THE DIGITAL STREET

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation sets out to show what street life is like for teenagers in Harlem who stand at the forefront of mobile and social media. Through various roles in the community, I describe how the social life of the street flows in person and online. Networked media about people and events on the street reconfigures face-to-face interactions, and vice versa. This digital overlay—the digital street—informs rivalries and resolutions, scholastic ambitions, and the moral decisions teenagers make about their friends and dating partners. Family members, the street pastor, and police also use this online data to draw conclusions about neighborhood youth—assumptions that both direct and divert institutional consequences. The basic premise of this research is that relations on the street unfold through media as well as through people. This point is illustrated in four facets of street life: the school day, marginality, surveillance, and intimacy. Each chapter matches an issue on the street to an issue online in order to understand the convergence of physical and digital space. This ethnographic data motivates us to see the street as a place with and without physical confines. As such, we must take seriously the social properties of the online environment as we account for change in a ghetto beyond the standard explanations of policies, economics, and demographics.
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THE DIGITAL STREET by Jeffrey Lane

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE DIGITAL STREET

Throughout Harlem, social scenes take place on streets where teenagers get together. These scenes pick up at around 3:30 p.m., after school lets out, forming not in the courtyard among classmates but back on the block with kids from the neighborhood. Standing before a school in Harlem or the Bronx at the end of the day, one may see school safety agents and police clearing the area, sending students back to their neighborhoods. Such little worlds on the street form in front of a deli on the southwest corner of 108th Street and Madison Avenue, with boys along the banister of the handicap ramp and girls seated atop a newspaper dispenser turned on its side. They also appear at the entrance to the AK Houses “in the block” on 128th Street between Lexington and Park. The kids from the Lincoln Houses congregate by the deli on 132d Street between Madison and Fifth Avenue, or beneath the scaffolding on “the project side” of the street, which is less visible to police. When it rains or snows, they move to the lobby in Buildings 40, 20, or 10, where the doors prop open easily.

On streets like these across Harlem—on single blocks or project superblocks—young people hang out and support each other, just as those who have grown up poor in cities have done for ages. Urban scholars have long described such scenes in ghettos throughout the nation and across racial and ethnic lines. Writing from Chicago’s Hull House at Polk and Halstead Streets at the turn of the twentieth century, Jane Addams (6) noted a multiethnic “spirit of youth on the street” as industrialization organized kids for work while “failing to organize play.” As a Puerto Rican boy in East Harlem, Piri Thomas (15) described being “on the block” with “a lot to do” and “nothing to do” at the end of the Great Depression and the decline in WPA relief. Writing about Boston in the 1960s, Herbert Gans (1962) introduced his readers to the “action-
seekers” of the Italian West End, young-adult males so attuned to each other and the excitement of the street that they missed the impending destruction of their community in the name of “urban renewal.” Terry Williams and William Kornblum (1985) spoke about “teenagers and hard times” for white boys in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, hanging around McCarren Park, reaching for the rapidly deindustrializing area’s last lines in manual labor in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Elijah Anderson (1999) in the 1990s and Nikki Jones (2010) in the 2000s revealed how black boys and girls embedded in the neighborhood violence of Philadelphia’s segregated ghettos navigated public space without the protection of police or other institutions. Most recently, Victor Rios (2011) in Oakland, Forrest Stuart (forthcoming) in Los Angeles, and Alice Goffman (2014) in Philadelphia have shown that the culture of control inside the ghetto grants citizens of color only semi-legal status on the street.

There clearly exists a rich tradition of studying the street for the sake of understanding the ways in which the forces of modernity play out in the everyday lives of young people at the bottom of the economic ladder. What makes these social worlds on the corner different now is that they are networked online. The life of the street unfolds through social and mobile media, not simply through people. My research thus focuses on the ways in which face-to-face encounters and digital life interlock on the street. I show how teenagers and the adults trying to control them link media to the streets of Harlem in order to manage their experiences in the neighborhood. This study is about growing up poor on the digital street.

Networked scenes by delis and under scaffolding start up in the morning with those skipping or estranged from school. As they gather on the block, their peers grind out classes inside schools. Students at “unscanned” schools—the 93 percent of school buildings in New York City without permanent metal detectors—may keep up by phone. At “scanned” schools, on
the other hand, communication lines to the street are cut. Students pay a dollar to check their phones at the bodega or “phone truck” and reconnect after school. The corner operates in the same “always-on” mode as does urban professional life or the peer worlds of more affluent teens. The same bonds or expectations of continuous communication apply.

After school, the block bustles with the energy of teenagers. Only the setting differs from the steps of a schoolyard or the hill of a campus. Kids gather under the threat of violence, with police watching, and alongside noticeable and nearly daily changes in their neighborhood. These young people are teenagers of color in contested public space—areas of interest to rivals from other blocks, police, poverty reformers, developers, and others. The kids hang out by properties being turned over by the “New Harlem Renaissance” or by the housing projects around which these changes are oriented. They find themselves within the “zones” of Operation Impact, or clusters of blocks with extra police deployments, and the ninety-seven-block Harlem Children’s Zone, a service area for schools and programming designed explicitly as “a counterweight” to “the street” and toxic popular culture. But teenage street life is shaped as much as anything else by the digital environment, by changes in media and the issues that arise as social life extends online. The interaction of two social environments—online and offline—defines the conditions under which street life unfolds today. The convergence of this physical and digital space will be discussed throughout this dissertation. But this street life has been underway for several years already. The goal is to catch up and focus on where it needs to be moving forward.

The Digital Street

The premise of this research is the simple idea that the social life of the street is networked online. Street life is mediated by digital interaction and an overlay of online information about people in the neighborhood. Scholars of technology have discussed how urban
public space has been reconfigured through networked communication and online information. This issue matters most, however, to teenagers in the inner city. This population segment is both most involved in matters of the street and most active on mobile and social media. The kids on the corner utilize digital data to organize the public spaces in which they derive parts of their identity, sustain support networks, and assume major risks. In the following chapters, we see how and why teenagers in Harlem link networked communication to neighborhood street life. We examine this convergence in terms of four categories: the school day, marginality, surveillance, and intimacy.

Each of these four section deals with how an issue on the street converges with an issue online. We start at the threshold of the street and school. In this first section, we see how this boundary shifts through mobile communication. We come to appreciate the street corner as a support system nurtured by “perpetual contact” (Katz and Aakhus 2002), yet complicated by the policing of the phone on either side of the school walls. The school day can be thought of as a new sort of collective experience for neighborhood teens as they work together online on their plans and ambitions.

In the second section, we continue to explore the changing boundary of the street in terms of its code. We focus on the collision of “the code of the street” (Anderson 1999) and what internet scholars call “context collapse.” Marginality stands to get worse when the neighborhood burden of fighting for one’s block extends into social media, where relational settings combine. We see how teens manage the stigma of the street online, working to keep it away from other facets of their lives.

In the next section, we move to adults and questions of social control on the digital street. We concentrate on the interaction of parents, institutions, and teens through the social role of the
street pastor. We see that the tradition of “do-it-yourself surveillance,” formerly organized by local stores, now operates through digital channels because the “eyes and ears on the street” (Jacobs 1961) are aggregated across different neighborhoods, layers of community, and media platforms. In such a case, a kind of morality emerges through these lines of communication and their orientation.

In the final section, we witness another way in which digital information shapes morals and actions within a community: through intimacy. Boys and girls sort out relations online, buffering the uncertainty of encounters in person and changing what it means to be around each other in the neighborhood. The romantic “affordances” of technology, sometimes cast as emotional avoidance in middle-class contexts, become a form of street smarts in the inner city—but with new costs.

These four domains introduce a new way of thinking about street life in the inner city. The social setting is very different now, and not only due to policy choices and economic shifts related to deindustrialization, an expanded criminal justice apparatus, or other forces of modernity accounted for by scholars thus far. It is different because of the internet and the simple fact that life in the inner city, as everywhere else, is lived through the media. The socioeconomic changes conditioning street life—explained with such care and intelligence by street scholars—are refracted online. These factors inform the on- and offline story of growing up poor in the city.

To orient this study, several things about the field site and population in question must be noted. I begin by describing my involvement in this community.

*Teenagers and Change on the Streets of Harlem*

Harlem is a world of young people. The ratio of youth to adults in Harlem is notably greater than it is in more affluent parts of New York. Writing about “the uptown kids” in
Harlem’s housing projects, Williams and Kornblum indicate that “half of the residents of the projects are under twenty-one” (1994, 41). If we look at data from 2010 for the percentage of the population that was seventeen and under in housing across Harlem in the neighborhood’s three Community Districts (CDs), we will find 17 percent in West Harlem (CD 9) and 22 percent in both Central Harlem (CD 10) and East Harlem (CD 11). This contrasts with percentages in all Manhattan districts south of 96th Street, which range from between about 7 percent in Midtown’s Community District 5 to about 15 percent on the Upper West Side in Community District 7 (City of New York 2013).

Harlem’s young people face a range of hardships characteristic of life inside ghettos. Of Manhattan’s 12 Community Districts, Harlem’s three Community Districts (9, 10, and 11) have the three highest rates of household incomes under $25,000 per year, foster care placement, adults with no high school diplomas, and parents who have served prison sentences (Children’s Defense Fund and the Justice Mapping Center 2012).\(^1\) Harlem’s six police precincts log the highest rates of shootings in all twenty-two precincts across Manhattan (including Inwood and Washington Heights, areas above Harlem) (Crime & Safety Report 2010).\(^2\)

Yet Harlem is also a world of change. For this reason, in 2010, urban scholar Sharon Zukin questioned if Harlem should still be considered a ghetto, describing all sorts of constituencies invested in or laying claim to the area. Since the early 1900s, Harlem has been a black neighborhood, which black residents have struggled to define given the divides that

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1. This data comes from a data-mapping project convened by the Children’s Defense Fund and the Justice Mapping Center, which produced in March 2012 a report under the title *The Call for Youth Justice*. The rates above are aggregations within each district of census-tract percentages. The data comes from multiple agencies and pertains to
2. These figures appear in DNAinfo.com’s *Crime & Safety Report 2010* and have been calculated by dividing the number of shooting incidents in each precinct in 2010 (according to CompSTAT) by the population living there (according to the 2010 US Census).
separate them in terms of income, education, interests, and other factors. Things have only gotten more complex, says Zukin:

Claims to represent Harlem’s best interests have been put in play by . . . old and new black residents in both the middle and the working class; new and future white residents, all middle class; real estate developers, new retail entrepreneurs, the media . . . and government agencies (70).

All of these groups, according to Zukin, are “pushing Harlem to be less like the ghetto of its recent past and more like other Manhattan neighborhoods” (70). In his book on gentrification, David J. Maurrasse (2006) describes a style of “revitalization” driven by funding policies and strategies to serve large corporate retailers. Russell Leigh Sharman (2006), speaking of East Harlem, discusses the “shallow roots” of ethnic groups. Arriving in succession have been Italians, Puerto Ricans, African Americans, Mexicans, West Africans, Chinese, and, finally, he predicts, middle-class whites, the bearers of “urban renewal.”

According to 2010 Census figures published by the Department of City Planning (that break down race and Hispanic categories), East Harlem (CD 11) is 12 percent white (non-Hispanic), 32 percent black (non-Hispanic), and 49 percent Hispanic. Central Harlem (CD 10)—where the present research is principally based—is 10 percent white, 63 percent black, and 22 percent Hispanic. West Harlem (CD 9) is 23 percent white, 25 percent black, and 43 percent Hispanic.

Among the three districts over the last three decades, Central Harlem’s demographics changed most notably. The percentage black dropped from 88 percent (1990) to 77 percent (2000) to 63 percent (2010). The percentage white barely changed between 1990 (1.5%) and 2000 (2%) but then spiked by more than 400 percent in 2010. Meanwhile, the percentage of Hispanics in the area increased steadily from 10 percent (1990) to 17 percent (2000) to 22
percent (2010) (City of New York 2013; all demographic data in the two preceding paragraphs comes from this source).

We find far greater demographic variation when we compare census tracts within and across the three districts. Within West Harlem, for example, Census Tract 197.01 around Morningside Park and Columbia University is about 70 percent white, while only a few blocks northwest in Census Tract 219 (which runs along Broadway between 125th Street and 134th Street), that percentage falls to 12 percent. In another example, Census Tract 239, at the top of Harlem, is only 4 percent white (“American Community Survey 2012 5-Year Estimates: Percentage White Alone” 2014).

We also find tremendous economic variation. Consider, for example, the median household income for each census tract, going from the west end of 125th Street all the way to the east end of the street: $48,000 in Census Tract (CT) 211; $24,000 in CT 209.01; $62,000 in CT 257; $33,000 in CT 222; $67,000 in CT 200; $82,000 in CT 198; and $18,000 in each of three tracts (CT 196, 242, and 192) in East Harlem, where poverty is more widespread (“American Community Survey 2012 5-Year Estimates: Median Household Income” 2014).

We see great variation in the residential and retail face of the street in avenues, blocks, and even buildings of a single block. Camilo José Vergara, in his 2013 book *Harlem: The Unmaking of a Ghetto* (an inverse of Gilbert Osofsky’s 1965 *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*), photographs the same locations over forty years to reveal storefronts that gave way to vacancy and vandalism and others that turned into shiny chain stores. Today, we find dead zones that look like Seventh Avenue between 126th Street and 127th Street, where the east side of the street contains only shuttered businesses and a fenced-in lot. Other parts of Harlem brim with recent reinvestment. Frederick Douglass Boulevard, between 118th and 119th Street, for example, hosts
a Starbucks, Best Yet Market, and Chase Bank in the retail spaces below luxury residential units. The other side of the street presents a more eclectic mix of shuttered buildings, new residencies, a seminary, a Senegalese/French patisserie, an espresso shop, a nail salon, and an African general store, amid other offerings. Such development suggests various implications for young people on the corner: pressure to clear public spaces near new residential or retail locations, rising costs of living for families, the availability of jobs at big retailers.

On the changing streets of Harlem, we find heavy yet selective policing. Police watch the street from portable two-story SkyWatch Towers, behind video feeds of closed-caption cameras inside public housing, on foot patrol, and inside marked and unmarked cars.

It is also the discretion of police that distinguishes these streets and residents by race on any street. Let us compare policing in Central Harlem to the Upper East Side, using an analysis of 2009 “stop, question, and frisk” data published by The New York Times (Bloch, Fessenden, and Roberts 2010). About 115,723 people live in Central Harlem within the confines of its two precincts, the 28th and 32d. About 91 percent of these residents are non-white. In 2009, the two precincts logged 19,540 stops. Of these stops, roughly 71 percent resulted in frisks, 41 percent in the use of force, and 8 percent in arrests. Non-whites accounted for 99 percent of all persons stopped.

By contrast, the Upper East Side’s population includes about 208,259 people and is roughly 83 percent white. This population falls within the confines of only one precinct, the 19th, so let us add the adjacent 22d Precinct, which covers all of Central Park and houses no permanent population. In an area far vaster than Central Harlem with a population 1.8 times as large, police made only 4,375 stops. Of these, 51 percent resulted in frisks, 27 percent in the use of force, and 8 percent in arrests. In all, 75 percent of persons stopped were non-white.
We can draw a few points from this comparison. Compared to the Upper East Side, police contact is far more frequent and more densely concentrated within Central Harlem. Being stopped by police in Harlem or on the Upper East Side is an exceedingly rare event for white people. Compared to whites, people of color are subject to considerable police suspicion, which often leads to frisking and sometimes being handled with (added) force. These stops are rarely tied to arrests (8 percent); the arrest rate remains constant in both neighborhoods, while the stop rate (based on population size) is eight times larger in Central Harlem than on the Upper East Side.

