends who spend a lot of time in the same social spaces. Usually, both men and women get these courtesy invites, but for this party the frat only gave the invitations to men. *I was literally sitting with two of those guys the morning of the party in Miller* she says, *I can't believe these men are fine with being friends with me in one situation but not another*. The only women who were actually invited to the party were the dates of the men in the frats, either their girlfriends or random women they asked. *It's so weird*, one says, *most of*

them invited first years they don't even really know. I know one guy who Facebook messaged a woman he'd never even met to ask her. I bet he just saw her running at the gym once and thought she was hot. Another friend chimes in and says, if you wanted to be invited to that space as a woman, you literally had to sell yourself.

This group I'm with is mostly senior women, mostly white. Some of them crashed the party, to hang out with their friends who have boyfriends in the frat. *It was so weird, one says, the party was full of all these younger girls who were not talking to anybody. A guy described them to me as houseplants; they weren't interacting with anybody, they were literally there to be fixtures.* I ask them about how these men decided which first year women to invite. The answer, my friends decide, comes down to hotness. *There's this one first year who's really big on Instagram and it was almost like she was a currency; so many guys invited her and she made the guy who brought her look good.* The whole affair, we decide, is weird. One friend interjects, *the courtesy invites are weird too, though. If we as women don't have the power to access the space unless it's given to us by men, of course it's gonna be weird.*

Before this conversation with my friends, I had no idea this party was even happening, or that it's a party that happens every year. I didn't even know that there were underground frats at Colby until I was most of the way through my sophomore year. It was never my scene. When I came to Colby, my best friend was a sophomore, deeply involved with the Frisbee team. His social life became my social life and I got pulled to another side of campus. Still, though, I wonder if I hadn't known him, would I have ever been able to be in those spaces, those parties? It's like my friend said, *If we as women don't have the power to access the space unless it's given to us by men, of course it's gonna be weird.* The frat gives out courtesy invitations to people they are close to. How do women become close to the frat? The way it looks to me is that, their first and

sophomore years, they're the dates of upperclassmen. They spend time in these spaces, start to belong, become familiar and friends with the frat members in their years.

But, how does a first-year woman get invited? It's about hotness, but what *is* hotness at Colby? Later, I look at photos of the party on social media. All of the women are thin, with really healthy looking long hair, in beautiful dresses. They are wearing makeup, but not so much it looks *unnatural*, most of them are wearing nice jewelry. They are almost all white. These women, in many ways, look like iterations of each other to me. It's not that their faces are the same, or even their complexions or hair colors, it's a feeling, highlighted by their uniform of dress, heels, bare legs. They are beautiful, but all in the same way. I think of myself, my first year at Colby. My body was much softer then, round but very strong. I didn't look like an athlete. I wasn't thin. My hair was long and a little wild and shaggy. I dressed in clothes I'd collected from thrift shops and markets in San Francisco and South America. I look back at myself and think I looked young, but I looked beautiful. I didn't look like the women who were invited to that party; we were attractive in different ways. I was beautiful, but not beautiful at Colby.

In almost every interview, I ask the student what they think is attractive at Colby. Most of them will start off with something like *oh, nice and fun and easygoing...* Vague words that really mean very little. No one starts out with physical attributes. When I press students to tell me what attractive at Colby *looks* like, almost every time, they answer *skinny, blonde, athletic, natural beauty*. They almost always answer as though I asked them what makes a *woman* attractive at Colby. Only two people take it a step further; a Jewish woman I interview tells me, *oh WASP for sure* and a black woman answers clearly, *almost without a doubt, you have to be white*.

Dorothy C. Holland and Margaret A. Eisenhart (1990) explore how attractiveness is conceived on college campuses. Holland and Eisenhart write “attractiveness is spoken of both as an *essence* of a person and an *effect* of another person.” (Holland and Eisenhart 1990: 102). While one’s physical appearance *is* part of what is taken into account when judging attractiveness on a college campus, it is not all of it. Attractiveness is something affirmed, something given to you by another person’s attention. In the same passage, the authors write, “one gains or loses attractiveness depending on the attractiveness of those whom one attracts and the treatment that one receives from them” (Holland and Eisenhart 1990: 102). Thus, attractiveness is inherently tied up in a fluid, public, and visible social system; it is located both in the body and outside of it.

Holland and Eisenhart also argue that, as attractiveness is fluid, beauty standards reproduce themselves: “women who have a reputation for being attractive and worthy of good treatment, are given the benefit of the doubt. What they do, say, and wear tends to be considered attractive, and thus they become more attractive.” (Holland and Eisenhart 1990: 103). The more a woman who is already considered attractive repeats an action, the more the action itself is seen as a marker of attractiveness. In turn, doing the action makes the woman more attractive. And, the more a woman deviates from a norm, the less attractive she becomes. It is a self-reinforcing system.

I go back and ask two of the friends who’d told me about the party how they think a woman becomes attractive at Colby. One of them says, *a lot of people at Colby come in knowing people involved in these scenes, usually from prep school, or summering on Nantucket or whatever. So, when a first year shows up and she has female friends already hanging out with a certain kind of man, she can more easily hang out with them too.* My other friend is on the

lacrosse team tells me she thinks it has to do with athletics too. She explains that being on a sports team as a woman doesn't give you capital necessarily, but it does put you in contact with male athletes, usually through formals and parties. But, she says, not all teams are ranked the same; women's soccer and lacrosse are considered to be the hottest. I ask her why. She answers, *the women on the teams tend to be attractive and cool. My whole time here, the seniors were so fun and cool and pretty, and then the prospective students who are similar to women already on these teams will come here on their overnights and want to be a part of that group. Essentially, the team attracts more of the same kinds of people.*

Both of them, without explicitly saying it, are talking about wealth and whiteness. It's a specific kind of whiteness and wealth, though, because I am white and wealthy and didn't fit the standard. When they talk about Nantucket and Prep School, they are evoking East Coast WASP whiteness. Do I not fit this whiteness because I'm Jewish? I'm both an Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jew (though much more Ashkenazi) and in many ways, I look it. My skin has green, yellow undertones. I have dark hair and a lot of it. I have a wide and soft body. Being Jewish positions me, and others, in this weird liminal space of whiteness. Ashkenazi Jews in the US became white in the aftermath of World War II as the country rejected Nazi's and their anti-Semitic politic. Whiteness expanded. However, Jews (and other groups) have, and continue, to hover on the margins of whiteness. I will never deny that I experience white privilege, yet I will also never claim that my experience of whiteness is the same as someone who is a WASP.

This is true in hookup culture at Colby. A close friend of mine, a white Ashkenazi Jewish woman, had a WASP man she slept with tell her she *was on the darker side of white*. When I asked another white Ashkenazi Jewish woman I interviewed how she thought her Jewish identity shaped how she could interact with hookup culture she

told me, *in a really fucked up and consumptive sense, sometimes it can work to your advantage. If you look Jewish in a certain way you can make yourself into a fetish, but a safe fetish because these men get that you are still mostly white.*

While college campuses in some sense represent bounded communities, they still exist within larger contexts. Sarah A. Spell (2016) examines race and access to hookup culture. In her research, Spell found that white students on college campuses have much more access to hooking up. She argues that racial homiphily is prevalent in all types of romance and sex and, since a majority of students on many college campuses are white, it follows that students of color tend to have fewer options (Spell 2016: 10). She also finds that in the United States, standards of beauty are determined by white phenotypes; “whites set the standard for sexual and beauty norms” (Spell 2016: 3). Students of color that Spell interviewed described how white students had a leg up with finding partners because both white people and people of color have been trained to desire white features (Spell 2016: 10).

But, it can't just be about looks. I know a lot of mediocre-looking white men who have success in hookup culture and some absolutely stunning WOC who can't even break into that scene. I think it's about power. I call a friend who graduated a few years back, Tyler, and ask her if she thinks that attractiveness at Colby is about power. She tells me, *For sure there's a Colby mentality of white and cis and straight and thin and wealthy, especially wealthy, being attractive. Wealth seems to be a major indicator of attractiveness. The ability to buy nice clothing, a gym membership or playing sports, to eat healthily, but also the sort of confidence and power that a lot of Colby students seem to possess is attractive. Now that I'm graduated, I am not necessarily personally attracted to these qualities, but because most Colby students have them, it was hard to avoid people that fit them altogether. There were so many*

people – even ones that I hooked up with – that were not nice people, not even good looking necessarily, but because they had this privilege and power, they were able to sleep with a lot of people. I begin to understand that attraction at Colby is about who is acceptable to desire, who will give you power if you desire them.

Questions about desire

There's a funny thing that happens when you study your own sex life; all moments render themselves open to analysis. Or, at least that's what's beginning to happen to me. At night, before I sleep, I mull over every flirtation, every rejection, every kiss. I try to link them into some coherent narrative, make sense of it all. In October, I start dating a woman. It's the first time I've feel the potential of what *could* be with someone; when I'm with her, it feels like something big and powerful is emergent. It's connection. It's care. She feels it too, and tells me so. But, a few weeks later, she ends things. *If I stayed with you, I'd fall in love. I can't do that.* The next week, she starts dating a man. I'm able to fill in the words she didn't say, which really are *I can't fall in love with a woman.* I write in my journal, *What's the range of possibilities for me to be sexual on this campus? What are my constraints?* What systems are at play? I try to parse it out; is this about me being queer? About me being Jewish? About me having such a strong and distinct personality? There no longer is a split between my field-site and my life. It's exhausting.