Let us use these same statistics for Central Harlem and the Upper East Side to consider a police practice few would tie to public safety: misdemeanor marijuana possession. Comparing arrest rates on the charge of misdemeanor marijuana possession, we find, in 2010, 1,202 arrests in Central Harlem compared to 149 arrests on the Upper East Side.\(^3\) Given population size, the marijuana arrest rate in 2010 was about 14.5 times greater in Central Harlem than on the Upper East Side. This pattern also holds in the years immediately before and after 2010.

Harlem’s teens of color come of age with this saturation of police discretion, which inevitably shapes their perception of public space and law enforcement. In a 2013 survey of 474 young adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five from East Harlem and four other mostly minority neighborhoods, 44 percent said they had been stopped nine times or more. Eighty-eight percent of respondents claimed to “believe that residents of their neighborhood do not trust the police” and only one in four survey participants said he or she “would report someone whom they believe had committed a crime” (Fratello, Rengifo, and Trone 2013, 2).

\(^3\) This data comes from the New York Police Department and was obtained through a request under the Freedom of Information Act. I received this data courtesy of Issa Kohler-Hausmann at Yale University Law School.
But stop, question, and frisk is also being scaled back by political and legal pushback. Stops decreased citywide by 22 percent from 2011 to 2012 with declines of more than 50 percent in each of the first two quarters of 2013 as compared to 2012 (Fratello, Rengifo, and Trone 2013). To some extent, scrutiny of the same demographic in the same neighborhoods has shifted online.

The policing and prosecution of juvenile gangs is rooted in social media. As learned through my participation in a task force alongside personnel in the NYPD, District Attorney’s Office, Department of Corrections, and Department of Education Gang Unit, social media gave police a tool to define, track, and (through collaboration with the District Attorney’s Office) prosecute gangs in the absence of other indications of gang activity. In other words, the cohort of teenagers involved in gun violence in ghettoized areas did not fit with previous markers of legitimacy as a gang—that of a “criminal enterprise” with hierarchical roles and underlying economic purpose to a set of crimes. But networks of teenagers referencing a common group name and alleged violent crime on the ground could be identified on social media. Beginning in Harlem in 2006, a tiny subset of police in the juvenile justice sector, with access to social networking sites (which are typically blocked on department computers), built an entirely new repository of these “crews,” separate from other databases maintained by police, corrections, and the DOE. This consolidated unit has expanded significantly and its methodology has influenced the entire department.

Monitoring social media is a key piece of “JRIP,” NYPD’s Juvenile Robbery Intervention Program in East Harlem and Brownsville, Brooklyn, and its citywide anti-gang initiative Operation Crew Cut. According to the NYPD, by November 2013, more than 400 “crew members” had been arrested through Operation Crew Cut. Police claim that the operation
has reduced homicides by half among young people ages thirteen to twenty-one—from eighty-seven in 2012 to forty-three in 2013 (New York Police Department 2013).\(^4\) Between February 2011 and April 2013, the District Attorney’s Office issued ten conspiracy indictments of Harlem street-corner groups involved in shootings. These indictments linked physical evidence of violent offenses with allegedly related electronic evidence in the form of video, photographs, and posts on social media.

Anti-poverty measures, particularly related to education, are in play across Harlem. Starting in 2002, Mayor Michael Bloomberg pushed school choice and competition through the expansion of charter schools and other schooling options beyond the traditional public school. Harlem—with its twenty-five charter schools—has become a national and even international laboratory for this social experiment. The Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ), in which Mayor Bloomberg invested significant political capital and personal wealth, provides the template for President Barack Obama’s national “Promise Neighborhoods” grants as well as start-up schools in European and African nations. HCZ has been set up explicitly as an alternative to “the street” based on founder Geoffrey Canada’s (1995) personal experience of having to fight on the blocks where he grew up from age four. The idea is to create “a pipeline” through the streets of Central Harlem to route children as they approach college age through early childhood learning programs, parent training, family health care, and other forms of intervention.

The Brown Center on Education Policy at The Brookings Institution finds that HCZ schools perform about as well as other charters, which is to say better than public schools. According to the Center’s October 2013 aggregate research report:

NYC charter schools are, on average, doing a substantially better job for students than the regular public schools with which they directly compete. For example, student gains in

\(^4\) These figures given by NYPD are 2012 to 2013 year-to-date comparisons based on the date of November 24.
math in charter schools compared to traditional public schools are equivalent to roughly five additional months of schooling in a single school year (Whitehurst 2013, 2).

 Critics see this investment in charters and any learning gains as coming at the direct expense of public schools. Bloomberg’s mayoral successor Bill de Blasio has begun to shift investment back to district public schools. We are thus witnessing much variation and tension in education. The city’s graduation rate increased by 18 percent between 2004–2005 and 2011–2012, according to the Brookings report, though students graduate less prepared for college, an issue behind New York State’s swift adoption of the Common Core Curriculum. A 2011 “SchoolBook” article in The New York Times indicates that 75 percent of city students are not prepared for college after four years of high school (Santos 2011).

 In a single school building, we may find competing school options. An elementary school building on 112th Street between Fifth Avenue and Lenox Avenue, for example, houses a charter school, a public school, and a magnet school, each jockeying for space and funding while bracing for the arrival of yet another school in the next year. In Central Harlem’s School District 5, where some of the city’s lowest-performing schools are clustered, we find tremendous variation as well. Consider graduation rates (within four years) for the Class of 2013 at three high schools: Thurgood Marshall Academy (a public school) graduated 94 percent of its class; Democracy Prep (a charter school) graduated 66 percent, exactly the city average; and Bread and Roses (a public school that is closing down) graduated 33 percent.

 Old and new residents, real estate developers, police, and education reformers are all responding to the historical fact that the street, in the inner city, functions as a place, not simply a passageway. This is one of the most robust findings of urban ethnography.5 The street provides a hangout, a dating and party scene, a habitat, an economy, an identity, and a stigma. One’s home

5 In the first anthology of urban ethnography, one of eight section deals with the social worlds of the street and other public spaces (Duneier, Kasinitz, and Murphy 2014).
or adopted block is a neighborhood and a community onto itself. The street is a place that grips its young people particularly tight. It sorts friendships, dating, play, access to social services, and other points of daily life in adolescence (Harding 2010; Suttles 1968). A corner, a courtyard, a small slice of an avenue, the semi-fenced-in “superblocks” of a public housing project operates as “turf” (Jacobs 1961; Suttles 1968; Thrasher 1927). In the context of urban poverty, the proportion and influence of “neighborhood friends” increases through middle school and high school (Harding 2008; 2009; 2010). In more affluent settings, this life outside of school “declines in significance in the newer and broader social context of the high school” (Milner 2004, 80).

The above section outlines some of the salient conditions of the street that we will consider with regard to digital life in the coming chapters. But first, here are a few related facts about the use of media. Given a lack of statistical data on the local level, I can only describe these patterns in broader strokes. The most important point is that persons of color as well as the poor are at the forefront of mobile and social media. This notion breaks from the usual research findings that present this demographic as being behind in matters of technology. National data shows that the young, the poor, and those of color are major smartphone owners and users. They are most certainly online and using social media.

Research on twelve- to seventeen-year-olds conducted in 2012 finds no statistically significant difference in smartphone ownership rates between blacks (40%) and whites (35%). On the other hand, computer ownership rates vary: 64 percent of black teens, compared to 81 percent of white teens, own a laptop or desktop computer. Both groups are widely online: 92 percent of black teens and 98 percent of whites report having internet access (Madden et al. 2013). 

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6 This difference by race is, however, statistically significant.
If we consider research conducted in 2013 on young adults, 85 percent of blacks and 79 percent of whites ages eighteen to twenty-nine own a smartphone, a non-significant difference (Smith 2014). Survey respondents of both races in this young-adult category indicate near total internet access—blacks at 98 percent, whites at 95 percent (also a non-significant difference).

Another Pew study from income-based data collected in 2013 finds that young adults regardless of income level are highly likely to own a smartphone. In this study, 77 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds with an annual household income below $30,000 report owning a smartphone (Smith 2013).

Smartphones, internet access, and specifically mobile internet access factor prominently in the lives of poor young adults and teenagers of color. Indeed, being poor is associated with higher levels of mobile phone use and lower levels of laptop and desktop use. Pew researchers Kathryn Zickuhr and Aaron Smith (2012, 2) write: “Among smartphone owners, young adults, minorities, those with no college experience, and those with lower household income levels are more likely than other groups to say that their phone is their main source of internet access.” This particular relationship to media is evident when Elton holds up his smartphone and says, “This is my computer.” We also hear it from Carla, who, when I ask if she knows how to touch-type, replies: “Like on the phone?”

This demographic is busy on social media. According to a collaborative 2013 Pew and Berkman Center report, 88 percent of blacks and 81 percent of whites twelve to seventeen years old with internet access use at least one social media site, a non-significant difference (Madden et al. 2013). The same report finds that 83 percent of teens from households with incomes below

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7 I use fictitious names or simply a title for the people I write about in this dissertation (with the exception of public figures). I also use an alias for a local anti-violence organization. I leave the spelling and punctuation as is for all quotes that appear in media, unless a slight change is absolutely essential for clarification or matters of confidence. Quotes heard in person are also unaltered unless absolutely necessary.
$50,000 and 78 percent of teens from households above this threshold use social media, again a non-significant difference. Meanwhile, among young adults (ages 18–29) blacks (96%) and whites (90%) also use social media at comparably high rates (Smith 2014).

These findings indicate that poverty does not spell estrangement from mobile and social technologies. On the contrary, a smartphone is a major priority and may mean more in this context. What does not come across in the above research is all the effort that goes into keeping in the forefront of mobile media. Some of the teens in this research are given a phone and phone service (usually under a “family plan”), others innovate (Pugh 2009). They save up to purchase phones, new or used, aggregating small sums of money to pay their monthly service bill. They share phones moment to moment, for chunks of the day, and days at a time (i.e., “holding” a phone). Friends and family members pass old devices down, recirculating these many times over. Teens trade for phones. They steal them. Through no-contract providers like T-Mobile or Simple Mobile, teens pay by cash month-to-month at local retailers. At these stores, a phone can be connected without disclosure of any personal information. By paying for phone service associated with a low-end smartphone, this device’s SIM card can subsequently be inserted into a separately acquired high-end device. An iPhone designed for AT&T’s network, for instance, functions with a SIM card from another carrier’s less-expensive phone and service plan. Other smartphones require manipulations to work on new networks. They get “jail broken.” Then there are adaptive strategies not predicated upon the acquisition of hardware, such as “approximating calling” the person with a phone most likely to be near the intended party (Ling and Donner 2009). All this effort goes into staying at the top of digital media.

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8 According to 2009 data presented by a law enforcement official at a Juvenile Gang Task Force meeting in September 2010, electronic devices were the number one targets of robberies in New York City. Inclusive of all items taken, 41 percent of robbery arrests in 2009 were of persons under the age of eighteen.
Getting In

I now turn to how I got started on this research and include a quick description of spending a Saturday on the block. This account will reveal the level of trust I developed in this community and will set the stage for the next chapter.

I “fell into” this research. It began when I moved from Princeton, New Jersey, to an apartment in Central Harlem in the summer of 2009 so that my wife could be near Columbia University to complete a master’s degree in fine arts. This move marked a return to New York City, where I was from, but to a different neighborhood from South Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where I last lived in the city, or Manhattan’s Upper East Side, where I grew up. I should say that I am a white man and that I turned 30 that year. I moved back to New York looking for a dissertation topic for my PhD in sociology at Princeton University. I wanted to contribute to ongoing research interests in growing up poor in cities and matters of policing and inequalities in the criminal justice system. I also imagined myself picking up themes that I had previously explored in a book I had written before graduate school on the ways in which ideas about race (what it means to be white or black) are generated and transmitted in the basketball industry, particularly through the media. Since college, and more so since working with Mitchell Duneier at Princeton, I have been consumed by urban ethnography, a tradition of studying city people up close.

In fall 2009, I went to a Community Board 10 meeting, during which I heard an announcement for a “talk on youth crews” that was to be given by a local pastor at a community center. It sounded interesting, and I was curious about the kids around the corner from where I lived. They hung out in front of a 24-hour laundromat, often under a SkyWatch police tower. An African-African pastor and ex-offender in his early fifties gave the talk. He projected on the wall
a map of youth groups that he said were engaged in back-and-forth violence generally not tied to
drug markets. For this reason, he believed that the community could stop the violence if its adult
members came out to prevent their kids from fighting. He spoke about young people looking for
love and acknowledgement, along with the mechanics needed to stop fighting, which involved
holding eye contact with “the batteries” at the front of the action. He described a script already in
place: the recognition of “Pastor on Deck,” or “POD,” served as a signal for “no violence at this
time.” He also said that he was following 1,500 teens in Harlem and the Bronx on Twitter and
that anytime he heard of potential violence, he sent a text message blast to mobilize community
members. The pastor said he needed more people to join him, particularly during afterschool
hours and on Friday and Saturday nights when teens traveled to and from parties. He gave out his
number and asked those present to text him if interested, adding that only persons with unlimited
text messaging should join his messaging group because he sent texts all day and night. I had
unlimited texting, so I sent him my number and started receiving his messages.

A week later, while I was visiting a friend in Philadelphia, I received the following texts
from Pastor (the name I will use for him in this dissertation): “Shootin 135 Lenox – please
checkout” (4:22 p.m.); “Just got word. A Women got shot. Gaught in shoot out.” (4:48 p.m.).

I offered my help by text when I returned the next day. “Ok,” Pastor wrote back. More
texts from Pastor followed: “Heard that caught one person and someone ran in building cops
have 135th bet lenox andn 7th blocked off” (5:08 p.m.). I later learned that a resident in her mid-
sixties had been hit in the calf and that a seventeen-year-old male had been arrested after his full
name had been gleaned from a YouTube video in which he holds up the negative results of an
HIV test.
On a New Jersey Transit connection from Philadelphia the next day, I received another group text requesting help. It reported that a teen from 129th Street and Lenox Avenue, the group by the laundromat and police tower, might be getting jumped after school by teens from St. Nicholas Houses, a housing project just a block west of Lenox Avenue on the other end of my street. I texted back that I would meet up. That afternoon I drove to the high school in Pastor’s car with Pastor, a second anti-violence worker, and two seventeen-year-old girls, Rochelle and Rochelle’s best friend since fifth grade, Eyana. Pastor calls Rochelle one of his “specials,” a set of young women who are involved in rivalries with other girls, and sometimes even with each other; usually date boys in boy rivalries; and maintain social connections to peers across numerous neighborhoods (the breadth of their networks is far wider than what is socially permissible for boys). The specials, as I would learn, were some of Pastor’s closest face-to-face ties.

We did not come upon a potential fight that day, but I was drawn to Pastor and the specials. Those few days also introduced me to the topic of my dissertation, though I did not realize it right away. I was seeing street life in media—not depictions of street life in the evening news or rap music on the radio, but as an everyday interaction within a face-to-face community. I began to hang out with Pastor and the specials in the car, on the street, and in Pastor’s office, the lounge of an elderly housing facility where he works as a services coordinator. Pastor’s boss allows him to use this space as a drop-in for young people. Months later, when a friend of mine who works in a Midtown investment firm told me that her office was upgrading computing equipment, I arranged to have their old hardware installed in Pastor’s office and started a computer lab. “The Lab,” as we called it, added computers, printers, and internet capacity to a loosely organized program of assistance with school, work, court, service credit requirements,
and other matters, which are provided by Pastor and a fluctuating set of volunteers and partnering outreach and anti-violence workers. The Lab was also very much a place for teens to socialize and otherwise spend time online as they pleased. Both its focused and casual uses provided opportunities for me to learn in person about some of the online practices of the more than one hundred teenagers and young adults who used the facility, as well as some of the seniors in the building and surrounding area.

I worked on all parts of the outreach operation: street work during afterschool hours and weekend nights; “interrupting” confrontations and fights; facilitating peace talks; and coordinating rallies, vigils, and “Positive Presence 4 Peace” Fridays (three-hour street-corner conversations with local entertainment acts and program referrals). Much of the day-to-day outreach centered on a rivalry that involved teenagers from 129th Street and Lenox Avenue against teens from St. Nicholas Houses (just one block west of this corner) and Lincoln Houses (four blocks northeast), an alliance called “St. Lincoln.” On at least fifty-five separate occasions between 2010 and 2012, one side of this rivalry fired shots at the other.

Over time, I took on new neighborhood roles both connected and unconnected to Pastor’s ministry. I led workshops and wrote curriculum at a major municipal summer employment program for three summers (2010–2012). I worked on several cases as a consultant at a public defender’s office representing teens and young adults. I was an invited member of a government-funded juvenile gang task force and contributed writing to two of its publications. I led college readiness workshops at an afterschool athletics and tutoring program. I spoke at, visited, or conducted observations inside seven schools.

I came to meet hundreds and hundreds of teenagers and young adults, about 500 through the summer job program alone, and many of the parents and other adults in their lives, both
affiliated and unaffiliated with institutions. I met a handful of white kids; all others were persons of color, primarily children of African-American parents and some of parents who recently immigrated from the West Indies, West Africa, Puerto Rico, or the Dominican Republic. I observed tremendous variation in home and family arrangements; access to basic provisions, schooling, work experience; and non-involvements or involvements in the juvenile and/or adult criminal justice systems.

These face-to-face relationships extended to phone ties and ties on social media—first on Twitter, then Facebook, and, finally, Instagram. Eventually, I was linked to about one hundred young people in Harlem on at least one of these platforms. These ties became central to keeping up with neighborhood matters and to the coordination of an informal system of little exchanges. I provided meals; rides; advocacy with courts or bureaucracies; help with schoolwork, exams, and applications; and small amounts of money in exchange for short interviews and fieldwork.

Early on, I began a series of recorded, semi-structured interviews, beginning with some of the specials and their friends. This eventually led to interviews with twenty-three young persons, some of which extended to several meetings, usually held at Columbia University. I also started playing basketball with many of the boys from the group on the corner of 129th Street. We played in games at a local community center, church, and outdoors. I had leads on multiple games in Manhattan and I would take small groups to half-court games inside two Midtown residential buildings where friends of mine lived and to full-court games at my former high school (Hunter College High School) and two other schools with regular evening runs. One teen nicknamed us “the basketball crashers.” Over time, I came to know many of the young people from this corner and their families. I was spending hours each day on the block. Sometimes I would bring my car around and it became a place to sit and hang or a shuttle for kids and their
family members. I benefited from a routine that Pastor, Ray (a retired postal worker), and others in the outreach community had established before I arrived. Gradually, but particularly after about six months, I felt increasingly confident being out on the block without Pastor or Ray.

I began to use ties on social media as a central fieldwork tool, first with this group and then with other cliques or individuals elsewhere in Harlem. As much as possible, I captured online material immediately after its production by taking screenshots and then asking the author or others involved about the content. Sometimes I messaged the author immediately. More often, I brought a phone or tablet out to the block to have a short conversation on a stoop or in my car. I became a photographer of social life, capturing screenshots of communication that I then used as elicitation devices. “What does this mean?” “Why did you say this this way?” Because I knew the people and the neighborhood, I could see in some instances how online interaction affected what happened in person, and vice versa.

This approach allowed me to see communication in public space, whether online or on the street. But relations obviously unfold also in the private mediated spaces of text messages or inboxes on social media. To access these channels, I asked Pastor and some of the young people with whom I developed great trust to share their text and inbox messages, as well as phone contact lists. We reviewed this material together. It revealed the nature of one-to-one relationships, granting insights not otherwise available to a researcher.

Spending time on this block could take any number of forms. On one particular mild Saturday in March, I saw Whiz, a sixteen-year-old from the neighborhood, pedaling nonchalantly on a BMX bike. Whiz wears a Hollister hoodie, white cargo pants, and reissued Barkley Nike sneakers; has half of his hair braided and half in a poof; and listens in one ear bud to a BlackBerry playing Meek Millz. I stand and Whiz sits on his bike as we chat, watching the
avenue. The grandmother of Whiz’s friend walks by on crutches and tells him that she will “take a lawnmower” to his head. They flash each other big smiles. The weather is warm, and familiar faces pass. Eighteen-year-old Christian, in a good mood since passing his GED exam, lives about half a mile southwest of where we stand. He posts on his Facebook wall, “OMW [on my way] UPTOWN TODAY SHOULD BE LIVE.” When he arrives, we chat about his recent job searches. “It’s a job to get a job,” he says. The conversation turns to last night on the block. He and others were drinking and smoking until late. A photo from the festivities is now his profile picture on Facebook. It shows Christian with one arm around Olivia; the other hand flashes a “Westside” as he bites down on his lower lip. He adds the caption “Me & my Babe Lastnight Lmao [laughing my ass off] Chilll,” choosing language to hedge where he stands with her. This afternoon he wonders if she is “too young” at age sixteen.

Christian, Whiz, and now Christian’s (adoptive) cousin JayVon and other guys gather. “Yo, we out to that party?” Christian asks one of the guys, sorting plans for tonight. Shawn, in from his junior college out of state, lays out parties he knows about on four other streets as the boys debate whether they will be “valid” and travel with the “grip” [gun]. Later Christian spots another friend crossing the street towards them, prompting names for him in his condition the previous night, starting with “Saucy,” “Jizzle Man,” and “Birthday Pissy.” “Sauce Boi!” JayVon announces, affecting a patois. Shawn: “We trying to get that like to-niiight.”

I stayed out for a few hours. While catching up with Teddy for the first time since his return from Spofford Juvenile Center, Whiz interrupts, “Hold up, where them cops taking pictures of you?” Christian points out an unmarked police car. A camera lens peers out from the front passenger’s tinted window.
“They just caught the whole picture, dogs,” says Christian, as the vehicle drives off.
Teddy explains that he was photographed earlier this afternoon when he came out of the deli.
“I’m about to make a song, Jeff,” Teddy transitions.
“Yeah?”
“Me and JayVon, we gonna go to the studio,” he says, in reference to an in-home studio around the corner that costs $25 per hour to rent. Teddy and his friends rap about experiences like being photographed by police, which they upload to SoundCloud, YouTube, Facebook, and other social media, sharing and promoting each other’s songs. JayVon, wearing earbuds he borrowed from Whiz, listens to one such track on a phone that is out of service. Later on, Big Chuck, twenty-one, comes out to the block. He was recently let go as a “driver’s helper,” seasonal work he has twice gotten at UPS. Chuck and I chat feet from a newly opened coffee shop that attracts a racially mixed clientele willing to pay $2.45 for a medium cup of coffee. Two classical musicians opened the coffee shop just after an indictment came down on the corner in November 2011. Nineteen males between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five were charged in a conspiracy to possess weapons, following a four-year investigation on the ground and on social media. In this transitioning area, Chuck and I also stand feet from candles and empty Hennessey bottles that serve as a memorial for a twenty-five-year-old recently killed by gunfire.

This dissertation is about coming of age on the street and in the media. It is about universal experiences of adolescence like partying with friends or flirting with the opposite sex that are redefined by the context of the inner-city street. I describe street life as lived by young people today, in person and in media, discerning how widespread changes brought on by networked technology play out on the corner of a changing ghetto.
This dissertation is simultaneously an urban ethnography and a media study. A basic task of ethnography is to show people and their dilemmas up close. We can do an even better job of this by incorporating media. By being online, we see more of what people say and do whether or not we are standing beside them. In this dissertation, we should think of media as both a subject and lens of study, just as media researchers typically do. We can understand how and why technology matters by seeing people through the media they use. Thus each chapter is built around detailed accounts of particular people, on- and offline. These characters guide us through each aspect of social life under consideration. They also reappear across chapters, so we come to know increasingly well people like Christian, JayVon, Sarah, Tiana, Andre, Pastor, Olivia, and Desiree. Each will be introduced in full as we go along. By honing in on individuals, the breadth of this study is not minimized. On the contrary, we hear about a total of 80 named individuals in this research. Given the methodological purchase of networked media, each person may also show us even more about his or her world than before.

Let us now explore a new era in street life, beginning at the border of the street and school.
Chapter 2: SCHOOL DAYS

Introduction

The social setting of the street changes as it is networked online. This simple idea is the focus of this research. We start now at the boundary between the street and school as it shifts through mobile communication. In this chapter, we come away with an appreciation of two things. First, the social life of the street is nurtured remotely, not just in person. One’s support system on their home block is always available online. Young people draw on it throughout the day—before, during, after, or instead of school. Second, school days are a new sort of collective experience that plays out online across the neighborhood. Where one stands in relation to the street and school at a specific time of day or point in life is broadcast locally in order to invite and integrate the plans and reactions of others.

Researchers have described the flow of culture between the street and school in terms of conflict. We start from this observation. Then we expand our understanding of the communication that streams between these domains of urban adolescence.

Street Culture in School

Fieldwork collected in the 1980s and 1990s indicated that street culture had deeply penetrated public schools in segregated and ghettoized sections of New York City (Bourgois 1995; Devine 1996; Mateu-Gelabert and Lune 2007). Based on research inside ten “lower-tier” schools between 1985 and 1994, John Devine concluded, “the schools walls are porous, violence flowing in and out, between community and school” (1996, 41). At least half of all students carried weapons into the buildings under study, according to estimates by school officials and students (36). The school system gave way “like a marshmallow” to a culture of violence in the corridors sustained by students afraid of one another and by ineffective staff control (109).
Building on Devine’s research, Pedro Mateu-Gelabert introduced the notion of a “bidirectional flow” of conflict between the school and neighborhood. Between 1995 and 1997, Mateu-Gelabert collected data on 195 incidents of conflict between a subset of students at a New York City middle school (Mateu-Gelabert 2000; Mateu-Gelabert and Lune 2003). The most common reason behind school conflict was beef between rival blocks. Thirty-nine percent of incidents had a “delayed outcome”: the conflict either originated in school and later moved out to the neighborhood or it started in school and then played out in the neighborhood (Mateu-Gelabert and Lune 2003, 360). In a second study conducted between 1989 and 1994 at a failing high school in the Bronx, Mateu-Gelabert and collaborator Howard Lune found that students had “to become ‘street smart’ inside school in order to stay safe (2007, 186).

The Digital Flow of Street Culture

Today mobile communication links conflict between the school and street. Reflecting upon one facet of high school just weeks before her graduation, nineteen-year-old Eva explained:

If you get into an argument in school or you get into a fight . . . you gonna call your friends and people from the block. “Oh, come pick me up from school, this girl just did so-and-so, I’m a . . . fight her” or “come pick me up, this boy just did this, I want you to come beat him up” or “I feel like she gonna come jump me so come have my back.”

In other words, students can literally call for neighborhood backup from inside school. During confrontations in school in the 1990s, students “often threaten to bring ‘their people’ from the block” but must find their allies inside the building or else afterschool, back on the street (Mateu-Gelabert and Lune 2003, 362). Information now travels faster. A student in school can pick up the phone at the point of conflict. Shortly after his transfer to a school in the Bronx, JayVon and a young woman were involved in an altercation during class. The young woman threatened to have JayVon jumped by boys from her neighborhood by placing a phone call in which she presumably arranged for others to come to the school. JayVon lost his temper and said, “I’ll
shoot you.” JayVon was suspended for several weeks. I collected this account from JayVon (who expressed his regret with these words) and I later witnessed, on one occasion during a visit to his school, a student who appeared to have been thrown out of class make a call in the hallway in which he detailed the confrontation that had apparently just taken place inside the classroom.

Instances of school conflict also migrate into the surrounding neighborhood through their narration on social media. Christian, a success story at his GED school after he passed his equivalency exam, received two disciplinary measures along the way, one of which involved the mobilization of violence through mobile and social media. According to Christian, the incident in the lunchroom began when a classmate named Audra deliberately stepped on one of his new Timberland construction boots, scuffing the toe. Christian got a broom used to sweep the floor and put it in Audra’s hair. She punched him several times. Christian took her wrists, pulled down her arms, and slapped her across the face twice. The two were separated and taken to different floors of the building. After the fight, Audra called two female cousins nearby who entered the school building and went after Christian with a pointed object, most likely a key. They tussled briefly before the fight was broken up. Christian was cut along his forearms and hands. Reports were taken. While still inside school, Christian posted on his Facebook wall: “Foster [Projects] Bitches Tried to Jump me in School Today LMAO [laughing my ass off] Held it down like a nigga from [the Avenue] suppose to” (12:52 p.m.). Christian learned he was suspended and left school. “Outside Feeling Great & Looking Better SUSPENDED for the rest of the week so i got another Vacation ahhhh Life is Great lml [laughing mad loud],” he posts at 1:17 p.m. Christian decided to walk roughly a mile to Foster, posting: “OMW TO FOSTA UH HUH!!!” (2:14 p.m.). When I asked what he intended to do, he told me that he was prepared for a confrontation if he saw the group. Otherwise, he was content with seeing a young woman he sometimes hooks up
with who also lives in Foster and was present in the lunchroom. No confrontation ensued and he visited his classmate.

These three posts and a fourth post two days later that included a nasty “subliminal” toward Audra drew a total of twenty-three likes and forty-one comments from a range of Christian’s Facebook friends. Some were classmates who had seen the incident; others were classmates who had heard about it through Christian’s posts and, in some instances, other on- or offline gossip. About half were people Christian had never met in person; others were friends from the scene around 129th Street and from elsewhere and young women with whom he had been intimate. Christian is a Facebook friend of Audra’s cousin and his profile is public, so it is likely that Audra also saw or at least heard about Christian’s writings.