Driven by frustration, I download Tinder over Fall Break. I drive through Boston, Portland, accumulating matches. Some of them, I talk to. A couple of them, I meet up with. On a date with a Bowdoin graduate in Portland, he asks me *did you download Tinder for research purposes?* Really, I explain, *it's the opposite. I can't fuck on campus anymore without analyzing it.* What I mean to say is, I don't think anyone on campus is willing to sleep with me. On my date with this man, and the other dates I go on, the energy feels really easy. Not easy like *soul mate easy* (whatever that means,) but easy in that when I desire these people and they desire me, the next step is obvious; we hookup, maybe see each other again, maybe not. I feel like, outside of the confines of

Colby, I have the possibility of being read as attractive in a way I do not in the Apartments. I feel both less marked, and more seen. It's wild, nothing about my appearance changes; I am just as physically attractive on campus as I am off-campus. I realize it's not about my body, it's about what my body represents.

Holland and Eisenhart argue that attractiveness is something that exists both in and out of the body, both in the person being observed and the observer. It is something you can have but also can have taken away from you. Not having your attractiveness affirmed marks a woman in a public interaction as not attractive. Holland and Eisenhart argue that attractiveness is tied to social capital, but not in the same way for men and women. Holland and Eisenhart write that "men's prestige and correlated attractiveness come from the attention they receive from women *and* from success at sports, in school politics, and in other arenas. Women's prestige and correlated attractiveness come *only* from the attention they receive from men" (Holland and Eisenhart 1990: 104). While both Bogle (2008) and Freitas (2013) show that this has changed somewhat in the past decades, it still holds true that a great deal of a college woman's social status relies on her ability to attract men.

At Colby, I don't think that social status in all spaces is about attractiveness or the ability to attract. However, as I sit with it, I think it is more important than I want to admit, or at least in certain social spaces. I think back to what my friend said about being on a sports team benefitting women socially because it puts them in contact with male athletes. I think back to what my other friend said, about men controlling the social spaces. I think back, grudgingly, to the comparison of underclass women at a frat party to houseplants. It's clear to be in these social spaces as a woman, you have to make yourself attractive in a certain kind of way. But how is that kind of way decided?

I see it like this; all sex is a way to say something about yourself, a way of shaping subjectivity. Who you are attracted to, who is attracted to you, who you sleep with or don't sleep with all have some sort of identity meaning. But, the sex that happens in hookup culture at Colby is used to say *very specific* things about the self. Yet, I just find it impossible that everyone comes to Colby with the same ideas of what it means for someone to be attractive, that everyone comes in with such similar desires. Obviously, there is the influence of media and the homogenous nature of the community, but some of it has to be learned (or at least confirmed) here.

Debra Curtis (2004) discusses the social nature of desire in her research on sex toy parties. Curtis follows a tradition in anthropology and sociology in denaturalizing sexuality through demonstrating how it is constructed in response to temporal and physical location (Curtis 2004: 95). She asserts desire is social and that to view it as such disrupts the idea that desire is innate, or completely individual. However, she argues that this theory “does not occlude the individual’s subjective experience of desire. On the contrary, this project intends to chart how desire... in turn shapes sexual practice.” (Curtis 2004: 100-101) She continues to make the point that desire is a practice, that the lines between the physical experience and mental experience of sex are much blurrier than many would assume (Curtis 2004: 110) She argues that the connections between sexual practice, desire, and identity are socially created and fluid, rather than static and mediated by biology, and thus can only be understood within specific cultural constructs.

So, what's the Colby cultural construct and how does it shape student's experiences of desire on campus? I bring up this question, or some version of it, to a close friend of mine, Natan. He's queer, Latinx, and Jewish. *Last year, I'd go to bar night*

and every time these really fratty guys would come up and like, grab my ass or grope me, he tells me, and it wasn't in a public mocking of me being queer, it was very private, only at moments no one else would see. Even in the dining halls, sometimes, I catch straight men staring at me all of the time. I once made direct eye contact with a guy when he was doing it and he was so shocked he walked straight into a table. I used to think that maybe these men would grab me and stare at me because they had never seen someone who looked like me before... a lot of these guys are really WASPy, maybe they hadn't seen a brown person before. It took me a long time to recognize that these men were attracted to me, in a really fucked up way, but they were attracted to me. They just couldn't express it in a normal, healthy way. Masculinity is so fucked up.

The only way I can think to describe what Natan (and others, including myself) experiences on this campus is a kind of desire that those who desire him are able to police at times, but sometimes lose control over. But, why police desire? I propose a theory of *contingent desire*, based on Evelyn Blackwood's (2009) theory of contingent masculinity. Blackwood documented how tombois, a site-specific term for a female bodied transgender identity in Indonesia, performed different gender identities depending on their social context. While these tombois used male pronouns and performed a more traditional masculinity in some spaces, when around their families the same individuals would use female pronouns and often perform house chores done by women. Tombois do not understand this fluidity as contradictory; rather, this "maintaining family relations is as important as, and in fact structures, who one is" (Blackwood 2009: 468). Blackwood explains that the "the contingent self is neither bounded nor coherent but conditioned by circumstances, a process rather than an entity" (Blackwood 2009: 468). Contingent subjectivities, she argues, are relational to temporal, spatial, emotional, and logical contexts.

In a similar sense, I think that desire at Colby is shaped by “the material effects of particular spaces and gendered expectations “ (Blackwood 2009: 469). Social processes shape both what students understand as individual desire and which channels of desire are socially rewarded. Different people become desirable dependent on how they benefit those who desire them. Every time I try bringing up this idea with my straight friends, they tell me *Anne, I know who I want, I feel it in my body*. But, can’t desire that is felt in the body still be socially informed? I argue yes. Jane Ward (2015), in attempting to make sense of how straight-identify white men can have homosexual desire and even sex yet still identity as straight, offers up a new way to understand heterosexuality. She writes:

I conceptualize heterosexual subjectivity as constituted not by a lack of homosexual sex or desire, but by an enduring investment in heteronormativity, or in the forces that construct heterosexuality as natural, normal, and right and that disavow association with the abnormal, or queer, sexual expressions. This investment in heteronormativity is itself a bodily desire; in fact, I believe it is *the embodied heterosexual desire...* It is the desire to be sexually unmarked and normatively gendered. It is the desire not simply for heterosexual sex and partnership, but for all of its concomitant cultural rewards. It is a desire that people may well feel within their genitals. In sum, [my analysis] works from the premise that heterosexuality is, in part, a fetishization of the normal” (Ward 2015: 35)

I’m starting to think that heterosexuality is not just a fetishization of the normal but a fetishization of access to certain kinds of power and privileges. Adrienne Rich’s theory of compulsory heterosexuality helps further illustrate this point. She attests that heterosexuality is an important part of masculinity in the United States; in expanding on Rich’s theory, Wilkins explains that, “men use sexuality to create and challenge masculine identities... many young men achieve masculinity through the relentless performance of heterosexual success and dominance over women” (Wilkins 2012: 165). Consequently, when men are able to properly perform masculinity, they establish

themselves as different from women and gain gender-based privilege (Wilkins 2012: 167). In this sense, heterosexuality offers access to social power (Pascoe 2007:10).

Claiming a heterosexual identity and interacting with others through that identity paradigm can be understood as the most socially acceptable way of being sexual at Colby. Yet, making these claims does not work in the same way for heterosexual men and women. The social cues and cultural constructs that shape desire at Colby affect the genders differently.

In her research, Freitas observed that for men, hooking up was about quantity; the more women a man could hook up with, the more masculine and thus powerful he is (Freitas 2013: 107-108). In fact, she writes, “it seemed that hookup culture did not so much cater to heterosexual men and male desire as it did to male anxieties about living up to so much sexual expectation.” (Freitas 2013: 105). Pascoe found similar themes with high school boys. Even before these boys had entered college, they asserted, “if a guy wasn’t having sex, ‘he’s no one. He’s nobody.” (Pascoe 2007: 88) She observed these boys engage in a constant struggle to secure masculine identity. She looks particularly at boy’s use of the insult *fag* as a way of checking and enforcing masculinity. Her analysis “highlights the use of *fag* as a generic insult for incompetence, which to the world of River High was central to masculine identity” (Pascoe 2007, 57.) Essentially, she found that competence makes you masculine, and masculinity makes you competent. Men, both in the high school and college context, are competing with each other; no one wants to be the one with the least masculinity. The more a man can hookup, the more masculine he can prove himself to be.

I ask a senior guy I know about how the men he hangs out with talk about women. He tells me, *It started for me when I first came to school, you immediately get put into*

a space with a ton of men and right off the bat, it's like oh have you seen this chick, she so hot... or whatever. Just sorta exactly what you'd expect. It never really changes much unless you make the conscious effort to change it. That sort of conversation about women and hookup culture will sort of always continue. I go home with my 3 other roommates, who are all guys, and all of us are sitting around and conversation like that still happens and it's always sorta geared around a hookup but never the stuff after. I just think it's pretty hyper-masculine to be like I need to hookup with as many chicks as I can. I feel like that's such a hyper-masculine conversation that almost seems like it wouldn't happen, but it does. It happens all the time. The way he describes it to me, stories of a hookup work like a social currency; not only do they grant men access to these conversations, stories allow men to prove their masculinity. One of his roommates is in a relationship, he tells me, and sometimes the others call him *soft* all the time, like he's less masculine. *By being in a relationship, you're losing the ability to be in that conversation* he explains.