After serving his suspension, Christian returned to school with his aunt for a meeting. Two of Audra’s uncles (men in their late twenties or early thirties) confronted Christian and his aunt and threatened to “take care of this.” Christian believes that Audra called them when she saw him arrive. The incident ended with no further confrontation. The conflict inside the lunchroom quickly expanded into the neighborhood to involve new participants and audience members. Audra appeared to take the fight seriously. She solicited allies to school right away and a week later when Christian returned from suspension. Audra called (or texted) for “reinforcements” privately. Christian, by contrast, made a public show of it—a tongue-in-cheek Facebook narrative about his attack, suspension-vacation, and pursuit of his female assailants.

If Christian and Audra’s school or JayVon’s school had a metal detector, the antagonists probably would not have had their phones. The conflict would have been contained within the building, until at least one of the students had left the grounds. Phones present the option to call on one’s neighborhood friends or kin before and instead of one’s classmates.
The regulation of mobile communication in school may change how students think about their “backup.” Prior to her enrollment at the high school from which she will graduate, Eva attended ninth grade at a different school, a “scanned” (metal-detector) school on the Upper West Side. Eva said that she and her classmates rarely brought phones into the building (although she occasionally snuck her phone into a small compartment on a wheelchair belonging to a boy classmate who entered through a handicap-accessible entrance). When I asked if being without phone access mattered, Eva indicated, “I had to build a pack in school.” “If you don’t have no communication outside,” Eva continued, “then you have to have real friends in there to survive throughout the day.” “Throughout that whole year, I just developed close friendships with them,” she said. “When we would leave school, they would come to my block; I’d go to their block.” The group evolved from “school friends” to the more intimate category of friends you “chill with” in the neighborhood; friends who are “loyal.” “Then, in school, if something [a confrontation] happened, I got five people walking down the stairs with me.”

Of course, “packs” formed in school before mobile communication. But now young people like Eva may compare their friendship options in school against the availability of their “block friends.”

In “scanned” schools, the stream of conflict usually replicates the “delayed outcome” that Mateu-Gelabert observed in the 1990s. But because conflict often transpires or appears in students’ media it is difficult to isolate matters on either side of the street/school boundary. We can illustrate this point with Eva’s experience as a ninth grader at a “scanned” school. Following an argument with an older girl who attended another school in the building, the two fought in the bathroom. Eva said she won. After the bathroom fight, according to Eva, Eva’s opponent wrote
on Facebook that she was going to have people “air” Eva “out” [i.e, shoot Eva]. Eva’s allies in school brought this to her attention the next day with printouts of the Facebook content.

Weeks later, preparations for a ‘staged fight’ (Mateu-Gelabert and Lune 2003, 363) brewed inside school. The confrontation took place after school about six blocks from the building, by a McDonald’s on West 72d Street. A large swell of students from the co-located schools had gathered. Some students began to video with the phones they had picked up from storage at nearby stores or the “phone truck.” According to Eva, her rival threw a glass bottle and Eva charged her. In the ensuing fight, Eva broke the girl’s jaw.

Video of the fight, which circulated online, came to the attention of the administration. Eva’s case was referred to the Department of Education, which held a “Superintendent’s Suspension Hearing” that revolved around footage retrieved on Facebook. In the eventual outcome, both students were placed at different schools.

That conflict often streams in media does not mean that matters are simply made worse. By leaving a digital trail, antagonism can be easier to manage. In Eva’s case, the Hearing Officer was able to adjudicate an outcome by playing back “what happened.”

The enactment of conflict through digital media and the responses that follow are among the subjects of the forthcoming chapters. But we must first address the other side of the cultural exchange between the school and neighborhood.

**The Flow of Scholastic Culture**

It is not just conflict that streams between these domains. Scholastic aspiration and achievement also flow from the school onto the street. Students call on their friends from the block not simply for backup in a fight but for mutual support in school. In fact, teens may
position their own educational ambitions in terms of the collective potential of their “block friends.” Peers pull each other “up” with talk of making it to college.

About two months before she was scheduled to graduate, 18-year-old Lacey came to school one morning and saw her name posted on the door to the main stairwell. Lacey made the dean’s list for the first time and her name appeared with only fifteen others in a school of about 230 students. She promptly took a picture and sent it in a group text to her mother, father, stepfather, cousin, and “two boys” she was “cool with” from her home block in East Harlem. I asked her why she wanted the boys to know that she had made the dean’s list. “They finished high school but they never kept going to college. So I’m like, ‘if I could do it, you could do it.’” Lacey said that the boys congratulated her and expressed pride in her achievement. Then she added: “But you can’t force nobody to go to school.”

“What did you want them to do?” I asked.

“Instead of standing outside, wasting your time, you could have been a junior in college already,” Lacey replied.

Lacey also might have texted the boys because others’ school success had motivated her own pursuit of college. After she saw photos of her peers at college, Lacey said to herself ‘that’s gonna be me.’” Lacey “never thought she’d see an A” on one peer’s report card until the young woman posted her grades on Instagram: two As, one B, and a C for her second semester as a freshman at a community college in Pennsylvania. Such evidence of academic improvement influenced Lacey to raise her high school grades and to apply to college. Lacey was accepted at Fulton-Montgomery, a community college in upstate New York.

When Eva transferred schools after her fight in ninth grade, she joined Lacey at a high school in Harlem. The two friends will continue on to Fulton-Montgomery, where Eva was also
accepted. After Eva earned high marks for her final high school credits, she took a screenshot of her report card online and texted the image to neighborhood friends and family. She also posted the screenshot on Facebook and Instagram.

Christian’s GED school is located on a different floor of the same “unscanned” building in which Lacey and Eva attend high school. Christian’s favorite teacher was a white man in his twenties who teaches math. I spoke to Christian’s math teacher about his phone policy. He told me that when he began at the school (through Teach For America), he was “a lot more laid back about everything,” including “texting in class.” He initially wanted to distinguish himself from a dean, a middle-aged black man with a background in corrections, who, he thought, was “awful for these kids” because he enforced heavy discipline. The math teacher said that he gradually became stricter about phone use. But students still took out their phones whenever he gave back assignments. His students routinely photograph and upload high marks to social media. The math teacher puts up exemplary work on one wall of his classroom, but his students want this validation to travel beyond the classroom.

This is common practice among the teenagers in this study. They upload not just high grades for specific schoolwork but all markers of scholastic achievement—honor roll and dean’s list designations, report cards, diplomas, certifications, and acceptance letters to high school, college, or other post-secondary educational institutions. These posts always generate supportive feedback. Aside from a playful remark from a close tie (e.g., “my nigga that’s 5th grade math”), I have never observed any criticism or hostility towards another’s academic achievement online.

9 The math teacher told me that he later came to respect the dean’s approach as a form of tough-love.

10 Mobile communication also links teachers to their students. When Christian’s passing GED score came back, the math teacher texted the good news to Christian, who was absent that day. While his union advises against any phone contact with students, the math teacher communicates with several students by phone, fielding a text from one student during our conversation. According to the math teacher, student attendance reaches 50 percent “on a good day.” Like other staff to whom I spoke at the school, he uses cell phones to reach students, even pulling them into school on some occasions.
When I asked Pastor if he could recall any such instance, he said that he could not. I asked Eva and Lacey if either had ever seen any negative comments in response to a photo of another’s success in school. Both pointed to criticism of posts related to a particular local community college that, as Eva explained, “a lot of people say” is “like high school” or “the thirteenth grade” and by going there, “you’re wasting your money.” Aside from that, Eva and Lacey indicated that they had never seen one peer discourage another peer from getting an education. “I never heard nobody say don’t go to college,” Eva confirmed.

*From 129th Street to College*

In April 2011, I observed nineteen-year-old Smalls, an aspiring rapper with tattoos across his chest and arms, engineer a new identity as a college student some 200 miles north of his social base on the corner of 129th Street and Lenox Avenue. Starting on April 4, Smalls wrote a series of posts on his wall related to “GETTING MY COLLEGE SHIT 2 GETHER” for his enrollment in the fall at a SUNY community college. These posts detail the logistics of his first visit to campus—taking the bus, staying in a nearby hotel, going on a tour of the college—as well as his excitement and anxieties. On the morning of his placement exams, he wrote: “I honestly don’t think I know what I got my self in 2 I pray I m ready 4 college,” which prompts supportive comments from two peers and a mentor.

Smalls positions his own college aspirations in terms of a shift in his peer world. On his wall on April 7, Smalls writes:

“THE SUN WILL COME OUT IT WON'T STAY CLOUDY & DARK 4 EVER THEY THOUGHT ALL THE NIGGAS FROM 129TH & LENOX WASN'T GONNA B SHIT NIGGAS R STARTING 2 PROVE ALL THE NAY SAYERS WRONG SO SHOUT OUTS 2 MY NIGGAS THATS MAKING SOMETHING OF THEM SELF”
The post ends with a string of tagged and untagged names of those in college or taking steps towards enrollment. When we speak about the post, Smalls tells me that from “the way everybody was talking, niggas [from 129th Street] was supposed to be in jail or dead.”

“Who were those people who were saying you’re not going to college?” I asked. “People you’d just see in the street and shit like that, like you’d hear somebody mother telling they son ‘leave him alone, he’s not going nowhere’—shit like that.” Smalls uses posts like the one above to boost morale and challenge general perceptions of his friend group in the neighborhood.

Later that month, I drove thirteen of Smalls’s peers from the 129th Street scene to Howard University for a college tour sponsored by a local philanthropist. On the drive back, seventeen-year-old Kaseem called his crew of his boys, “the pussiest generation yet.” He meant this comment as praise. Addressing his friends in the van, boys and girls, Kaseem emphatically argued that his cohort of boys were different from earlier groups that occupied the same corner. “We don’t push nothing. We don’t do none of that. All my niggas’s doing is college . . . . All the top niggas about to go to college, man,” he declared. Others appeared excited. Some detailed their ideas of “the college life.”

About a week after the Howard trip, some of the boys from 129th Street fought their longtime rivals from Lincoln Houses at a party inside an apartment. Shawn, “top five” in the group and a student at a community college in Pennsylvania, was stabbed in the eye. Following multiple operations, Shawn, with his eye intact but without vision in the eye, returned to school. Between trips back for doctors’ visits, Shawn took his final exams, and he managed to complete his first year with a 2.6 GPA.
Over the 2011-12 school year, Kaseem completed his senior year of high school and needed a passing score on the US History Regents to graduate. Shawn finished his sophomore year and raised his GPA to 3.1. He also finalized his transfer to the four-year university associated with his community college.

In the summer of 2012, after he passed his Regents exam, Kaseem graduated high school. He promptly posted a photo of his diploma with the caption “#RealWestSideShit AAAAAHHUUUU.” In the action movie 300, “AAAAHHUUUU” is the Spartans’ battle cry, which the boys from 129th Street adopted as their own fight call. Kaseem appropriated it yet again for a different charge forward.

When we met for lunch one day that summer (of 2012), Kaseem reiterated his intention to go to college. But Kaseem, instead, stayed into the year at his summer job as a custodian at a Harlem Children’s Zone community center. This work turned out to be even more important after his girlfriend became pregnant. They had a baby boy the following summer (August 2013). Being a father brought Kaseem tremendous joy. On Facebook, he regularly uploaded photographs holding, cuddling, and caring for his son. Along with some of these photos, he added a hashtag designed to counter a negative stereotype of black fathers in the neighborhood and in the media. Kaseem included hashtags like “#DeadBeatsKKKK[Killer]” and “#FatherHoodTheBestHood”. Kaseem linked his commitments to work and fatherhood. In one such post, he included a picture of a glistening tiles with the caption, “Look @that floor #Top5MaintenanceMan #WorkingFather”.

Kaseem refashioned slang associated with gangs—“K” to denote killer and “Top5”—to apply to fatherhood and work. He also interspersed posts that paid homage to his block crew, such as “throwback” photographs of their younger days as a fighting group.
Shawn, meanwhile, completed his junior and senior years. He posted his progress along the way and, like Kaseem, integrated documents of personal success with signs of solidarity with his block. On Instagram, he mixed a screenshot of As and Bs in courses like Sociology of Deviance and Modern Dance with a photo from the rap studio while he was in town and pictures of incarcerated friends with captions like “smh i miss my guy.”

When Kaseem graduated from college in May 2014, Kaseem posted a tribute to Shawn and a second “block friend” in Shawn’s graduating class:

My bros really did it this is a fucking Milestone . . . we done been through it all and now my brothers is graduating from college a 4 year university most of yahh niggaz can’t say that about yahh mans you grew up wit we really been through it all fucking wit these streets and now they graduating LOVE YAHH NIGGAZ B

Teenagers with social lives based on the street desire education and a successful adulthood. Some scholars have written that black students from poor urban neighborhoods reject scholastic achievement because they see it as a form of whiteness (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). I find the opposite. Success in school is something to “own”; to broadcast as quickly and as widely as possible; in the form of photographic “evidence” of official documents and graded assignments. Scholastic accomplishment is also an ambition to share specifically with one’s friends from the block, with the goal of collectively making it to college. In the above, we see an understanding of street life as an adventure of adolescence that should end before one’s prospects for adulthood foreclose. As Kaseem writes, it is a “milestone” to “fuck wit these streets” as an adolescent and then to graduate college as a grown man. This trajectory is cause for celebration.

School Days as Networked Experience

Given prideful expressions of scholastic ambition and the absence of anti-education commentary, we may wish to think about schooling in terms of everyday contingencies. Whether a student goes to school in the morning, how long the student stays, and what transpires during
the school day reflect a host of practical and relational issues. What makes these school-day matters specific to the moment is that all of them are mediated on the interpersonal and neighborhood levels. Consider these wall posts from teens who gather around 129th Street:

“imm offthyss goodnightt school in the A.M,” writes one teen, disconnecting to sleep.

“Sleep early no partying for me tonight :( ; Sighs cause i have SATs in the AM;,” shares another.

“Morning ! Omw 2 Skool,” writes Jamal, leaving Harlem for his school in the Bronx.

“Lms [Like My Status] if u not in school,” posts Lee on a Wednesday morning in November.

“Freee Crib,” announces Jamal, right after 9 a.m. on a school day.

“Up early who got the free [house]?? I wana chill,” Cole asks at about 10 a.m. on Thursday morning of Regents week.

“Omw to skool with Olivia,” says Betty, tagging her friend on their commute downtown.

TJ, from school in White Plains: “WHO AT SCHOOL LMS.”

“TRYIN TO GO 5 5 CUZ IM GOING TO BE BY THE BLOCK BY 12,” says JayVon, looking for someone to match his five dollars towards a bag of weed on a Wednesday.

“YOO I HATE WHEN TEACHERS BE WRONG ND TRY TO MAKE YOU WRONG...,” posts Cole.

“home from school wasshup talk 2 me...,” he writes.

Teens write their school days into existence, updating things along the way. They take advantage of mobile communication as a means to coordinate minute-by-minute logistics (Ling and Yttri 2002). Yet they do not limit these discussions to the one-to-one or more insular channels of text messaging. Such private, small communication does transpire, as we will see, but social media allows teens to hash out plans with an entire social scene in mind, one with expanding possibilities of new apartments to hang in or companions with whom to grind out classes. These real-time arrangements intersect with greater expressions (Ling and Yttri 2002) of
where one stands in relation to the street and school, as discussed above. A clustering of these reflective, identity-centered claims usually suggests that a life project is under way. These notions of self may be written into the biographical sections of a profile, where Valleta, for example, indicates she is “Book & Street Smart.” Or they may appear spontaneously, as in posts such as these by young people in the 129th Street scene:

“LENOX AVE IS THE BLOCK IM FROM STREET TAUGHT ME HOW TO POP My guns,” writes JayVon, in verse.

“WHEN I GROW UP I WANNA BE A DOCTOR OR NURSE.. BUT I BE OUT HERE RUNNIN THE STREETS BUT I THINK I CAN MAKE THAT HAPPEN,” reflects a female teen.

“What’s the point of keeping a hood mentality if you don’t plan on spending the rest of your life as a block nigga there isn’t it is pointless,” writes Smalls.

“I.does this school shit; pretty & smart :),” a young woman posts in caption along with a photograph of an honor roll certificate in science and three assignments marked “100%.”

Teens use media to coordinate actions on and off the street, towards and away from school. They motivate themselves and others. But the potential for violence through mobile media dictates the official stance on phones inside the city’s public schools. What the policing of mobile communication really affects are the bonds of perpetual contact.

**Perpetual Contact**

We now turn to a broader literature on mobile communication to better understand what is at stake at the boundary of the street and school. Mobile communication as a field of study expanded significantly after the “Perpetual Contact” workshop at Rutgers University in December 1999. This workshop’s papers became the basis of a book of the same title and a program of research about, as editors James Katz and Mark Aakhus would later say, “how people orchestrate their lives around the possibility of (and ability to refuse) communication” (Aakhus and Katz 2003).
One line of research shows us that mobile communication brings us closer to the people we care about. Ling (2008) uses the term “bounded solidarity” for connectivity to those we hold dear. Licoppe (2004) describes a “connected presence” that close family and friends share throughout the day in the form of short, quick communication (rather than longer, less frequent talk typical of “landline” conversations). Steady contact despite physical separation forms a “telecocoon” around young lovers (Habuchi 2005).

danah boyd’s contribution in Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out (2010a) suggests that among adolescents, such ongoing connectivity between intimates is embedded in a wider peer world. Teens create “networked publics inhabited by their peers. Teens will usually have a small circle of intimate friends with whom they communicate . . . via mobile phones and IM, and a larger peer group that they are connected to via social network sites” (boyd 2008b, 84). When considering teenagers, we should think of perpetual contact in terms of a networked peer world with multiple lines of communication on different scales.

Sherry Turkle (2008) describes the above as a form of “tethering.” Being “always-on” spawns a “social contract” in a given peer world. To take a break may require “good cause to claim time offline” (126). “Tethered teens,” Turkle says, need immediate validation for emerging thoughts and feelings. Such external attunement undercuts the capacity to simply sit quietly with emotions and to learn independence.

We might think differently, however, about perpetual contact in the context of poverty. Horst and Miller (2004) study teenagers and adults in Jamaica and find that ostensibly mundane mobile communication (e.g., “Hi how is everything?”) combines with the possibility of spontaneously giving and receiving help—emotional, spiritual, logistical, financial, and other (Horst and Miller 2004, 96–97).
Because Turkle writes about teenage children of urban professionals who are tethered to their peer world while out shopping at the mall or on a family vacation, it is easy to trivialize this connectivity and the urgency of their thoughts and feelings. But this changes if we look at the teenagers in this study. In a random sample of 1,200 wall posts on public profiles of thirty teens from the 129th Street scene (forty randomly chosen posts by each of fifteen males and fifteen females), 19 percent refer to their emotional state. They express boredom, feelings about the weather, excitement about a party, sentiments towards parents and dating partners, and other points, often mundane, that surely circulate across teen networks everywhere. Then there are other expressions tied to circumstances more densely concentrated in the inner city. Using the initials SMH [shaking my head] or the more emphatic SMFH [shaking my fuckin’ head], we can “see” what the teens around the corner of 129th Street are shaking their heads about. The issue is sometimes as light as phony sports fans, but teens may also be upset about a shooting, the killing of a peer, confinement of their friends in juvenile or adult facilities, an upcoming court date, “snitching” within the community, estrangement from fathers, and other normative experiences in their adolescence. One young woman caring for a newborn while the child’s father is incarcerated writes: “was on the phone with him for like a hour . . . smfh this shit is so sad . . . i love youuu! Free HIM!” Posts a second teen: “Dis world is crazy sum 1 jus got shot an killed on 112 smfh dis gonna b a crazy summer man i can feel it.” Teens tell each other the light and heavy in their lives. The flow of communication is integrated and ongoing.

I apply the concept of “the tethered self” to the street corner because I am interested in the anxiety around perpetual contact. To be tethered means that wherever we are, we are also “elsewhere.” Dalton Conley’s 2009 book Elsewhere, U.S.A. is also about urban professionals and

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11 The final sentences of Turkle’s essay include an implicit invitation to compare her “claims about . . . the always-on/always-on-you culture” beyond “the social class” she writes about (135).
their kids. The “Elsewhere Class” is tethered to the office. Such attachment blurs the boundary between “the world of work and the world of family, play, and relaxation” (Turkle 2008, 131). For school personnel, the fear of street violence is so great that the variety of communication and the educational potential of mobile media cease to matter. For teenagers, they become anxious when faced with the loss of all forms of backup in times of trouble. In the forthcoming sections on JayVon, we come to appreciate just how precious it is for him to have the stability of ongoing contact.

But first we return to our discussion of street culture in school as the justification for policing students and their mobile media.

**Policing Perpetual Contact**

By the 2000s, education research shifted from accounts of a “culture of violence” to a “culture of control” in urban education (Kupchik 2010; Kupchik and Monahan 2006; Monahan and Torres 2010). The origins of this changeover appear in Devine’s study. Following three student murders and a critical injury to a teacher at one high school, the city responded with the first in a long line of investments ($38 million) in policing and technological surveillance (Devine 1996, 75). Police culture towards inner-city teenagers migrated into the school environment. Students were stopped and frisked at the entrance to school; subjected to identity checks, metal detectors, x-ray machines, and other forms of surveillance.

Kathleen Nolan (2011) traced a swift change to a regime of “police in the hallways.” In 1998, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani switched control of security and discipline in public schools from the school board to the police department. School Safety Agents (SSAs) now reported to the NYPD, and police officers increasingly entered schools, particularly after the formation of NYPD’s School Safety Task Force. In 2003, Giuliani’s successor, Mayor Michael
Bloomberg, launched the Impact Schools Initiative, assigning 200 police officers to twenty-two middle schools and high schools with high incidents of violence and low attendance rates (Nolan 2011, 31).

Disciplinary matters previously the school’s domain became police and court issues. The regulation of school days went from one extreme to the other—indifference to criminalization. Given prolonged decline in urban violence (on the streets and in the schools), “the current discipline regime is in disproportionate response to the actual threats youth face” (Kupchik 2010, 5). Scholars like Carla Shedd (forthcoming, 14) speak of a present-day “symbiosis of the public system and the criminal justice system,” or what some advocates for urban youth call the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

Today the policing of the boundary between the school and the street increasingly centers on the mobile phone, a device that “tethers” students to the streets from which they arrived in school. The regulation of mobile phones in urban education fits within a broader framework of phone control by authorities.

When persons are deemed suspicious, their phones are policed. Warrant-based “wiretaps” enable covert investigations. When someone gets arrested, the suspect’s mobile phone is seized. Its location points, call logs, text messages, contact list, and other information stored on the device or remotely by the carrier may become investigative material or electronic evidence in court. Once detained, an inmate’s communication with the outside world shifts to the recorded landlines in the facility.

Law enforcement directs parents to “police” the phones of their kids. A handout distributed at community events and at parent meetings at schools entitled *Patrol Borough*

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12 According to a 2007 NYCLU report entitled *Criminalizing the Classroom: The Over-Policing of New York City Schools*, 200 armed officers and 4,625 school safety agents in public schools across the city make the NYPD’s School Safety Division the fifth-largest police force in the country (Mukherjee 2007).
Manhattan North’s 5 Steps to Identify Gang Involvement emphasizes phone surveillance. Along with book bags and bedroom walls, parents “should” check social media profiles and the pictures, videos, and screen savers on cell phones to determine if their child is in a gang or crew. Parents should ask themselves “why” their kids even “have internet access on their phones” and should consider “eliminat[ing] the media package from the cell phone.”

Inner-city teens associate restrictions on phone access with being punished, not just by parents as in more affluent contexts, but at the hands of institutional authorities. Getting arrested and being jailed means having your mobile phone taken and used against you, along with any future talk on the facility’s recorded lines. Getting picked up for suspected truancy might also lead to phone punishment. During school hours, police may question and pick up anyone under age eighteen without identification and valid proof for not being in school. This scrutiny intensifies on “sweep days” designated by the Department of Education. If a student is picked up in Manhattan, one of two things usually follows: the officer either brings the alleged truant to school—the more common decision—or takes the young person to the truancy center in West Harlem.13

If taken to school, this student will have his or her phone access managed through the two-track system I describe below. If brought to the truancy center, the student will have his or her phone along with any other belongings taken away and stowed. The student then sits quietly until picked up by a parent or guardian, who is brought to school by an SSA, or until 5 p.m. At about 10 a.m. on a school-day morning in 2011, I visited the truancy center inside the Police Athletic League building, a handsome facility with a big gym and a range of programming

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13 As administrators at the truancy center explained during my visit, on any given day police pick up a mix of chronic and occasional truants, those out of school on a ritual or a special occasion cut day, and even some students late on their way to school.
available to PAL participants but not to truants. I waited in the lobby for my contact to arrive as NYPD school safety vans came and went. NYPD officers brought in one group of ten teenagers. The last one, a girl who looked Latina and about fourteen years old, spoke loudly on the phone as she passed through the glass doors. “He violated me,” she said into the phone.

“There was no violation,” said one of the officers escorting her towards the stairwell.

“He a man—he not supposed to put his hands on me,” she continued.

My contact brought me to the truancy room in the lower level of the building where I had a chance to observe for several hours and chat with staff. Two school safety agents—one male, one female—were sitting at a folding table entering intake information by hand in a ledger. When I entered, twenty-three young people, all of whom appeared to be black or Hispanic, were seated in rows. Screens partitioned the rows of young people from the area in which they were searched. A second male/female pair of school safety officers was standing in this area, stocked with tags to check belongings and three Garrett-brand scanning wands. Upon arrival, each young person was searched along with his or her bags and instructed to shut off phones. Phones were placed inside students’ bags and stored on a rack in the truancy room. If students had no bags, their devices were stowed in a connecting office.

I watched young people do nothing for hours. This was not a study hall, as schoolbooks had been taken away. The teenagers shifted and slouched and fiddled in their chairs. They were in police custody without having been charged. This was a holding pen, which, as I was told, has been the format of the truancy program for the last twelve years.

The punishment for being out on the street rather than in school is either to be forcibly taken to school or made to sit quietly in a room, cut off from perpetual contact. But those who go

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14 Prior to my visit, I had participated in a working group to address the integration of services and referrals into the truancy program, which was significantly revamped in 2013.
to school may also be punished with the loss of mobile communication, if they attend a school deemed dangerous. While communication devices have been banned since 1987, not all public school students are prohibited from entering school with their phones, only those passing through metal detectors. The policing of the street/school boundary operates along the two tracks of “scanned” and “unscanned” schools. Scanning ostensibly serves to bar weapons, but it defines more broadly the terms of perpetual contact for students going to school that day. The permanence of metal detectors reflects the decision of the school board at a particular moment that a given school was particularly violent. According to a history of school surveillance policies by Jennifer Weiss, the first set of metal detector systems was installed in forty-one high schools under Mayor David Dinkins in early 1992 (2008, 10; also Devine 1996, 23).\footnote{In the 1991–1992 school year, the teacher’s union logged 129 gun incidents (Weiss 2008, 10).} By 2012, eighty-eight school buildings housing more than 150 schools had permanent detection systems. Magnets are fixed at the entrance of about 7 percent of the city’s 1,200 school buildings. Here the boundary to the street is most stringently sealed. \textit{All} students attending school in these buildings must relinquish phone access for the day. Phones are left at home or else students pay $1 per day to check their devices at a phone-storage truck or nearby deli. Carla prefers the bodega by her “scanned” school in the Bronx because a store “can’t drive away.” While I learned of some successful efforts to sneak phones into “scanned” schools, students basically conform.\footnote{School personnel and students described a variety of successful and unsuccessful strategies students have used to get phones into “scanned” schools, such as the concealment of a phone in one’s underwear or beneath the insole of a sneaker; placement of a phone on outer window ledges (to accessed from inside the building); and taking the device apart and rebuilding it inside school.} As Olivia explains, “they make you take off your shoes. They scan your book bags. It’s like an airport in there.” For students encountering this boundary, the condition for school attendance is the loss of perpetual contact and, in many cases, a daily fee to stow the device off school property.
At some schools without permanent systems, temporary scanning takes place on “roving” metal detector days. This means that about twenty police officers arrive at 6 a.m. to set up the machinery and administer, along with school staff, the scanning of students and vouchering of their phones. All students entering the targeted school temporarily experience the magnetized boundary of “scanned” schools and accompanying loss of phone access. They do not, however, have to pay to check their phones, since vouchered devices are stored in school. It is in the context of the inner-city school that the phone is linked specifically to violence on the street and not just to classroom disruption, cheating, sexual dramas, or bullying as it is in all other schools (Thomas 2008). In 2006, following the introduction of the roving detection program and the newly formalized phone ban, Mayor Bloomberg defended his position by pointing to the use of phones in school to cheat, take photographs in the bathroom, and coordinate gang violence (Weiss 2006). A DOE official told me that “the first issue” behind the phone ban is calling “reinforcements” to school after a fight and the rapid mobilization of large groups in school grounds. An assistant principal at JayVon’s school said that phones are “a safety hazard,” then describes a recent situation in which “a van full of back-up” arrived at school after a fight inside the building. While scanners, searches, and the designation of the school as “persistently dangerous” might be “demoralizing” for students and staff alike, the assistant principal hoped that metal detectors would be permanently installed next year, a likely possibility after a shooting inside the school. The assistant principal also said that phones were “the number one distraction” in the classroom.

But many school buildings serving inner-city students do not have permanently installed metal detectors. This is the less punitive track. At “unscanned” schools, regulations on phones vary widely. Some have an “official” check-in policy, akin to the vouchering system on “roving”
scanner days, that may or may not be enforced. Some schools have no such door policy, allowing students to enter with phones provided they are kept out of sight. The regulations on phones may also vary within the building at the discretion of staff. Valleta, for example, attends an “unscanned” school in Central Harlem where she enters with her phone concealed. As per school policy, she is only free to take out her phone during sixth-period lunch in the cafeteria. But in practice she also takes her phone out during second, fourth, and fifth periods and hides it during first, third, seventh, and eighth, according to her understanding of her teachers. For staff at a given school, the latitude to modify measures follows from the DOE’s Discipline Code. Official “disciplinary responses” for sixth through twelfth graders who bring a phone to school (“Level 1 Insubordinate Behavior”) are a wide set of exclusively in-house interventions, such as “admonishment by pedagogical school staff” or a “student/teacher conference.”