It's not just men who have the pressure to hookup, women experience it too. Women, however, cannot position their sexual experiences in the same way. Bogle found that women engaging with hooking up had to walk a very fine line of being attractive to men and being seen as too sexually promiscuous (Bogle 2008: 112). Women's interactions with sex are heavily peer policed; "for women who break the rules there are consequences... a label can overtake a woman's identity." (Bogle 2008: 112). Thus, Bogle found, if a woman talked too much about her sexual interactions, she ran the risk of her peers labeling her a *slut* or *whore* and ruining her reputation. While a woman can embody masculinity in hookup culture through "a form of dominance usually expressed through sexualized discourses," she will not be rewarded in the same way as men; in fact, she runs the risk of punishment (Pascoe 2007: 5).

In November, I go visit a friend, Gracie, who graduated Colby a few years ago. She lives in Boston, works at a job she actually likes. Because I find that I can't last very long without talking about this research, I bring up these ideas about the limitations on women in hookup culture. Gracie's in a relationship now with another queer person, but at Colby, she was really active in hookup culture. She laughs with recognition when I bring up the idea of punishing women for being too active in hookup culture. She tells me, *I generally found that people, mostly men, treated me as more of an object or a conquest than an actual human with feelings. I also was definitely very sexually active at Colby, and toward the end of my time there, I realized that people knew more than I thought they did. There was a stupid Facebook page called "Colby Confessions", which had a post once my junior year about me having sex with a lot of people. I also heard of people talking about me, either behind my back or to my face, about being a slut or having slept with a lot of people. I told myself I didn't care, but I realized that I was seeking validation and emotional intimacy through sleeping around. Because men treated me like something to be conquered, I treated them the same way in an attempt to feel equal. I basically began to act like a man in my sexual relationships: being aggressive in my pursuit of people (openly inviting people to come home with me, for example), hooking up with people's friends immediately after hooking up with them, hooking up with more than one person in a night, etcetera. This usually worked out for me, until I hurt people who I didn't realize cared about me until it was too late.*

What Gracie is saying without saying it exactly is that to be successful in hookup culture (and by that, I mean access social power) a person of any gender must, to a certain extent, embody masculinity. Yet, it's much harder for women than it is for men. Still, the need to embody this masculinity works to make hookup culture a competitive system, all about doing better and proving that you are better. The frantic

pace of competition facilitates and encourages the ritualized predictability of hookup culture but it also fosters hookup culture as a system in which, “students learn to treat each other as objects existing for the sole purpose of providing them a certain good, to be disposed of or put aside once they are done. Within a dominant culture of hooking up, it is normal- typical even- to use others as if they were without feeling or real value” (Freitas 2013: 15).

I start thinking back to the questions I was asking in September, about why there was so much bad sex at Colby. It’s starting to make a little more sense to me. I think about what, for me, makes sex good; trust, communication, care, comfort. I do not believe that you have to be in a committed or romantic relationship with someone to have this kind of sex, but I do think that this kind of sex is inherently emotional, vulnerable. Freitas argues that, for men, publically expressing that sex can be emotional is socially risky; men are encouraged to “repress their feelings surrounding their own vulnerabilities and need for love, respect, and relationship so intensely that we’ve convinced them that to express such feeling is to have somehow failed as men; that to express such feeling not only makes them look bad in front of other men, but in front of women, too” (Freitas 2013: 114-115).

One morning at breakfast, I bring my ideas about emotions, pleasure, and hooking up with a friend of mine, Joshua. He listens, and then says, *I know how fucked up this is, but after I sleep with a woman, and I mean almost immediately after, I start looking for reasons not to care about her. And I know that I am not the only guy who feels that way. And I know that women do it too.* Joshua is not a *bad* guy, whatever that means. He writes poetry, calls his mom a lot, keeps wildflowers in jars in his room. While I would have expected what he said to come out of the mouth of a man who was more, I don’t know,

traditionally masculine, I'm shocked that Joshua, this sensitive sweet friend of mine, said it. Later that same day, I tell my friend Miranda about my conversation with him. *Anne*, she says, *remember how all of last spring we referred to the guy I was sleeping with by a nickname? I did that because I believed if I didn't refer to him by his real name, I didn't have feelings for him. I literally tried to do anything I could to not care about him.*

But, why try so hard to not care? In her definition of a hookup, Freitas writes that an “apparent lack of emotional involvement” is intrinsic to the experience (Freitas 2013: 25). She continues to attest that allowing emotion to enter a hookup is a social transgression; to be unemotional and unattached is socially valued (Freitas 2013: 19). To maintain social power, students have to find ways to disconnect with themselves and have the kind of sex that is socially validated. In this vein, Freitas labels hookup culture as a culture of repression; “the repression of romantic feeling, love, and sexual desire, too, in favor of greater access to sex—and sex for the sake of sex” (Freitas 2013: 182). Students engage in processes of repression to have sex that is ultimately about identity and not about pleasure.

I see this, actually I *feel this* often with women on campus. This fall, straight women start hitting on me. I've had straight women flirt with me before, telling me *you're so cute, if I liked women I would totally be into you.* But, this fall, there is weight behind the words. One Friday, I go to this party, see a woman I kind of know. She's part of different social circles; she lives with all athletes, she wears J Crew. She sees me across the party and waves, excited, walks over. She takes my hand almost immediately, starts dancing, getting me to do turns like we are partners in a waltz. Then, suddenly, the feeling shifts. She starts touching my waist, looking at my lips and smiling. I feel it in my body that she is flirting with me but I can't believe it. *She's straight* I tell myself,

she doesn't want you, you are projecting. But, this woman moves closer and closer and soon one hand is on my waist, under the shirt just a little, and her face is so close our noses could touch. I have to ask her, *are you trying to kiss me?* And, she does, holding me at the back of the neck. She can't stop smiling. *Wow, she says, this feels so good.* For a second, I think I was having a normal queer experience. But, then the captain of the lacrosse team walks in and she stops, pulls away. It's like her face has melted, she's almost unrecognizable from the woman who was so happy just moments ago. We talk outside the party and she tells me *my friends and family would never understand* and *I think you're really strong* and *if anyone asks if this happened, I'm going to say it didn't* and when I remind her that she had kissed me in public she says *I'll say that I was really drunk.*

It keeps happening. Like the one time, this woman kisses me in a parking lot then takes me back to her room to make out on her bed only to tell me not to tell anyone because, she says *I can't have people who have known me my whole life think of me differently.* Like this one time, at a party of campus, a woman comes up to me, sloppy drunk, pushes me against a wall, kisses my neck, and confesses feelings for me but adds *I'm not ready to be in a relationship with a woman.* In November, a woman I've known for a while comes out to me as bisexual. *I've known since freshman year, but I still don't think my friends will understand.* In the next few weeks, our friendship grows. We hang out together with a larger group of queer students, and in those spaces she wears her sexuality like it's her skin; so core to the way she is able to be seen and move through the world. She speaks as if this is how she is always, everywhere. But, I see her out in The Apartments from time to time and that self is covered, still. She's part of this particular social corner of campus, the group of people who go to every off-campus

party. She's beautiful, a true *Colby girl* down to the athletic body and long, straight hair. She's white. She's wealthy. I'm saying she has a lot of social capital.

One night, we run into each other and, almost hidden, she pulls me aside. We go home together. Afterwards, she tells me she's seen the violence I've experienced from women on campus. *I'll never lie about being attracted to you, I'll never be ashamed.* And, in certain spaces, she keeps her promise; around other queer people, she's very open about it, almost to the point of using it to legitimize her bisexual identity. But, soon, I find out she's lied about it to her closest friends, the straight ones, the ones she goes with to every off-campus party. It's almost so expected that I don't let myself feel hurt, just tuck the story into my field notes. It begins to feel like I am conducting participant observation of my own body; I am going through the motions, but I am not fully a part. Let's be clear; this is a coping mechanism.

I think what hurts me the most is that I, like Natan could with the men who groped him, can feel that these women *do* desire me, or parts of me. Especially this last woman. Remember how I defined good sex before? Inherently emotional, vulnerable? I'm feeling coy about details, but this sex was that. Desire was very much present and very much acted on. But, why is it such an impossibility for this woman, these women, to identify as queer, to indulge their queer desire? I think back to how Holland and Eisenhart "men's prestige and correlated attractiveness come from the attention they receive from women *and* from success at sports, in school politics, and in other arenas. Women's prestige and correlated attractiveness come *only* from the attention they receive from men" (Holland and Eisenhart 1990: 104). And, I think about how publically identifying as queer on this campus has made me less attractive to men. Maybe, these

women are afraid of losing that access to social power. I won't ask them, but this seems to make sense to me.

But, why does being queer make me less attractive to men? I think it's because if hooking up, for men at least, is about proving masculinity through both how many people and who you hookup with, certain women make men seem *more* masculine. I think about the times that my queerness has made me more attractive to men on this campus. Usually, it's when I'm out, visibly hitting on a woman. I remember this one time, I made out with a woman at this party and after only about a minute, I looked up and there was a ring of men around us. Watching. Grinning. I remember this one time, I was flirting with another woman in the pub, and when she went to go buy another drink, this man I wasn't even friends with came up to me and asks *how would you feel about having a threesome?*

I think what made my queerness attractive to men in those moments is it was something that they could consume, hold, objectify. It was something they could get pleasure from. It was in moments they could perform masculinity in hookup culture through "a form of dominance usually expressed through sexualized discourses" (Pascoe 2007: 5). Yet, I don't think that this just applies to queerness. I think that performances of gender and sexuality in hookup culture intersect so much more with race, class, and religion than I ever thought they could.