District 79 schools operate mostly in “unscanned” buildings. The district includes about 160 schools or programs designed to serve students who are “under-credited” for their age or otherwise at the edge of a high school education. With the exception of schools inside correctional facilities, District 79 schools and programs tend not to enforce the phone ban too tightly, which, according to one DOE official, stems from a shared understanding that staff serves its student population better by taking a fluid stance toward phones. District 79 students are generally older (sixteen to twenty-one) and, as Christian’s math teacher explains, “they have lives, they have kids."

The Tethered Self on the Street and in School

We now see up close how one student at an “unscanned” District 79 school integrates his school days into the days of his peers, and vice versa. First, we explore JayVon’s phone data

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17 Another DOE official told me that this leniency was due, instead, to a lack of resources.
without following him into school. This point of entry through JayVon’s phone allows us to see the workings of a support system and a social and romantic scene on the street that is active throughout the day among teens in and out of school. Then we link a new set of phone data to face-to-face observations in school to see how digital ties outside the classroom shape dynamics inside the classroom.

To begin, we need some brief background on JayVon and his phone.

JayVon
JayVon’s personal network is sometimes his only resource. I have been with him when he had nothing in his pockets—no identification, money, phone, or MetroCard. But if he is around 129th Street, he can find what he needs from the people there.

JayVon has basically been on his own since age fifteen, when I met him through Pastor. His life had just been uprooted by an incident of violence by his father inside the household on 128th Street where he had been living with his dad, stepmother, and other family members since age nine. JayVon temporarily moved in with his mother in the Bronx. After his father came to his school in violation of an order of protection, JayVon’s mother arranged for a safety transfer during his sophomore year. JayVon left the school on the Upper West Side that he had liked and where he had begun a promising basketball career. He then enrolled at a District 79 school in the Bronx. JayVon stayed only briefly with his mother. Her one-room, one-bed apartment in River Park Towers was too small and JayVon had no allies in this housing project. Months later, at the fast-food restaurant where she worked, his mother told me that she had to take care of herself before she could help JayVon. Estranged from his father and in contact but not living with his mother, JayVon entered an itinerant period, staying with peers and family for weeks or months at
a time, going to school intermittently, and spending much time on or around the corner of 129th Street.

Let us now pick up JayVon at age eighteen, when he enlisted my help “cutting on a phone.” JayVon was the first person I had ever heard use the term “cut on.” I have never had a utility company cut off service because I was unable to pay a bill. Such good fortune is unknown to JayVon for whom having utilities cut off is an experience so common that “cutting on” has come to mean the reinstatement of service. In April 2012, I helped JayVon “cut on” a BlackBerry Curve given him by Tion, one of his friends from 129th Street, with some expectation of later being paid $20. Before Tion’s BlackBerry, JayVon had either borrowed or taken without permission (depending on whose story I believe) a phone from Christian in mid-January, and used it until service expired a few weeks later. JayVon went without steady phone service for most of February and all of March, borrowing phones from several friends and using Facebook to stay connected as best he could. Tion took the SIM card from the BlackBerry for his next phone, so JayVon got a second SIM card from Isaiah. Isaiah gifted JayVon the card (as both acknowledge), which was also loaded with music.

JayVon inserted the SIM card and brought the BlackBerry to a BoostMobile retailer at one of many multi-purpose stores on 125th Street that compete with Verizon, Sprint, and other big providers along the same shopping artery. Inside Fortune Jewelers, past the displays with “Gucci” and “Cuban” link gold chains and videogames, the store’s phone specialist charged JayVon $10 to activate the BlackBerry plus $60 for the first month of service. The phone serviceperson told JayVon that his monthly cost would eventually go down to $45 per month if he was timely with payments for the next eighteen months. I conferenced with JayVon, who had expected to pay the advertised $45 rate with money his godfather had given him, and a $10
connection fee with my help. I agreed to cover the balance and JayVon handed over the money. Five minutes later, the man handed it back, taking no personal information from JayVon as he assigned him a “646” number. The service included “unlimited talk, text, and web.” JayVon intended to pay his bills in cash at the store. “Have a good day,” said JayVon, who got on the phone as soon as we exited the store.

To whom is JayVon tethered through his BlackBerry? How do these ties shape his attachments to the street and to school?

*JayVon’s BlackBerry*

About a month after JayVon activated the BlackBerry handed down to him, he graciously allowed me to download the contents of his phone. Together we analyzed his contact list, noting the nature of each relationship and whether he was still in touch with each of these people a month after I downloaded his network. The meaning of his personal network and its centrality on the corner came to life in this examination. Of his 124 contacts, he could find fifty-four on a given day on the corner of 129th Street and Lenox Avenue. Seventeen of these fifty-four he considers “bro.” These are not friends but putative kin, some of whom he has known since early childhood. Six of the fifty-four he considers “sis.” These dear, platonic ties are also granted familial status. One is the older (genealogical) sister of one of his “bros”: she is “big sis.” Including his “cousin” Christian, twenty-four adoptive family members (beloved peers in their teens and early twenties) are centered around 129th Street. He remains in touch with all of them a month later.

JayVon’s network includes a set of six males over the age of thirty whom he knows in the context of the corner. These men he places in the category of “old head.” Three are outreach workers organized by Project KeepAlive. Another shares leads on work, once helping to place
JayVon as a busboy at a local restaurant. The last two are white men, including myself, listed in JayVon’s contacts as “Mentor Jeff,” and a man who volunteers at the Mormon church on the corner of 128th Street, where the boys play basketball on Thursday nights. We are the only white people in his contact list.

Also from the 129th Street scene are six female contacts he designates as “friend,” including “Bestfriend Bea,” the girlfriend of an incarcerated “cousin,” and his “diary.” Five of these six remain in his life a month later. Then there are sixteen women who do not live in the immediate vicinity of the corner but become part of the scene for some time through JayVon or one of his “bros.” These girls presently or used to “talk to” one or more of the boys in the scene. In some instances, these connections progressed to boyfriend/girlfriend status and JayVon calls five of these young women “ex-girlfriends.” These ties are unstable; JayVon is estranged from twelve of the sixteen after a month (if not sooner). This leaves two other contacts around this corner: the mother of an incarcerated “bro” currently unlisted in his contacts and “Weed Man” (a marijuana dealer).

Beyond the corner, JayVon’s other contacts play a similar set of roles as well as some new ones. He has other adoptive kin at the peer level (i.e., “bro,” “sis,” “cousin”); a previous basketball coach he considers an “old head”; “friends” of both sexes; and a large contingency of forty-four females in the unstable category of romantic/sexual interest (i.e., a girl he or one of his “bros” “talks to,” “cuffs [dates],” or used to date). Then we find additional putative or blood kin, some at least a generation older. Many are clustered on several different blocks in Harlem, each about a half-mile from 129th Street and Lenox Avenue. Others are in the Bronx or in Brooklyn. Along with the families of his 129th Street “bros,” these family members have let JayVon live with them at different points. This group includes his mother, “blood” siblings and stepsiblings,
his grandfather (a stepfather’s father), and his godfather Bernard, among other close adult ties. Finally, his contact list includes a set of vendors based on three separate blocks who sell clothing and accessories to JayVon.

We see the “personal community” (Henry 1958) that JayVon has etched into his phone. It is based on the people he finds principally around one corner and a few other blocks. He turns to these ties for a place to sleep, support and advice, companionship, pleasure, and other needs. His peer dating and social life centers here and not in school. Of all his contacts, only fourteen are ties from any of the four schools he has attended.

As we might expect given this phase in his life, JayVon calls on this network more than this network calls on him. Along with JayVon’s contact list, I downloaded ten consecutive days (April 30–May 9, 2012) of call logs and text messages, which we then reviewed together. During this period, he placed 535 calls and received 252 calls, calling others more than twice (2.12) as many times as they called him.18 This asymmetry was less pronounced for text messages: he sent 936 texts and received 845. Much of this communication links JayVon to the corner: eight of the ten individuals with whom he interacted most often (both in terms of calls and texts) meet on 129th Street.

In his study of black men who congregate on a street in a ghetto of Washington, DC, Elliot Liebow (1967, 161) claimed that “in the streetcorner world,” “an individual’s energies, concerns, and time . . . are almost entirely given over to the construction and maintenance of personal relationships.” Liebow’s claim is even more evident in the contemporary world of perpetual contact, as JayVon’s case shows. JayVon sustains a high volume of phone activity throughout the ten-day period of observation. Each day, he averages roughly seventy-nine calls

18 In one case, data on call direction was unavailable.
and 178 text messages (incoming and outgoing). The only period without any calls or texts across all ten days is the hour between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m.

Because JayVon attends an “unscanned” school, we can see—just by looking at his phone data—how perpetual contact plays out across the street/school boundary. During the weekdays under review, the amount of time JayVon spent in school varied from most of the school day after a late arrival to none at all. If we go by JayVon’s school day, which begins at 8:40 a.m. and ends at 3:05 p.m. (excluding his lunch period), his average daily total of calls or texts (incoming or outgoing) during class periods is 107. This phone activity connects JayVon to forty-one school-age peers (under twenty-one), twelve adults, and four unrecognized numbers. If we exclude all communications with those twenty-one or over who are no longer entitled to a public education (along with the unrecognized numbers), JayVon exchanges about eighty-six calls/texts per school day or about fifteen calls/texts per hour of class time with peers who might be in school. JayVon’s school days are linked to the days of his peers through mobile communication.

If we think about connectivity to the corner, 69 percent of JayVon’s phone activity during school time is with ties based on 129th Street.¹⁹ He interacts with thirty-two street-corner contacts during school days—old heads and other adults, his adoptive peer family, and girls he is talking to. For every hour of presumed class time, JayVon exchanges roughly thirteen calls/texts with his social world on the corner of 129th Street.

The nature of this communication ranges. Let us consider a few examples that illustrate both the multidimensionality of street-corner ties and the networked negotiation of school days. On a Wednesday morning, JayVon wakes up at Isaiah’s mother’s apartment, where he spent the

¹⁹ I exclude eleven calls/texts with unrecognized numbers.
previous night. At 9:04 a.m., he texts a sis from the corner scene. He relays a request from a mutual bro that she visit him in Rikers this Sunday. The incarcerated bro—eighteen years old and serving twenty more months—calls JayVon often, and JayVon helps keep his support chain going. Seconds later, he returns a text from the night before from a girl named Serena whom he met recently on 129th Street: “wyd [What are you doing?] good morning.” Fifteen seconds later, he texts an outreach worker: “Good morning.” He hopes to secure financial help to pay for a ticket for having jumped the turnstile. The unpaid ticket has produced an arrest warrant. A message comes in from Paulette, another girl he recently started talking to: “Whassup😊,” she writes. At 9:06 a.m., Paulette responds with her whereabouts: “School. What time you get out,” he asks (9:09 a.m.). “3,” she responds (9:10 a.m).

JayVon’s sis writes back about the requested Rikers visit: “I know I know” (9:10 a.m.). JayVon writes to Paulette throughout her school day, sending messages like “you having a good day in skool so far” (9:46 a.m.) and “Walk pass lenox before you go to dance practice today alright” (10:25 a.m.). Later, when he does not see her on the corner, he texts “Where you at?” (3:14 p.m.). She writes back the next minute that she is still in school “takeing my test.” JayVon wishes her well: “Ok hope you past it” (3:15 p.m.).

At 9:26 a.m., he initiates a text exchange with a girl from the Bronx who attends a school in Harlem near the apartment he is in: “Wyud [What are you doing?]” (9:30 a.m.). “In school wby [what about you]” (9:30 a.m.), she responds. “Nothing in the house just sittin on the couch dressed idk [I don’t know] if I want to get up thoo” (9:31 a.m.). JayVon is deciding to play hooky. “Lolss get up,” she tells him seconds later. “you trying to stay in skool you can come with a friend if you want to my house I really don’t feel like going to skool” (9:33 a.m.). She declines, and mentions in a later text that her boyfriend has a baseball game she might attend.
Within twenty minutes of his attempt to draw one girl out of school to join him at the apartment, he encourages a second girl, Olivia, his friend, to “make sure you make your way to skool” (9:50 a.m.). “I am,” she replies seconds later. “Yo,” texts one of his bros from 129th Street (9:54 a.m.). “Wya [Where you at?]” (9:56 a.m.), JayVon writes back. At around noon, JayVon tries again with the outreach worker who previously indicated that he could help JayVon with the ticket. “Hit me up bro,” he writes. Then he hears from a sis from 129th Street that she has an HTC phone to sell him, knowing that JayVon wants to replace his BlackBerry, which has been coming apart.

JayVon skips school but stays busy sending and receiving 115 calls/texts during school hours, communicating principally within but also beyond his street-corner world, working to secure companionship and perhaps sex, money for court fees, a replacement phone, and school supplies from Staples. He lends support to dear friends and fends off boredom. His day off intersects with the school days of others.

On the days JayVon attends school, he actively manages relationships outside its walls. After a morning blunt-smoking session on the corner, he heads to school where he posts on Facebook about his “cypher with the bros.” In class, he writes to his dear female friend, Joy, who lives in a housing project south of 129th Street: “Good morning sis love you” (10:15 a.m.). He follows this platonic expression with a different message to a girl named Aruni, now part of the 129th Street scene: “Good morning sexy :)” (10:17 a.m.). His girlfriend writes him minutes later; she smoked this morning also and asks: “Can you buy me food after schoo :)” (10:20 a.m.). He hears back from Joy: “Love you too” (10:27 a.m.). Joy inquires if JayVon is in school. “Skool time,” he responds. She expresses her approval: “I was waiting for you to say that” (10:50 a.m.).
Then she tries to shift his attention towards class: “Lol do your work thou[gh]”. “I Dnt wanna have to beat chu” (11:08 a.m.).

For the next hour, JayVon arranges to meet his girlfriend after school while chatting with Aruni. Just before noon, his sis from the corner enlists his help for finding a buyer for a 2012 gray XL “biggie” (down jacket) that she is looking to sell out of season. After lunch, scrambling to cobble together money to pay his monthly phone bill before his service is cut, JayVon reaches out to a second outreach worker: “Yooo Ray I’m in skool but I need a favor soo my phone can cut on I got 40 all I need is 20 to cut it on its 60 for my bill” (1:34 p.m.). In the last hour and twenty minutes of his school day, JayVon receives texts or calls from three of his bros from 129th Street to arrange their meet-up. “Omw to the hood” (3:20 p.m.), he texts one of them.

During this day in school, JayVon nurtures the same street-corner support system he will rely on that night when he learns that his older blood brother agreed to a plea bargain carrying a sentence of seventeen years to life in prison. At 1 a.m., he posts this news on his wall: “damn life can’t get any worser smfh.” The post generates likes or supportive comments from six core friends from 129th Street.

JayVon links his school days to those of numerous young women at different schools. When JayVon is out of school, he pursues the company, or at least attention, of girls he is interested in romantically or sexually, regardless of their whereabouts. On one occasion, when I met JayVon for lunch on a day he skipped school, he spent much of our time together texting a girl he had recently met who had gone to school that day. He put heavy demands on her attention: “I’m trying to keep a conversation with her,” he said to me. He encouraged his female friend, Olivia, to attend school, while his platonic tie Joy supported him in his school day.
JayVon resolves the question whether to spend a given day on the street or in school by 
“being” in both places at once. He need not choose one domain or the other because of his 
enrollment in an “unscanned” school. While in school, JayVon participates in the social and 
romantic possibilities of the street. And he gives and takes from this support system. The 
provisions JayVon secures each day are based on his being around to take them whenever they 
are offered or may be extracted through his persistence. Fittingly, JayVon exerts tremendous 
effort to keep his phone on, not just in terms of finding money to pay the bill but keeping battery 
power throughout the day. When he goes to school, he relies on certain school personnel to plug 
his phone in. During the ten-day period of phone activity I studied, JayVon pressed the 
emergency call button on his phone thirteen times in order to activate a small amount of battery 
power stored for this purpose. The button places a call to 911, which he ends before it goes 
through. As we see in greater depth below, JayVon appears to spend his school days in a “middle 
zone” between the street and school.

I have relied on JayVon’s phone data and his insights to understand a pattern of 
communication that links school days across a wide set of peers, principally from one corner but 
also from other parts of the city. By focusing on JayVon, I push the possibility of what we can 
see of a world through just one person’s use of networked media, a strategy employed 
throughout this dissertation.

But what does this telephonic activity look like inside of school? Imagine being a teacher 
in a classroom full of students, each of whom is tethered to relationships outside. How does 
JayVon negotiate being in two places at once across a particularly charged threshold?

I now integrate face-to-face observations of JayVon’s experiences both inside and outside 
of school with the kind of phone data just discussed. To do so, I need to skip to February 2013,
when I obtained the necessary permission to shadow JayVon in school. By this time, JayVon had a new phone and service plan.

*JayVon’s iPhone*

In June of 2012, JayVon’s godfather Bernard assumed a larger support role in JayVon’s life, allowing him to stay in a house that he shares with his own mother in Brooklyn. Bernard bought JayVon an iPhone, adding JayVon to an AT&T family plan and agreeing to pay for his data plan each month. JayVon passed along his battered BlackBerry to an older friend from the corner. After JayVon lost his iPhone on a bus, my wife gave him her old iPhone when she qualified for an upgrade. Beginning in late February 2013, I accompanied JayVon to his school over multiple weeks. JayVon was again kind enough to share his phone data, which allowed me to match what I saw in person with his mediated communication. With JayVon as our guide, we will see how the boundary between the street and school is managed in three classroom communities spanning two five-week grading “cycles.”

JayVon’s curriculum is based on five-week cycles, during which students take two intensive courses, each meeting either once or twice a day for ninety-five minutes each time. This schedule is designed in part to prevent students with irregular attendance levels throughout the year from falling too far behind. Each cycle presents a fresh opportunity to earn credits towards graduation. JayVon proudly showed me his attendance award for the cycle that ended in late January. Since then, however, his attendance has plummeted. We begin this observational phase on a Monday in late February, at the start of week five of the current cycle.

JayVon gets up Monday morning and writes on his wall at 7:08 a.m., “WHO TRYING TO GET SMOKEY WITH YOUR BOY THIS MORNING”. Cole likes the post and writes “wasshup”. Since staying in Brooklyn with his godfather, JayVon comes to the corner of 129th
Street almost every morning to see his bros. Sometimes they smoke a blunt, and JayVon eventually continues on to school or else plays hooky at Christian’s house or another “free crib.” If warm enough, they may hang out on the block and in the stores. If he goes to school, JayVon almost always returns to the block afterwards before returning to Bernard’s place in Brooklyn. Sometimes he spends the night in Harlem instead.

On this brisk and clear morning in February, JayVon exchanges “good morning” texts with a female interest named Venise at about 7:30 a.m. before leaving the house for the corner of 129th Street. When he gets off the train in Harlem, he runs into his stepmother, and she takes him for breakfast at McDonald’s. Instead of his smoking session, JayVon happily takes the opportunity to eat a sausage-and-egg McMuffin (he often leaves the house without breakfast) and spend time with his stepmother. A few minutes before 10 a.m., we meet up on 129th Street to travel to JayVon’s school.

JayVon wears a black three-quarters jacket over a grey hoodie, sagging True Religion jeans, and green Nike AF1s. On the subway ride and walk to school, JayVon listens to hip-hop, mostly French Montana, a famous rapper who also attended high school in the Bronx. He alternates his blue earbuds between two music sources, his iPhone and an iPod. All three of these items came from someone else. He puts his hood on and bops his head.

At about 10:20 a.m., we arrive at JayVon’s school, which is “co-located” with three other autonomous schools in the same building. As we walk up the school steps, JayVon takes off his headphones. He greets the two uniformed school safety officers and swipes his school ID. I present my driver’s license and sign in as a visitor. A sign on a wall behind the guards’ desk reads “CELLULAR PHONES NOT PERMITTED IN THE BUILDING”. We missed JayVon’s
forty-five-minute “Advisory” period from 8:45 a.m. to 9:25 a.m. and arrive at his ninety-five-minute “A Slot” class more than halfway through the period.

Margaret’s Class

JayVon knocks on the door. JayVon’s A-Slot teacher, a tall white woman named Margaret, opens the classroom door. She looks surprised and tells me in the hallway that this is the first time she has seen JayVon this cycle. JayVon has missed all four weeks of Margaret’s social studies and language course called “America Después de 1492—Contacto y Conquista.” I later hear from Flor, who teaches JayVon’s B-slot science course, that he has come to only three of her classes during this stretch. This week, however, JayVon can still make up ground towards his yearlong portfolio-based assessments in social studies and science (an alternative form of evaluation to the state Regents exams).

Margaret, who started in public education four years ago after a twenty-year corporate career in brand management, goes over to JayVon, seated at a desk, and asks him, “How are you doing this morning?” JayVon, sheepish, says nothing and takes the handout she gives him. There are thirteen other students in the room, including a tall student named Benny who arrives after JayVon to eat his breakfast at a desk with earbuds in his ears, rap playing. When she asks where he has been, Benny says he had to help his sister move from the Bronx to New Jersey. Three other students have headphones on but are not necessarily tuning out the day’s tasks; in fact, music, if played lightly for “concentration,” is permitted, according to a sign in the classroom, and seems to abet some students’ productivity. For the most part, students tend to their devices intermittently while working on their own as Margaret circulates to discuss content and class standing individually.
Margaret lends a pen to JayVon, who arrives without a bookbag or school supplies (and maintains no locker in school). She instructs him to read a passage on how the Americas changed after Columbus arrived in 1492, highlighting key points and making annotations in the sidebar. After she leaves JayVon to work with another student, he calls out for a highlighter stored in an empty coffee can.

“It’s self-service in this classroom,” Margaret responds.

“Cause you were closer that’s why I asked,” JayVon says. JayVon works diligently for about fifteen minutes straight with a pen in one hand, highlighter in the other, before consulting his phone. He neither receives nor sends any text messages during Margaret’s class. Later, Margaret sits with him for about ten minutes and he reviews with her what he thinks the passage is about. When the period ends, JayVon indicates that he will return after lunch for C Slot with Margaret again.

In the hallway, JayVon’s principal greets him warmly before lightly admonishing him for having his phone out. Students and staff alike ask JayVon where he has been. He says “stomach problems” or “stomach virus.” He hugs some of the female students he passes while greeting some of the male students with a handshake sometimes associated with a cross-borough gang. In the stairwell on the way to his B-Slot class at 11:10 a.m., he puts on his headphones to listen through YouTube to Harlem rapper Juelz Santana before running into a friend from a school on another floor. When we arrive in his science classroom, his teacher, Flor, instructs JayVon to report to the attendance office on the floor we just left. An administrator named Rosa gives JayVon a big hug when he walks into her office. They chat and Rosa wants to know where JayVon has been and if he is okay. JayVon tells Rosa that he had a stomach virus. Rosa asks for a doctor’s note and tells him that she will “close out” his “407” if he attends the rest of his
classes this week. Closing his 407 means that procedures towards his discharge from the school cease.

After what proves to be a strong return week for JayVon, Rosa closes his 407 case. JayVon attends school from Monday through Thursday before missing Friday. He works on portfolio material during class time, lunch periods, afterschool hours, and as homework. Though he is late each day and smokes on two mornings, he pushes himself and his teachers in an effort to receive credit for the cycle. His teachers play along without any intention of giving him credit. Throughout his catch-up efforts, JayVon fights chronic hunger and stomach discomfort. JayVon suffers from undiagnosed gastrointestinal issues presumably related to stress, missed and irregular meals, and the deli foods he partially subsists on (avoiding the free lunch at school, which he finds repulsive).

On his first Monday back, JayVon’s phone activity picks up as he heads for Flor’s B-Slot science class. He trades calls in the hallway and then texts in class with the friend he passed in the stairwell. This friend, who lives in Harlem, considers leaving school early but JayVon texts back: “I got to stay to 3:05 everyday.” JayVon makes it to 3:05. During his last period (“C Slot”), a second session of Margaret’s course, however, JayVon and many of the other eleven students in attendance increasingly tend to mediated interactions. After getting a female student’s number in the hallway, JayVon takes a call from his mother, just as he enters Margaret’s classroom. Margaret directs him to go outside and JayVon exits. Just as he returns, his mother calls for a second time. JayVon exits and returns once more. Another student’s phone rings shortly after, and then Margaret’s phone goes off. Some of the students get excited and Margaret seems embarrassed. JayVon fields another call during class from a sis. The calls from his mother and sis are semi-emergencies. His mom wants to know if JayVon has any knowledge of his (blood)
sister’s whereabouts, as she did not return home to her boyfriend last night. His sis appeals to JayVon for support in the aftermath of being a victim of sexual assault. “Love you,” he texts his sis after the call. On his phone in Margaret’s class, JayVon integrates personal communication with schoolwork. He checks Facebook and Googles material for the Christopher Columbus project.

Margaret increasingly struggles to keep her students’ attention focused on work. Margaret conferences with a female student enraptured in Facebook correspondence through the iPhone she operates in her desk drawer. “I’m watching someone who should be my best student falter,” says Margaret, who instructs the student to leave her “boy problems” outside. Margaret tells Benny, also on Facebook, to put his phone away.

“I’m talking to my mom,” he says.

“What are you going to be working on this period?” Margaret asks. She lists a set of assignments he needs to complete. Benny places his phone on his desk and tends to the device throughout the period. “Make sure you’re using your phone appropriately,” she later calls to Benny. Throughout the week, Margaret and Benny—and Margaret and many other students—go back and forth like this. On Thursday she says to him, “The only reason why I should see your phone out is if you’re doing research.” Doing research or listening to music constitutes appropriate phone use in Margaret’s class, where a cart of laptops is always available. Students sometimes use them, but Wi-Fi connections are often slower on the laptops than on students’ phones. I hear from Margaret that the time it takes to power up a laptop, log onto the school network, and get online makes these laptops less attractive than personal devices.
On Tuesday morning of his week back, JayVon and I walk up the stairs on the way to Flor’s B-Slot science class. JayVon doubles over the bannister on the stairs, feeling as if he needs to vomit. On this day, he has eaten only cream-filled cookies and drunk a Sprite after a morning smoking session. I ask if he wants to go to the nurse to get something for his stomach. JayVon grimaces and says no.

Including JayVon, fifteen of the twenty-eight students enrolled in Flor’s science class are present. They sit at desks arranged in a circle. Eight of the fifteen students engage with devices despite Flor’s announcement of the “early bird special.” The early bird special provides a chance for students to earn points towards their grade during the first fifteen minutes of class time. Today these points are based on discussion participation and “not being on your cell phone.” Six of the eight students make no effort to conceal their phone use. JayVon and the student to his right obscure their phones. JayVon rests a folder against the back of his desk and top of his thigh, operating his phone behind this shield. His neighbor uses a black deli bag and a soda can as his props. JayVon is mostly concerned with his text exchange with Sunny, a girl he used to be involved with romantically but has fallen out with. This morning, texting from her school, Sunny reinitiated communication: “Wyd bby [What are you doing, baby?]”. Sunny and JayVon exchange fourteen texts over the last fifteen minutes of Margaret’s class and another twenty-one texts during Flor’s class. Sunny wants JayVon to get her from her school at the end of the day. JayVon, who explains, “I got beef up there,” convinces Sunny to meet him on the corner of 129th Street. “Omg I gotta wlk tu Lenox,” she complains.

During the early bird special, JayVon is mostly focused on Sunny but then his attention shifts to the classroom and his phone becomes a “secondary involvement” (Goffman 1967). Flor
asks students to share their answers to a handout pertaining to the microscope activity they completed the previous day. JayVon answers questions about magnification and plant cells. Benny, earbuds in, suddenly raps aloud with the chorus of a song by Chicago-based rapper Lil’ Reese: “But I’m out here in these streets—catch me in traffic.”

On the Monday of JayVon’s second week back, Flor distributes a “survey” (a euphemism for a test) to evaluate students’ understanding of material covered the previous week on genes and the logic of scientific research. The same survey was completed and gone over in class as an ungraded “diagnostic.” Flor directs the twelve students present to spread out to take the survey. “You cannot be on your phone because I don’t know what’s on there,” announces Flor. But some students have already begun playing music through their headphones. Flor concedes that phones may be used exclusively for music listening. Nine of the twelve students take the survey with headphones on. She admonishes Benny for typing on his phone: “You cannot be on your cell phone like that.”

JayVon starts the survey without music but then inserts his blue earbuds. He raps aloud with Chicago-based rapper Chief Keef: “I’m doin’ everything, you not doing anything. And my boys stay strapped.”

Students who have completed the survey transition to independent work. Some students work productively on essays and other material. Others do almost nothing related to the course. Over the ninety-five-minute period, Flor admonishes students for improper phone use on eighteen occasions. Sometimes these admonishments stand alone; other times they are part of a package of grievances along with sagging pants, failing to sign out before using the bathroom, or chatting with neighbors.
During lunch, I returned to ask Flor about phone use in her classroom and why she relented during the survey. She explained that she expects students to keep phones tucked away as per school policy. When students deviate, she docks participation grades, which represent 30 percent of total grades. She says that proper use of the phone entails using the dictionary, doing online research (which she also reports is faster on phones than on classroom laptops), and typing papers. She says that she allows music for two reasons: other teachers allow it so students expect this option, and some students “can’t be quiet” or cannot handle silence, so a bit of noise helps them “concentrate.”

Flor is available to her students several hours before classes start, after school ends, and during lunch. In her classroom, she provides school supplies and internet-enabled laptops so, as she puts it, students only have to “bring their bodies.” She puts her students in a position to succeed in her class if they attend, behave, and complete assignments. A large student-made sign lists “ways to gain points” that include “being on time,” “doing class work,” and “being friendly (the person doesn’t have to be your friend).” Alongside this list is another on “ways to lose points,” such as “using electronics,” “throwing things,” and “sucking teeth/laughing inappropriately.” Conduct—inclusive of doing the right thing with one’s phone—is a primary basis of student evaluation in this classroom community.