Questions about access

Near the end of the fall semester I get coffee with a guy I know who is active in Hillel, Max. He's an upperclassman, very involved in the Jewish community at Colby and open about it too. He wears a Star of David around his neck some of the time. *I wasn't always involved in Jewish life here*, he tells me. Apparently, his first year and a half, he'd been part of a social scene that made him feel empty, unlike himself. *I didn't really talk about being Jewish, I didn't even really think about it.* He turned to Hillel in search of community. Since then, his social scene has shifted; he goes to less off campus parties, has different friends. I ask him if he thinks publically claiming his Jewish identity has made it harder for him to be in the social groups he used to be a part of. *It's not like they aren't nice to me, I still see those guys and we are super friendly and everything. But, I do think it changed my ability to access the same sort of masculinity. Think about it; how many straight men are actively involved in Hillel?* Thinking about it, I can't count many.

Our conversation makes me think back to what I observed about myself when I tried dating off campus; no matter where I go, my body is the same, but depending on where I am it is marked and read in different ways. Similarly, Max was the same Max, same body, before joining Hillel. But the possibilities for his body changed.

In this research, I have continually mulled over questions of what is *possible* and what is *impossible* in hookup culture, how people define that for themselves and how they interact with these norms. I borrow the term possible from Judith Butler, gender theorist, who claimed in her theory of gender performativity, following the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "not only that the body is an historical idea but a set of possibilities to be continually realized" (Butler 1988: 521). Both what a person can embody and how that embodiment is read by others are shaped and constrained by

historical conventions. Butler writes, “the body is a historical situation... and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation” (Butler 1988: 521). Different bodies have different historical situations to be reproduced, different possibilities and impossibilities. When I say different bodies, I really mean bodies marked differently because of race and I mean marked in a way that extends beyond beauty standards.

I take a constructionist approach to race, meaning that I understand that “rather than emerging from a scientific perspective, the notion, ‘race,’ is informed by historical, social, cultural, and political values” (Guess 2006: 654). I realize it is to paint an incomplete picture to look just at histories of black and white bodies for the research. However, I do believe that historicizing the creation of blackness and whiteness allows a larger contextualization of race and racism in this project. As Sharon Patricia Holland writes in her book *The Erotic Life of Racism*, “even though critics want to move away from a black/ white binary toward a more ‘open’ field of inquiry, the way in which we understand how racism manifests itself is through a black/white example that belies a very static, but necessary, repetitious reading of racist practice” (Holland 2012: 8). Teresa J. Guess (2006) argues similarly, claiming, “As a basic feature of social organization, ‘race’ in American society largely depends upon what we mean by *whiteness* and its significance in patterning social interaction and social organization between whites and non-whites” (Guess 2006: 656).

Western Europeans who came to the Americas in the 1600’s needed laborers to work the land for profit. They created the category of *whiteness*; a colonial strategy of marking which human bodies could do slave labor and which could not (Ward 2015: 25). Slavery, as a trade, turned the Black body into an object, a good, a disposable

resource. In his book *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*, Ronald L. Jackson II writes that, “this devaluation and objectification of Black bodies arrested any agency to define the Black self, but also intercepted any public valuation of Blacks as subjects” (Jackson 2006: 14). White slave owners assigned physical markers of “difference” to Black bodies to further the distinction between whites and blacks, using these corporal signs to dehumanize slaves (Jackson 2006: 16). Jackson continues to argue that “all the evidence concerning the maltreatment and exploitation of Black bodies points to an undeniable conclusion: it was during the period of enslavement that Whites developed many of their fears and anxieties toward Blacks, particularly towards Black males” (Jackson 2006: 16).

Sex and sexuality served as ways of policing and controlling the Black body. White slave owners scripted the Black male body as *hypersexual*, allowing them to castrate, otherwise mutualize, and kill black men to protect white women from black men (Jackson 2006: 18). The Black female body was also scripted as hypersexual, but also without agency; “enslaved black women were marked as undesirable objects for white men due to their primitive sexuality. These women, as the myth went, were so super sexual that they virtually forced white men into sex they ostensibly did not want to have.” (Miller-Young 2014: 9). Black women were at once repulsive and irresistible sirens to white men. At the same time, white men scripted the white female body as asexual and vulnerable as a method of further fueling fear of black men raping white women. (Ward 2015: 57) While the creation of the categories of black and white in the United States is rooted in slavery, race was not just constructed once; it is continually constructed and dynamic. Jane Ward writes:

Ideas about the difference between black and white sexuality, and female and male sexuality, were also used by whites to justify white supremacy in the

United States, with one consequence of this strategy being that white men were posited as the paragons of proper heterosexual agency. Whites defended racial segregation as a means of protecting passive and vulnerable white women from sexually violent black men, and, less commonly, from the corrupting influence of hypersexual black women. In this formulation, white male sexuality was left unmarked and unproblematized, visible only as that which was properly positioned vis-à-vis women. (Ward 2015: 57)

What I mean to say with all of this is that at Colby, in a system where men are constantly competing to be the most masculine, different men have different abilities to compete that are contingent on the historical situations of their bodies. It's not just about masculinity and heterosexuality, it's about masculinity and race. White male subjectivity has been normalized. I interview Nic, a black-Latinx swimmer and he tells me *I feel like a lot of guys I know have a lot of conversations about whiteness and class and hookup culture without actually talking about whiteness and class.* The way he explains it to me is that sports serve as a way of obscuring whiteness and class in conversation. *Think about it, the lacrosse and hockey teams have the most access to hookup culture. Do you see a lot of black hockey players? That equipment is expensive. Lacrosse player is pretty much just a filler term for white, wealthy, WASP, East Coast. Being on swim or track doesn't give you that same kind of capital because the teams are more mixed.* Nic tells me that a lot of his friends feel like a certain group of women on campus are off limits to them, *you know the really "Colby-hot" ones. We joke, you don't even have to be attractive to hookup with those kinds of girls, you just have to be a certain type of dude.*

What Nic says is in line with what I hear from Gabi, a white woman who graduated a few years back. While at Colby, she was in a relationship with a black man and said that she was constantly accused of having a "fetish" for black men. She tells me something that disturbs me deeply, *there's only a few women who are willing to hookup with black men and I don't say willing because it's a personal sacrifice but because there is a social risk*

of sleeping with anyone who does not fulfill the Colby norm. It can keep you from getting invited to parties, change the way people see you. Gabi continues, and tells me that she learned from conversations with her partner that, black men a lot of the time end up hooking up with women who they wouldn't hookup with outside of Colby because it's who they can access. I know it's misogynistic to use a numerical ranking system for looks, but you'll see a black man who would be a 7 in any other space hooking up with a white woman who is maybe a 4. The white women who are considered really attractive at Colby aren't usually going to hookup with them.

Gabi is arguing that white women can lose or gain social power based on whom they sleep with. And, while students may want to think about social power in terms of teams, frats, or other social spaces, what Nic says causes me to believe that so much of this comes back to race, to whiteness. This brings me back to Max and to Judaism. Max is white, an Askenazi Jew. However, he lost social capital when he began engaging with his Judiasm in a public way. This isn't surprising; "the popular notion that Jews embodied non-normative sexual and gender categories is long standing" (Boyarin, Itzkovitz, & Pelligrini 2003: 1). Jewish men have been socially viewed as "soft" or less masculine for centuries as a way of marking racial difference between Jews and non-Jews (Boyarin, Itzkovitz, & Pelligrini 2003: 2). What Max is experiencing is the ways that anti-semitism and misogyny have braided themselves together as a way of gate-keeping whiteness. I understand now that the more you can embody whiteness at Colby, the more masculine you are as a man.

It also means that different women afford men different masculine capital and that these women are only possibilities to certain men. I'd already been thinking about this in terms of queerness in trying to make sense of why it was such a transgression for some women to come out at Colby. But, now I start thinking about it in terms of race as

well. Just as Jewish men have long been feminized, Jewish women have been masculinized (Boyarin, Itzkovitz, & Pelligrini 2003: 5). Labeled as “sexual inverts” and “lesbians” Jewish women have historically been “characterized less for [their alleged] desire for other woman than by her transgression of womanliness” (Boyarin, Itzkovitz, & Pelligrini 2003: 5). I bring up this history with another queer Jewish friend of mine, and she says *well, I guess that makes sense why there are so many out queer Jewish women at Colby; people already think you're less woman or whatever so you have more space to transgress.* Even more extremely, thinking back to histories of whiteness and blackness, if black women were considered *Jezebels* and white women paradigms of feminine purity, wouldn't that mean that white women are better performing “womanliness” as dictated by a white supremacist society? I think yes, which is maybe why white women offer men more masculine capital in hookup culture.

In an interview with Keren, a queer black woman, I ask her what she thinks about the relationship between whiteness and hookup culture. She tells me: *Hookup culture is extremely white. But you can be successful in hookup culture and not be white. But you have to fit other standards that Colby has set. I've been so confused at Colby. I've seen the most gorgeous women of color get passed over by some of the most average men. But whenever I do see women of color who do fit more into the culture, it's often women who are white-passing and are really close to that ideal, or they're really skinny, or wealthy, or straight. Probably all of it. There are people who look more like me who try to deny their ethnic-ness and try to maintain their token status in white culture. A lot of times, those people can be really successful in hookup culture. Also men of color are so fetishized on this campus. Like, oh look at that hot black guy, come dominate me... This black guy who graduated last year who was objectively hot told me that after he would hookup with white women, they'd often tell him that oh you were my first black*

guy, I've always wanted to fuck a black guy. Some of them even made comments about his big, black dick. Why would you even say that? That's literally reducing entire black experience down to you just checking off some sexual box.

I bridge this topic with a close friend of mine, a black female athlete involved in very athletic-heavy spaces. She used to be very involved in hookup culture, but hasn't hooked up with anyone in a long time. She tells me, *Hookup culture made me feel... I don't think I fully realized it at the time, but now that I have more perspective I realize I felt very objectified. Definitely way more objectified than I would let myself feel; I just tried to pretend like it wasn't happening. I felt like there was nothing I could do about it, and I was attracted to these guys and having good times with them, so I was just kinda like, whatever. But, I found out that this guy I was hooking up with and his group of friends were calling me my freshman year, and maybe my sophomore year, an African princess and shit. That's what they called me in their locker room talk.*

All of this is making me realize that subjectivity is not just how we understand ourselves. It also helps illuminate the seemingly-invisible structures that shape how we understand ourselves. In his ethnography *Vita*, João Biehl refers to a definition of subjectivity by Frantz Fanon. Biehl writes, "from Fanon's perspective, the locus of imperial control is not necessarily the political and economic institutions of the colonizer but the consciousness and self-reflective capabilities of the colonized" (Biehl 2005, 16.) What Fanon is arguing is that colonization, control, domination; these all exist inside of us as ways of thinking. *We* are the dividing practices, *we* embody these structures. This is why it is so important to study not just individual voices but the social, cultural, and historical context from which they are speaking and living. It is not just because these contexts shape the voices, they are, in some ways, the voices.

I'm starting to think this means that who is able to have more *control* over their experiences in hookup culture, have more options, is completely historically formed. Some people can access self-subjectivity and others, like the man Keren described and my close friend, become a sexual box to check off. Students who aren't the Colby ideal have to reshape themselves to fit that ideal if they want to be in certain social contexts. But, even women who fit the Colby ideal have to, in some sense, battle each other to be in these social spaces.

Around early January, I have a conversation with a guy I know, Henry, about something called *the X*. Imagine it like this; first year women come in as the "hottest" women on campus, first year men come in as the "least desirable." But, as time progresses over 4 years, the women lose attractiveness and the men gain. At some point, they cross and are equal, but by the end, senior women are at the bottom and senior men at the top. If you draw it out, the whole thing makes an X. What Henry is saying is making me think back to what my friend Cate said to me in September; *men on this campus want to sleep with the kind of woman who looks like she's not gonna make him go down on her*. How does this desired complacency intersect with of class year? I wonder to what extent it has to do with ideas of women on campus being more "woman" the less that they voice their own ideas and desire, outside of the classroom that is. This, certainly, is in line with what I heard from Keren involved in activism on campus. She said, *women here are more attractive when they are quiet. I think having a voice on this campus makes you "less hot" because people are intimidated*. This also makes me think about why bad sex is so prevalent and so important; maybe people here are looking for the most blank slates against which to project desire, the most unmarked people so that they can consume one another, move on. Underclass women are less likely to know themselves,

just by virtue of time. I think of how much I've grown since I started Colby, the ways I have come to understand who I am and what I want. The ways I have come to know how to ask for what I want. Maybe, this too, makes me less attractive here.

Henry tells me this story about this group of senior girls. *Apparently*, he says, *these women don't let the freshman girls go to bar night, and if they do, the seniors attack them. This is all hearsay, but I heard this from a sophomore girl who was like, yeah, we don't want to go because these seniors are so mean to us. The whole idea is that these seniors don't want the younger girls hooking up with the older guys.* And I get why; it's because women want to be in these social spaces. But, honestly, I know from personal experience that this kind of competition is exhausting, useless, and ultimately just harms me. Why do it?

Judith Butler, in her theory of performativity, asserts “gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (Butler 1988: 531). In hookups on campus, I recognize now that there is a pleasure in sex that is not sexual pleasure. There is the pleasure of performance. Freitas notes in her work how “girls learn very young how to be desirable—to *look* hot, to *dance* sexy, to *talk* dirty” (Freitas 2013: 92). She argues that being desirable to men is a key part of female gender performance. Pascoe noted similar trends when working with high school girls; she found “girls’ popularity, for the most part, depended on successfully navigating masculine approval mechanisms. They received admiration and popularity by confirming heterosexualized gender identities encouraged by school rituals and traditions” (Pascoe 2007: 162). The girls she observed defined their sexuality in relation to the desire and practices of the boys around them. Pascoe employs the term *bargaining with patriarchy*, first coined by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988), to describe how women negotiate social situations that are ultimately shaped and controlled by men and masculinity.

Women bargain with patriarchy “by submitting to sexist social institutions and practices to gain other forms of social power” (Pascoe 2007: 105). But, what does this social power give you? What does it give anyone at Colby?

I ask this question, or some iteration, to a white senior guy I know. He tells me he thinks it comes back to networks. *I think an idea of a network is partially what drives this hookup culture, it's all about expanding your network. You hookup with a girl and it's one of the first things you think about, and it shouldn't be. Who cares what that girl, or you, have done with other people, it should be about I'm hooking up with you because I'm interested in you. And I think that it's this desire to be hooked in to this system of webs, the right webs.*

I realize he's not the first person to have talked to me about webs, or social webs at Colby. My friend Lily tells me she's heard about this map from a couple years back. It was a visual charting of hookups on campus. *There were little clumps, she says, the athletes all linked up to athletes, the rugby team had it's own mess, and so did the outing club.* Lily's very involved in the COC, and COOT and when I ask her to really think about it, she tells me she's only hooked up with people who are also involved in those social spaces. *I'm not unique in that, though, she tells me, I guess it's kinda insular.*

I heard a similar story from this girl, Sara. Sara's been on the soccer team her 4 years at Colby. I ask her if she has ever hooked up with the same guy as a teammate. She tells me it happens all the time. *We call it being connected, and on my team tons of people are connected and we laugh about that. One time last year, when we were all drunk, all of the other girls on my team and I drew out a web on this poster board and connected everyone. We thought it was so funny.*

I remember, last year, sitting in Foss with my friend Lyla and drawing out a web for ourselves. It started on the back of a napkin but soon it was too big and we

transferred the chart to a piece of notebook paper. Our web was all of the hookups (and relationships) we could think of between queer women and femmes on campus. Each person became a name in a circle, ready and able to be connected to another name in another circle with a pencil-drawn line. Sometimes, straight women or straight men would make their way onto the page. Lines became stories, *I totally forgot that Mary hooked up with Anna sophomore year at Drag Ball. Yeah, they fucked in the balconies above Page.* Certain circles began to sprout lines again and again; we called these women *hubs*, a woman who graduated two years ago still won the page for most hookups. Lyla and I soon realized the web is almost only made up of white people. *There must be a queer POC web we don't know about*, I said. I liked the look of my little circle on the page, looking like a tiny sun with rays coming out of it, connecting me to other circles and on and on.

By being desirable to specific people, you can hook yourselves into social webs. Belonging in these social webs allows students to further cement the ways they understand themselves, legitimize their narratives. But, I think it's more than that. The more people you are connected to in these social webs, the more people you know and the more people *know* you. It makes being in the social spaces associated with these webs not just easier, but possible at all.

Questions about belonging

It's the beginning of the Spring Semester and I'm starting to sink pretty deep into a depression. I know it has something to do with my research, but I can't name how. I wonder if it's because the stories I have collected are heavy and full of hurt. In an interview, recently, a white woman tells me about this thing that happened to her. She uses that term, *a thing that happened*. Her story goes, *I was at this party and I just got really drunk, and it was an off campus house, and um, this freshman and I, I guess, just started making out, and he, we, we went upstairs. And, my perception of the night was, I guess, I got a little messy this night... my perception of the night was that we just went into different rooms and made out, but I didn't realize that we actually had sex until he texted me the next day after we saw each other in Foss*. The next interview, with another white woman, I hear about this time a guy cornered her into a closet in the apartments and made her perform oral sex on him. *I was crying the whole time she tells me he didn't notice, or if he did, he didn't care.*

I wonder if the depression is because all of this is constantly forcing me to re-enter my own experiences of violence, but in new ways. I'll say it plainly; I've been assaulted twice on this campus, both by close friends. Both were "nice guys," the kinds of guys with good reputations. I didn't think either one was capable of what they did to me and so I didn't believe my own body for months after the experiences happened. Or, I wanted to but couldn't. The morning after the first assault, I talked to a close friend of mine, a guy named James. I told James, *I think something weird happened with Kyle last night, my skin feels like it's lifted from my body*. All James said was, *didn't you sleep with someone else on Friday night? Honestly, Anne, I feel like this is what you get for sleeping with two men in one weekend.*

I say that this thesis has forced me to re-enter this violence in new ways because I'd already processed the body-hurt of these experiences but didn't want to contextualize them. Yet, in writing this paper and thinking about hookup culture as a system, memories from those nights bubble up in new context: how I found out later that Kyle had sexually assaulted another queer woman on campus in a nearly identical way and how he was ashamed of the fact that his mom was a lesbian. How the second man, drunk, whispered into my ear *I am going to fuck you so hard that I fuck you straight*. Hookup culture (because, yes, assault is part of hookup culture) is a system, rooted in larger systems, but enacted through and embodied by individuals. And what I experienced was embodied homophobia, embodied misogyny. Violence acting through one body onto mine.

Contextualizing these assaults makes me realize how often I feel this embodied violence. Even returning to the experiences I have had with straight women on this campus, I realize that these too are moments where I am reminded of my difference. Where I feel in my body that I do not belong. Where I feel in my body that it would be easier to change. I feel this, often, about being Jewish as well.

For research, I go to my first off-campus party. In the ride over, I tell my friend *this is going to be so awkward for me, no one is going to want me there. It's not my scene. I'm too queer*. But, when we arrive, the awkwardness fades fast. I am surprised at how many people I knew there and how many people knew me. Somehow, I am deep enough in that social web to be there. All around me, people dressed in clothing appropriate to the theme are taking photos of themselves, uploading them to social media. Everyone is trying to figure out as many ways possible to show that they were here. Everyone is trying to show that they belong.

I won't lie; I have fun at the party. It is fun to be there and be seen being there. I feel, I don't know if popular is the right term, but something like *powerful*. But, I think about the obsessive documentation happening around me. Belonging takes work, it takes constant performance. Repetition of rituals. People show up, give the big hellos, hug the right people. They stand by the keg for the right period of time. They are wearing the right clothes. They are the perfect amount of drunk; obviously altered, but not too sloppy. Yet, you can still show up, repeat rituals, and still not belong. Another friend of mine came to the same party. She tells me, *I stayed for 15 minutes. I felt like I was going through the motions of being there, but I still felt like I shouldn't be there. Like I wasn't good enough to be there, which is some bullshit*. In this sense, belonging is contingent on those most embedded in the web allowing you to belong.

At the party, straight women come up to me and flirt, heavily. I see men watching from the sides looking hopeful for something to happen, maybe for us to kiss, undress. I think back to what my friend said to me, months ago, about how *if we as women don't have the power to access the space unless it's given to us by men, of course it's gonna be weird*. It hits me that, while I may be liked and welcome for other reasons, to some extent my ability to be in that space comes down to my queerness, just as my ability to not be in spaces has come down to my queerness. It depends on how it benefits those most embedded in whichever space.

I understand now that this is why hooking up, hooking yourself into spaces is so important. The deeper in a web you are, the more you belong. The day after the party, I am mulling over these ideas in my room. There's a knock on my door. I open it to George, a friend who lives in a nearby building who stops by every now and then. I make us both some tea and I ask him how his weekend was. *Fine*, he tells me, *I didn't*

really do much. I find myself asking the questions I always ask people about their weekend, *where were you, did you go to Bar Night?* He tells me he didn't, that he didn't really go out. Our conversation turns to ideas of belonging, being in spaces. I tell him about my theories of showing up to rank, showing up to show you belong. *It's hard to show up if you can't afford to show up. Honestly, Anne, I didn't go to bar night because I didn't have 10 dollars to spend on a drink. People just assume I can go, but most of the time, I can't afford it.*

It takes so much to get into these spaces to just show that you belong. Some people don't even get to the rituals of belonging. There are many students at Colby like George, students for whom going to bar night, or paying for a taxi to an off campus party, or even having the right clothes is not a financial possibility, whether or not belonging to these spaces is a priority for them. Benny, a junior white man I interview, tells me that he thinks at Colby everyone tries to pretend that they're from the same social class. *So many people say that they are upper middle class, but there's a huge range. Technically, I think I count as upper middle class in the context of the country but I'm still on financial aid. Yet, you have these kids who come from much, much wealthier families who just want to pretend like we come from the same exact kind of background.* And, pretending like you come from that background of wealth is a socially powerful thing to do. Benny says, *You can hide class to a certain extent. Save up and buy yourself a Barbour coat or something; that automatically changes the way that people look at you.* In this sense, you can belong in these spaces as a non-wealthy person by mimicking wealth performance.

In February, a group of men living in two apartments send out an invitation on Facebook. The invitation is for an event they are calling *The Great Migration*. The description of the event begins: *deep in the heart of Africa, the sun sets over the Serengeti*

plains and beasts tired from a day of hunting and doing other animal activities seek nourishment on the banks of a watering hole... The men invite party-goers to dress as animals or explorers, warning that *only the strong will survive the trek*. A screenshot of the invitation circulates around campus and many students publically voice dissent and disgust for the event. One white woman writes, *we noticed the racism, and we're calling it out. This event glorifies the horrific colonization of the Congo and the genocide of Congolese people, continues the racist exotification of African countries, and shows extraordinary insensitivity to the violence faced by people in the region caused by white "explorers."*

I call my brother, who studied history at another college, and read him the invitation. He stops me after the name of the party. *How do these men not know what the Great Migration is?* Six million black and African American people moving out of the rural south in the first half of the 20th century and none of these men have heard of it. My brother assumes, like I do, that these men must all study the sciences, that they have no academic background in colonization or US History. We agree; this doesn't excuse their racism, but it does help make some sense of the blatant ignorance. Later, I find out that some of these men are history majors, are in the global studies department. I have a friend who took an African Politics class with one of them. It's Black History Month.

For a week, maybe less, the spaces I move in on campus are buzzing open. Splits occur; people who stand with the guys (*it's just a party theme, it's not even that racist, they're good guys*) and those who stand against it (*it doesn't matter, yes it is, it doesn't matter*). I hear one of the guys has been throwing up from anxiety; *he feels really guilty*, my friend tells me. Soon, the buzz stops, the event stops holding weight in most spaces, the campus

floats forward. Some people though, stay sticky with the violence building up, layering on.

Around March, all I can think about is this idea of *belonging*, of what it means to feel at ease in social spaces. I start asking people questions about what belonging feels like. All of these white people are talking about subtleness, about feelings in the stomach, or a shift in easiness in being. I ask a black friend, she tells me a story. *The other weekend, some other WOC and I went to a party in the Baseball apartment. It was pretty low-key. We decided to get up and dance on the tables, we'd seen some other girls do it before. We get up there and we are feeling ourselves, having a good time. But, after about a song, I look up and I realize there is a ten-foot empty space around the table; people had backed away from us. This party was crowded, there wasn't room for empty space like that.* She finishes, *sometimes you just fucking know a space isn't for you.*

I think it is after this conversation that I begin to understand how much of hookup culture comes back to whiteness. Yes, I've been thinking about whiteness and race for months now, but not in the right ways, or maybe in ways that only began to brush the surface. Yes, it's about beauty standards. Yes, it's about the ability to be sexual and define your own identity. But, I realize what's been missing from my thinking is the understanding of whiteness as a power that can exist outside of the body. Ruth Frankenberg (1993) discusses how white people view whiteness and white culture as “amorphous and indescribable, in contrast with a range of other identities marked by race, ethnicity, region, and class” (Frankenberg 1993: 82). She argues this is white delusion, a tool of white supremacy.

Looking around Colby, I start to see whiteness everywhere. It's not just the white bodies. It's the pearls worn to the gym with Lulu Lemon brand leggings. It's the

Canada goose jacket with L.L. Bean boots. It's the omnipresent *oh you summer on Nantucket too? Which part?* It's in the food in the dining halls, it's in the kinds of intelligence and speech we value in the classroom. We live in a "cultural and social system that [valorizes] whiteness: white superiority, white ways of doing things, and white standards of success" (Besteman 2008: 165). Whiteness feels invisible because it has been normalized; this is part of its power. But, does whiteness feel invisible to everyone? No. I think about what my friend said; about *sometimes you just fucking know a space isn't for you*. What she said is almost exactly in line with something Keren, the black queer woman who talked with me about the fetishization of black male bodies told me. She had this story, *I had this one white guy friend who invited me to some ski thing. I go into this party and it is all white people, all these white bodies. The lights were on for some reason and all of these people were grinding really weird. And I just knew "I gotta get out of this place"*.

I think about my research process, about the ways I have asked questions. I've tried to be vulnerable in the process, both in my learning and in my writing. In some ways, it is radical for me to share so openly; as a queer person, as a gender queer femme, as a Jew. These parts of myself have shifted the way I am able to live in the world, have shifted what I have seen and felt. They have opened me to violence, and to love. But, I don't believe I can unbraided parts of myself; we move through the world in bodies, marked and unmarked to various degrees. Yet, hookup culture is a system that works through, is enacted by, and embodied by individuals and individual *bodies*. It is a web, but it also feels and looks different in different bodies. My body is my body. Only I can access the embodiment I have experienced.

I think about the violence I have experienced from straight women on this campus, how objectified and consumable I felt every time I was used as someone's experiment, every time my sexuality was treated as disposable. Yes, that is violence. I felt, and feel it, in my body. Heavy. It changes the way that I interact with people, with spaces. Yet, when I asked Keren whether she had had similar experiences with women on campus, she told me, *I feel like I am too intimidating to be someone's experiment. That comes from me being black, being tall, being expressive, having a big voice on campus. I don't blend in at all. For a lot of people, that's not something they want to engage in.* Both Keren and I are experiencing homophobia, but in markedly different ways. The homophobia Keren is experiencing is braided with racism. I'm spared from that.

I understand so clearly now that the questions I ask are completely shaped by how I have been able to move through campus. And, while I move through this campus as a queer, gender queer femme, Jew, these are not the ways I am primarily read. I am white and I am wealthy. Both of these positionalities allow me an ease in many spaces around campus. I have grown up with the ability to move with the smoothness of an unmarked body. In the United States, whiteness is the normal against which all else is marked. Regardless of my gender and sexuality and religion, this campus was created to serve people like me, people who are white and wealthy. Because of this ease, I am blind to so much that happens, both on this campus and off. What questions did I not even know how to ask? What kinds of questions could I ever have been able to ask?

There's something I can't stop thinking about. I said I was sexually assaulted by two men, two close friends. What I didn't say is that one of them was an alumnus, back for a visit, and the other is a student currently enrolled. What I didn't say is that I am extremely open about my experience with the alumnus. I have cut him out of my life. I

have written about my assault online, in published poetry, in conversation. I use his name. I want people to know what he's capable of doing. What I didn't say is that I still socialize with the enrolled student who assaulted me. What I didn't say is that I still let him hug me when I see him out. What I didn't say is that I haven't made this assault public. I'm not going to try to weigh the impacts of these two assaults, try to measure which hurt me more. They both hurt, a lot. That's enough. So why be public about one and not the other? I realize, sadly, that it comes back to belonging. To social power. This one white Junior guy I talked to said to me, *if you spoke up every time you saw something fucked up happen here, you would have no friends. It's easier to just move on.* This parallels something that Cate, a white senior woman, told me in an interview. I asked her what she thought made someone successful in hookup culture. She told me, *to be successful, I think you need to be able to pretend like you don't care. Like a lot of people say that you need to be easy, but I don't think that's it. I think you just need to appear to be someone who is not going to make it a big deal.* The more you push back against these systems, the less you can belong in the spaces, the less social power you can access. Not going public with my second assault allows me to move through campus easier, smoother.

About a month after the Great Migration party, I'm still trying to process the event, or maybe I am trying to process my culpability in that event. I have lunch with Jessica, a white female friend of mine. I'm not friendly with the men who made the invitation, but I am a friend of friends of theirs. *Are these men going to be held accountable? By whom? How? Shouldn't they have known better?* We ask these questions to each other. We have no answers. *Why not us? Why not earlier?* I start thinking about how I feel in social spaces at Colby, how I feel homophobia and misogyny and anti-Semitism layer up on me without speaking out as much as I could. I guess I'm trying to say that I always

knew that I was facilitating spaces that were violent to me; I felt it in my body. But, how could I have not seen that regardless of how much I engaged with race and class in the classroom, I was facilitating racist and classist spaces? I raise this question to Jessica and she responds, *It's so incredibly crazy that on this campus, I will literally have conversations in classes with men who I know assault people. In class, these men express this knowledge and a level of critical thinking, and then I see them in the apartments and it's like they've never learned a thing in the world. I do it too. I just turn off the analytical part of my brain because it's easier and it would hurt too much to think about the insanity that goes on on campus.*

In that moment, I realize, to some extent, it comes back to choice, to the body. Even if a white student is studying race theory (or a straight student studying queerness, or a wealthy student studying class) in the classroom, they still don't have the embodied experience of the violence. They can choose to see it, or not to see it. But, it will never be violence against them. Looking back through my research and my field notes, I realize that there have been so many moments where others and I have been *speaking whiteness* without talking about whiteness. I realize that every one of my questions that has brought me to where I am has been centered around whiteness, around white experiences. There is so much that I will never know, and can never endeavor to know.

In an interview with C.J., a queer Latinx underclassman, I ask him whether he is happy at Colby. He tells me, *going into Colby, I had a very upbeat attitude, but when the school year started I was just like, oh... Then as the school year continued I felt this something, it was more than homesick, but I don't really know how to describe it. It's hard being on campus. You can't leave campus. I feel like everyone on this campus is constantly performing for someone else, like trying to show that they are putting their best foot forward. But everyone does that*

differently based on things that they can't control. POC perform it differently than white people. I feel like POC have to try harder or, just marginalized people just in general have to try harder to receive that emotion or feeling that they feel like they belong here.

It's not even that whiteness makes you more attractive, or allows you more social capital or that it allows you to hook yourself into different social webs. Being white means you don't experience racial violence. Being white means you can interact with whiteness as "amorphous and indescribable" (Frankenberg 1993: 82). Being white means you can live an unexamined life in a white supremacist system. I've already said it again, and again; the less you can feel in this system of hookup culture, the easier it is for you to move through. Being white in hookup culture at Colby means that you *experience embodied violence* less so you don't need to speak up as much. It's a white blindness. To be successful as a POC in hookup culture, you have to assimilate into that blindness. But, no, it's not a becoming blind, it's a staying quiet.

Much of what I see and have seen for this research is because of the intentional choice to look, not because it is something that I have experienced in my body. There are spaces on this campus and in this community that I could access easily because of my whiteness and wealth, and others that I could not access really, at all. In so many ways, Colby is a segregated campus. There are kinds of violence, namely those rooted in racism and classism, that I will never experience. And, even if I see or hear about them, I will still process the violence through the lens of my own experience, through a white, wealthy body. In many cases, I will be on the other side of that violence, a part of a community that allows this violence to occur.

And, in that moment, my return to depression makes more sense. Doing ethnographic work of my own everyday life has been a mind-splitting experience. The

way I see rooms around me, my own body, my own actions and words and thoughts, has shifted. It's like suddenly, there are a million little strings coming from everything, connecting to everything. I recognize that the series of questions I have been forced to ask of myself and the spaces around me are questions that some others already have to ask. Maybe the clearest way to say this is that I started asking questions that I never had to ask because I am white, because I am wealthy. It's been a bursting open of my subjectivity, a shift in how I understand myself and my impact. I think, really, at the root of this depression is a waking up to the world that I have always lived in. A world that I have been blind to in many ways. A violence that I have been complicit in without feeling.

There's a quote that I keep coming back to, from *The Heart of Whiteness* by Robert Jensen. Jensen is white, he wrote the book for other white people to help them grapple with their whiteness. He writes,

Somewhere down in our guts, we understand that in an oppressive system such as white supremacy, the unearned privileges with which we live are based on the suffering of others. We know we have things because others don't. We may not want to give voice to that feeling, but it is impossible to ignore it completely. And it doesn't feel good, in part, because to be fully human is to seek communion with others, not separation from them, and one cannot find that connection in which unjust power brings unearned privilege. To be fully human is to reject a system that conditions your pleasure on someone else's pain (Jensen 2005: xx).

I won't lie. I am ashamed. I feel guilt. Neither are productive emotions when left alone but they can be catalysts. This whole year, I have been trying to make sense of how the ritualized nature of hookup culture obscures the social processes and larger systems that inform students' desires and in so many ways, I have failed in my ability to see beyond myself, beyond my whiteness. Again, I won't lie. For almost half of this year, I thought I was the one being wronged. And, in many ways, I am. I have experienced

violence, violence that straight white women on this campus will never feel. At the beginning, I think I was asking questions about pleasure because the sex I was having in hookup culture made me feel unseen, unimportant. It was a dulling of connection. To use Jensen's terms, I wanted to feel fully human. I thought I could do that by embedding myself more in the system, by fucking more socially powerful men, by becoming more attractive, by beating the system. Yet, Jensen argues "to be fully human is to reject a system that conditions your pleasure on someone else's pain" (Jensen 2005: xx). Literally, my *pleasure*, my sexual pleasure is contingent on a system that further perpetuates white supremacy.

To pull it all together, in a lot of ways, this thesis is a call to white women, especially white straight women. While I do not identify as straight or as a cis-gender woman, I still loop myself into this category of white woman because of the way that my body is perceived on campus. I've spent all year shifting through their stories, our stories and I have seen experiences of violence, often terrible violence. Yet, there is also extreme silence. There is a fear to speak up for ourselves and for others. Look, I'm not trying to argue that the blame for all of the violence that is a result of hookup culture falls on white women. No. This is a system, we are merely a part of it. However, we can and have to do better. We are centering our own narratives, not questioning beyond our own embodied experiences. There is an imperative to think beyond the self, to understand our own culpability.

There's something I hear all of the time from other white women that usually goes something like *George is kind of racist (or involved in an organization that puts Xanax in the punch or may have sexually assaulted someone or isn't nice) but there are so few men to fuck, so I'm gonna fuck him anyways*. I say it too. We think that by sleeping with men who

do violent things, we are only hurting ourselves. This isn't true. All of our actions within this system have a larger impact. Foucault writes, "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 1975: 95). To resist, push back, disrupt the system, we shift where power sits, we shift even our culpability in violence. This is not a call for some kind of white savior action, but a call to reflect. *What am I not seeing? What do I not see because of my body?*

For me, this all comes back to what my professor said to me, this fall: *You students think it's about you, but it's not about you. Or, it is about you and it's also about something bigger than you.* In finishing this work, I come back to the night last April that sparked this whole process. That night where I sat, waiting without understanding why I didn't leave. What would it have done for me to have pushed back? To have left that night? In terms of my life, very little. I maybe would have felt proud, probably still hurt. But, realistically, very little. However, small transgressions are still transgressions. It would have, maybe even a little, destabilized the system, opened space for more destabilization. I'm not saying this man in himself was an overt racist, classist person, but what I am saying is that the same system that made it normal for him to treat me as he did had tendrils in, was a part of, a larger violence.

Conclusion: Questions beyond

I am finishing my thesis almost exactly a year to the day after that night last year, that night that started all of this questioning. At that time, I was working on a final assignment for a really difficult Anthropological Theory class. I was asked to finish the phrase *Anthropology because...* in five pages. As I have never been a compartmentalizer, I ended up writing a series of ethnopoems (poems rooted in ethnographic description) about hookup culture and my experiences with this same man who sparked the questions that fed this thesis. Looking back, what I turned in reads like a journal and not like anything you should ever subject a professor to. At the end of this collection of emotionally overwrought and under-edited poems, I wrote a little paragraph saying:

Anthropology because it gives me the space to begin my knowing in my body and to bring that knowing into a larger conversation to critique violence... I can use my personal, emotional body-knowing as a way to begin to see larger systems, that I can use to move from the internal/emotional to the new understandings of structures I want to dismantle. (Vetter 2016: 13)

Last April, while I could understand how such a vulnerable anthropology was possible and powerful, I did not understand how to do it. And I think, this whole year, in the aftermath of that saccharine collection of ethnopoems, I didn't think that vulnerable anthropology was much more than navel gazing. I was dubious of my own efforts. The questions you aren't seeing in this thesis were often *yes, I may be Jewish, queer, and gender-fluid, but what's so radical about speaking from a vulnerable place as a white, wealthy person?*

It took until the very end of April, until I had been thinking about this project for over a year, constantly questioning, for me to truly understand what vulnerable anthropology could do. It took until my thesis defense. The Anthropology Department

allows open defenses and maybe 30 people showed up to mine. Some of them I knew, some of them I didn't. I spoke for maybe 30 minutes, read some of my writing, and spent 15 minutes answering questions. The moment I knew that vulnerable anthropology was an important tool for community change was when I looked up after reading the last paragraphs of *Questions about belonging* and saw the looks of recognition on students' faces. Nothing I was saying, it seemed, was something that they didn't already know. All I did was name it.

Yet, I could not have named what I named without having undertaken the ethnographic process. It took almost a complete year of intensive question asking to begin to know what I have begun to know. To write it, and share it. In some ways, I lived a life very similar to the lives I've lived on this campus before; I went to class, I slept in a dorm, I spent time with my friends, I went out, I hooked up. Yet, in other ways, I lived in ways I never had before. David Valentine (2007) writes that ethnography "requires attentive and ongoing listening. It requires a recognition of other people's perspectives and organizations of their worlds as both historically produced and culturally located but *also* as concrete and real" (Valentine 2007: 249). This year, I lived both more inside and more outside myself than I ever had before. I couldn't stop the questions from pouring in, like flood-water, even in my dreams.

I think we can agree; I have exposed myself here for you, in this paper, without giving myself much room to hide. Ruth Behar (1996) writes, "the exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake" (Behar 1996: 13-14). That's what I hope I have done here. I have tried not to share so vulnerably as an act of catharsis, or confession, but to carry members of my community

to places they could not have gotten to otherwise. I think I could have written maybe 15 different versions of this thesis. I think I could have followed any train of questions, and found myself in a very different place. I could have happily written this whole paper about clothing as a ritual symbol. I had a whole series of questions about capitalism that never made it in. I chose to write *this* thesis, this version, because I thought it was the ethnography that Colby needed to read.

I believe that anthropologists have a certain responsibility to the communities they work with. I think that responsibility manifests itself as the need to represent with as little violence as possible, to treat shared knowledge with respect, to reciprocate knowledge with knowledge. I believe there is an even deeper responsibility for the native ethnographer, the ethnographer coming awake in her own community. I believe, then, there is the responsibility to use ethnographic knowledge as a catalyst for change, equity. I believe it is my responsibility to continue the discursive chain of question-asking and knowing-producing. Tony E Adams and Tracy Holman Jones (2011) ask anthropologists to aspire to a similar goal, saying “my experience—our experience—could be and could reframe your experience. My experience—our experience—could politicize your experience and could motivate and mobilize you, and us, to action.” (Adams & Jones 2011:110).

One of the questions that came up in my thesis defense was *how do you transgress in hookup culture? What can I do now?* It was a white woman who asked me, a senior. She had been taking notes on her phone during my whole talk. I don’t remember exactly what I said to her, but if I could answer now, what I would say is *question your desires. Why do you want what you want? Question your body. What systems are you embodying?*

Question this space. Question always. Critical analysis is vital for any community change, in any activism. It's difficult, I know. Here's one last story:

I am finishing this thesis on a Friday morning, after Bar Night at the very bar I mention in the introduction. Last night, I wore a short blue dress, my boots, hair up. I'm much thinner now than I was last year, I didn't mean for it to be this way. I think something about this year stole parts of my body from me. My body isn't that different anymore from a lot of women here; small, white, no longer so soft. I haven't wanted to acknowledge this growing privilege that's a symptom of how anxiety has manifested in my body. Last night, I drank rum and gin and more rum and more gin. I think I've said this before, but there's something about Senior year; it's full of last chances. I went to the bar without much of plan in mind, but hoping maybe to see a few people, all men. All involved in high power social spaces. All white. All of whom I don't like very much, but desire. It's a pull. At the bar, I saw these men and felt powerful being seen talking to them. I felt important and beautiful. It wasn't coming from the core of me, though. This feeling felt like water pouring over me; I should have recognized the impermanence. It wasn't something I owned; it was something that was given to me. And, then, quickly, taken away. I didn't take any of these men home.

Outside the bar, smoking a cigarette and trying to grow bigger than the sting I was feeling, I texted this man that I've been sleeping with, on and off, all semester. I'll call him Will. *Hey, are you at Bar Night?* Will's actually a kind person, and is kind to me. He's not involved in the social spaces and networks I critique in my analysis. I'm feeling too vulnerable to say how I actually feel about him, here in this paper that anyone might read, but I like spending time with him. I feel good with him. He texted me back, 15

minutes later, saying he had just left. I responded, telling him I was walking back to campus and if he wanted to come meet me in my room, he could. *But no pressure*, I added.

Will didn't respond. I think it's close to two miles back to campus from downtown, and as I walked home with my friend Rose, a part of me started twisting itself deeper and deeper into itself, growing into a big black pit. Had Will seen me talking to these men? Had he seen me there, not looking for him? Was Will where I had been a year before, at the same bar, watching that original man ignore me, not see me? How was I any better than that original man? I wanted to say that it's different *I'm queer, I'm femme, I'm...* but, I should know better than anyone; it doesn't matter. I was embodying the same toxic masculinity that had, and has, hurt me. I was seeking the approval I had spent a year calling violent. I was looking to implicate myself with men who would offer me power all at the price of hurting someone who actually treated me with respect. I was complicit. I am complicit. It was too cyclical for me.

I woke up this morning, hesitant to face my own ugliness. I sat, staring at this conclusion for hours. I knew what I needed to write but didn't like what it said about me. What it says about me is that I am, still, after a year of this research, vulnerable to the same pull I felt last year, the pull to desire someone that I knew I shouldn't desire. What it says about me is that I am, still, after a year of research, not beyond seeking power, to further reify my own place in whiteness and wealth privilege. As a response to the violence I have experienced, I chose to align myself with those who have been violent to me. But, I knew I needed to write what I have written here. I need to hold myself accountable. It's the only way to create change. Questioning myself has left me deeply disturbed with what I have found; a femme who, despite her best intentions, can still be unkind on an interpersonal and structural level. I'm only 23; I'm still so blind. I

will be violent again, and in many ways. That is hard to admit. But, without recognizing myself in such a way, I can't move forward, I can't create change.

What I did this morning is, in truth, very small; I texted Will and apologized. *I feel like an ass when I don't actually see you or talk to you when I'm out and then text you. I think, at least on my part, it's pretty unkind and disrespectful to be in the same place as you and then to rely on texting to communicate. I want to be less inconsiderate because I actually do very much enjoy spending time with you and don't want you to feel like I'm just texting you at the end of the night because I can.* I have received very few apologies from people who have been violent to me. It took months for the man from last year to apologize to me, and only after me calling him out. Neither of the men who have sexually assaulted me has apologized. Most of the straight women who treat me with violence have never acknowledged the events, much less said sorry. This doesn't matter. Just like it doesn't matter that I can analyze the violence in hookup culture if I can't acknowledge and own up to the violence in me.

I said this thesis was a call for white women in many ways, and it is, but not exclusively. I think this paper speaks to white femininity the most because of my own positionalities, but I hope that anyone can find a space to enter here. Can find room to question, to look for the ugly parts of themselves, no matter how hard it is. Before we can hold others accountable for their transgressions, we must recognize our own. The systems that are at play in hookup culture aren't spatially bonded to Colby; we will continue to feel their pull and be called to respond long after we grow and leave. We will live within these systems of violence for our whole lives. We must re-enter ourselves, constantly, question again, and again, and again. It's a process; there is no end—

Glossary

The Apartments: Colby students use this term to refer to The Alford Senior Apartments, a dormitory for seniors exclusively. This is the only dorm on campus that has apartments as opposed to dorm rooms, and is the primary site for parties at Colby.

Bar Night: A Colby sponsored event that occurs every Thursday during the school year. Different bars downtown take turn hosting Bar Night and offer discounts to Colby students. Technically, it is an event meant for seniors, but many students over 21 go.

COOT: Stands for Colby Outdoor Orientation Trips. Every student coming into Colby is required to go on COOT, a three day program. First years and transfers participating in the trips are referred to as *COOT Babies* and are led by older students, referred to as *COOT Parents*. COOT parents are made up of one male and one female student, and COOT babies often call them *COOT Dad* and *COOT Mom*.

Doghead: A Colby tradition where, the Friday night before St. Patrick's Day, students stay up all night, going to parties. Students who stay awake the whole night converge at the steps of *Miller Library* to watch the sunrise together.

The Pub- A bar located on Campus and operated by Colby. Every Wednesday, the Pub hosts *Pub Night* where there are discounted drinks.

Pre-games: A name for a small gathering of people coming together to drink and get drunk before actually going out to a party. These gatherings often include drinking games, but not always, and usually take place in dorm rooms on campus. However, often there are pre-games at off-campus houses before Bar Night.

The Spa: A space in *Pulver Student Union*, the student center on campus. While the Spa technically is just the café that sells coffee and some food, this term is often used to describe a large amount of space in the center of Pulver.

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