Jason’s Class

JayVon did not earn any credit for his cycle with Margaret and Flor. But he does the following cycle when he takes English with Jason and math with Nate. Jason is one of JayVon’s favorite teachers. The previous February (2012), after another cycle for which he received no credit because he was “excessively absent,” JayVon started the next cycle with Jason. JayVon expressed tremendous enthusiasm for Jason’s course, showing me on one occasion a worksheet
entitled “Electronic Media & Rhetoric,” which asked for explanations of lyrics by rappers Jay-Z and Common. Other materials that resonated for JayVon that cycle included writings by Danny Hoch and an excerpt of work by June Jordan that explored her experiences learning how to fight while growing up in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

On a Wednesday while I observe his B-Slot class, Jason introduces the curriculum and goals for his English course before jumping into short written exercises and a preview of their first significant writing assignment. The tempo is fast. During the lesson, he repeatedly draws on hip-hop—what plays in many students’ earbuds throughout the day—and specifically the tension between the street and school as explored in the genre. JayVon inches forward in his chair.

The “Do Now” projected onto the SmartBoard asks students to interpret a quote from the television journalist Jessica Savage: “No matter how many goals you have achieved, you must set your sights on a higher one.” The pursuit of goals is one theme for today. Jason plays three songs from his laptop: Biggie’s “Juicy,” 2Pac’s “Changes,” and “Love’s Gonna Get’cha (Material Love)” by Boogie Down Productions. Jason says that these songs from the 1990s resonated for him while he was coming of age. Students rap along to the first two while the third seems unfamiliar.

Jason asks the fifteen students present to identify the theme and characterization of the protagonist in each song. The class decides that “rags to riches” is the theme of “Juicy.” They describe the protagonist as ambitious and hungry, both “dreamer” and “hard worker.” To be a well-compensated rapper requires goal setting and “hard work,” says Jason, noting the same effort is required of being a doctor or a drug dealer, a profession that the protagonist has given up to focus on music. In the song by Boogie Down Productions, the protagonist, a B+ student in
middle school, falls in love with material things. He “loses sight of what is important,” Jason writes on the board. He drops out of school to pursue a drug career that produces short-term financial gain before bringing violence upon his brother and his “crew.”

Jason segues to the goals of the course, drawing on the dilemmas in the songs. The “primary goal” is to “graduate high school” or “get the hell out of dodge” and onto “more exciting and important things.” The “secondary goal,” tied to the first, is to “pass the English Regents,” and the use of hip-hop is “my way of kinda tricking you guys into poetry.” The exam, which incorporates poetry, is the lone state exam students at the school must pass to graduate.

Jason, a PhD candidate in Urban Education with ten years of DOE experience, exploits hip-hop throughout the period. After the three songs, Jason reads aloud an excerpt called “Art With No Easel,” adapted from Jay-Z’s book Decoded. The passage highlights continuities between poets, rappers, and hustlers, all of whom “bend language, improvise, and invent new ways of speaking truth” (56). The reading and a set of questions lay the foundation for the first essay Jason assigns his students, using a prompt from the Regents.

The pace and content appear to engage the class, with the exception of a couple of students who seem tuned out. When a student who is told to put away her phone does not, Jason takes it from her and places it on his desk until the end of class. JayVon asks several questions and works on handouts. He checks Facebook and texts sparingly from inside the desk slot. Over the period, he receives four text messages and sends five texts, spanning two conversations. In one conversation, he texts with Isaiah and another friend from the corner of 129th Street about an embarrassing photo one of them has found of two rivals from St. Nicholas Houses. In the other, JayVon and Venise flirt.
Jason moves the action faster and varies tasks more often than Margaret or Flor does. Students tend to their phones in Jason’s class but they do so with quick consultations consistent with the staccato of the room. No student/teacher dramas open around questions of phone rights.

In math class during C Slot, JayVon, between geometry exercises, posts twice on his wall. At 1:40 p.m., he writes, “ABOUT TO GET OUT SKOOL THEN OFF TO THE ISLAND [Rikers Island] TO SEE MY BRO”. At 2:30 p.m., he uploads a photo of his completed geometry work with the caption “ALWAYS GET MY WORK DONE AIN’T NO FEMALE WANT NO DUMB NIGGA”. The post draws ten likes, including two from “bros” and a third from an older guy who coordinates the drug trade on the corner of 129th Street.

The Mediation of the Street

The above depictions show us that the rhythm of the school day and of classroom instruction has been altered by students’ use of digital media. Students sustain connections to their world outside of school, which includes for JayVon his ties to the street-corner world around 129th Street, a friend on a different floor of his school building, young women at other schools, and his mother and other family and friends elsewhere. Along with this external connectivity, students also draw their attention inwardly to music that plays through their headphones, “sounding out” their experience of school, not just their commute (Bull 2000).

This continuous engagement with personal and networked media forces us to think differently about attendance. We typically assume a student is either in or out of school at a given moment. A teenager’s presence in school exists on a continuum confined by time and space. On one end of the spectrum is arrival to first period on time and completion of the entire school day. On the other end lies absence. Over repeated days, a given’s student standing in school ranges from the student with perfect attendance to the “dropout.” But things are not as cut
and dried now. A teenager’s attention and experience inside school readily streams outside this domain.

One important stream of consciousness is the digital street. By remaining connected online, teens can be “ever present” on the street where they hang out, even when physically absent. While inside school, teens may engage with a block-based community of peers, dating prospects, and outreach workers. This digital presence depends on the status of a student’s phone (e.g., whether “cut on” or cut off) and entryway into the building (i.e., “scanned” or “unscanned school”). Within “unscanned” schools, connectivity varies in terms of the negotiations between students and staff.

But my accounts inside Margaret’s classroom and Flor’s classroom suggest that the age-old tussle for student cooperation typically revolves around phone privileges generally, not necessarily communication across the street/school boundary. At the same time, Jason is the only teacher to leverage his students’ attunement to media (Garcia and Morrell 2013), which he accomplishes by relating instructional goals to depictions of street life in mass media. As a graduate student of Urban Education, Jason knows that rap music is used as a bridge to classic poetry (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008) as well as a tool to “make viable connections between streets and schools to create more shareable cultural worlds for learning” (Mahiri 1998, 7; 2006). Jason uses rap lyrics to relate to his students and the challenges they presumably face in school and in their neighborhoods. And yet Jason could explore these matters through the media his students produce.

Dance (2002, 45–46) found that teachers who are not only “competent” in “their subject matter,” but also considered “down” achieved the highest classroom cooperation in inner-city schools in Boston and Cambridge. Being “down” is distinct from caring about one’s students; it
means learning about “the streets” their students are from (46). The street life their students face is available to teachers online. For Christian’s math teacher, this is more information than he wants, as he fears it might negatively shape his perception of them. Social media contact between teachers and students is also against the rules, according to a protocol formalized by the Department of Education in 2012. Yet if teachers are not online to discern this information, the police are. A contact I spoke with in the juvenile justice division of NYPD in February 2012 indicated this unit developed a roster of 97 gang members based around 129th Street. He explained that the police who monitor them (and other targeted groups) on social media are trained to discriminate between primary members “knee-deep” in crime and the criminal justice system, secondary members considered the most likely to replace primary members who are apprehended, and associates, who make up the majority of the group and rely on its name to travel safely. One’s materials on social media bear out this level of presumed gang involvement. The most “at-risk” communicate that they are truant and getting high during the day; those going to school “post their report cards.” The mediation of where one stands in relation to the street and school shapes not only the perspectives of their peers and family members but of law enforcement as well.

**Life in Media**

Real life is lived in the media. Teenagers create and revise notions of themselves and their peers. They confront assumptions and stereotypes in the neighborhood and in mass media. What they say is not ignored. On the contrary, peers react. So do relatives and police. Teenagers some might call disenfranchised have a significant platform in the media that they use seriously to announce and respond to one another’s ambitions, plans, and decisions.
The status of urban youth of color is a major national and local issue. Nationally, approximately 60 percent of black men without a high school diploma will be imprisoned by their midthirties (Pettit and Western 2004). Inside Gracie Mansion, at a Black History Month celebration I attended in February 2012, Mayor Bloomberg praised rising graduation rates citywide since 2005 and the Young Men’s Initiative, a municipal strategy to address disparities faced by young men of color.

Harlem teenagers make their own public statements about their educational standing. They detail the successes and problems they have inside their schools. They bring these matters to the street, and vice versa. The school days of this generation are networked in real time across city schools and tri-state colleges.

One broader implication is that the influence of peers and that of the media cannot be discussed separately. What various scholars might call “peer effects” and “media effects” operate jointly in networked media environments (Ahn 2011). This chapter shows that teenagers in Harlem work through matters of education and street life through the one-to-one communication of text messaging and the one-to-many of social media. These interpersonal streams interact with mass media “about” the experience of inner-city adolescence.

Cultural sociologists refer to the filtering of broader cultural messages through the local matters of a group as “culture in interaction” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) or “idioculture” (Fine 1979). In media scholarship, the integration of production and consumption into immediate issues of a face-to-face and/or online community is the very essence of “convergence culture” (Jenkins 2006). We continue to explore these ideas throughout the dissertation.
Chapter 3: MARGINALITY

Introduction

The networked life of the street allows young people like JayVon to draw on his corner support system throughout the day. But the street also places a tremendous burden on young people who are expected to fight for respect in this setting. This chapter deals with the code of the street as it extends onto social media from the networked street corners of Harlem. Young people must navigate the code not only in the physical confines of their neighborhood but also online where multiple and invisible audiences converge.

Internet scholars call this convergence “context collapse,” but miss the fact that kids in the inner city deal with this issue every day. In the pages below, we square the “context collapse” agenda with the management of stigma, linking up again with a key concern to Erving Goffman that did not carry forward in the adaptation of his ideas to the online environment.

Here I will review the literature on code switching in urban ethnography, bringing in Goffman’s concept of “audience segregation” to make the assumption of this research explicit. Then I will focus on “context collapse” in the social media literature, drawing principally on danah boyd’s seminal work on teenagers. Using the story of Sarah’s fight video, we see the high stakes and multiple accountabilities that inner-city teens face as street life extends online. We then explore the three social media strategies of partitioning, tempering, and integrating depictions of the street in relation to “decent” concerns elsewhere in their lives. As we consider the last strategy of integration, we see up close how and why a young adult named Andre code switches over the course of a tenuous summer. We end by revisiting the networked corner in terms of marginality.
**Code Switching between “Decent” and “Street”**

The dichotomy of “decent” and “street” has a long history in the study of ghettos, though the names scholars use for these phenomena may vary. Drake and Cayton (1945) refer to the “respectable” and “shady” aspects of Chicago’s black ghetto. Kuper (1953) distinguishes between “respectable” and “rough” members of the working class in Coventry, England. This divide inspired Gans’s “routine-seekers” (those drawn to family life at home) and “action-seekers” (those who gravitate toward the street) in his study of Boston (Gans, 1962). Williams and Kornblum (1985, 10) maintain that adults in poor communities of all ethnic/racial groups draw a “basic distinction” among “young people in their neighborhoods or schools”; a “street” kid has been “fully exposed to the often violent morality of adult and adolescent street culture” while someone “not street” has “been more or less sheltered through childhood and adolescence” from the street by parents and educators.

In *Code of the Street* (1999), Anderson emphasizes the issue of public space in terms of this distinction. Rather than qualifying people, “street” and “decent” might really be about “codes,” particularly the code that takes over the street when civic justice ends. Anderson still writes about “street families” and young people with core “street” identities, but he shifts the theoretical impetus towards code switching. If “decent” and “street” are not inherent qualities of people, then individuals may switch between the two. Anderson’s work, as well as recent ethnographies on inner-city black and Latino youth by Dance (2002), Garot (2010), Harding (2010), and Jones (2010), emphasizes the significance of context when it comes to this distinction in ghetto neighborhoods.

Anderson and urban ethnographers responding to *Code of the Street* generally use “decent” and “street” to mean one of three associated things: morality, orientation, or label. All
three terms relate to the same basic issue: how youth cope with high rates of inherited neighborhood violence without recourse to police or other institutional protection. This means that kids are expected to fight on or for the streets of their neighborhoods and must navigate this need interpersonally.

In terms of morality, “decent” means that disputes are settled “civilly” through reasoning or other non-violent ways (Anderson 1999, 50). “Street” means conflicts are decided through physical force on the basis of “might is right” (Garot 2010).

“Decent” and “street” refer to different orientations. To be “decent” is to orient oneself towards school, work, family, and other mainstream pursuits (Anderson 1999, 287). To “go street” is to “dominate public space” through bluster or actual violence (Harding 2010, 149).

Finally, “decent” and “street” refer to labels. Residents apply these two “labels” (Anderson 1999, 36; Dance 2002, 52) to themselves and to others “as a basis for understanding, interpreting, and predicting their own and others’ actions, attitudes, and behaviors, especially when it comes to interpersonal violence” (Jones, 2010, 10 referring to Anderson 1999). “Decent” and “street” are “self-perpetuating” stereotypes about local young persons’ presumed propensities for violence (Jones 2010, 10).

Reasons for Code Switching

Why do young people in high-poverty urban areas code switch? Anderson writes about the dilemma of the decent kid who must adjust to “the exigencies of the street” as he grows up and spends time “away from home, out of view and immediate control of his family” (1999, 98). On the street, he comes into repeated contact with street-corner groups comprising peers and young men, some “from homes ravaged by unemployment and family disorganization” (98–99). To move about freely, the boy “must get cool” with these groups by showing “how tough” and
“how hard” he is “to roll on” (99). He may begin to code switch, presenting on the street a
tougher self than the one he shows at home.

Anderson offers two trajectories for “the decent kid” who code switches. One possibility
is greater identification with his “street” side, meaning he does “more than make peace” (99)
with his local street group and makes a name for himself by repeatedly meeting verbal and
physical challenges and by challenging others. As he “gains points for going for bad” and “grows
confident” on the street, “he changes” and “now seeks to have others fear him” (1999, 102).
Anderson writes of this undertaking as a “campaign for respect.” Having built a “street”
reputation, he has a “disincentive for code-switching [back]” since he becomes vulnerable if “the
wrong people see him do so” (1999, 103). This hardening of a “street” identity appears to
contradict Anderson’s premise. Jones, meanwhile, finds that girls must also navigate the code;
for those who earn the label of “girl fighter,” this becomes their only protection (2010, 10).

The second trajectory for the “decent kid” entails sustained code switching rather than
identification with “the street.” It involves “maintaining decency” without “falling victim to
alienation” on the street (Anderson 1999, 103). Young males following this pattern affect a
street-specific appearance on their commute to school or while otherwise out in the
neighborhood. They wear “clothes approved by the street” and “act out in judicious ways,
cussing or acting tough in situations in a way not likely to lead to real trouble” (104). Code
switching insulates these actors from bullying and ridicule while on the street so they may enjoy
friendships with those not in street-corner groups, complete high school, and pursue “larger plans”
that lead to higher education and work (104).

In his field site, Garot reports the reverse, noting that it is “much easier for ‘street’ young
people to adopt a ‘decent’ persona than vice versa” (2010, 136). “Decent” and “street” in Garot’s
work refer to moralities—reasoning versus “might is right.” Garot finds that young persons (ages fourteen to twenty-one) with “street” reputations often enact a “decent” face when challenged or threatened by others (2010; 2007). Meanwhile, in public, youth not known for fighting prefer the appearance of “going about [their] business” to a tough front that might provoke others (2010, 139). In other words, young persons labeled as fighters or gang members do the most code switching. They are repeatedly challenged on the street but will walk away from a fight or retaliation (i.e., show a “decent” face) if they have a “good reason.”

In many cases, these “good reasons” are based on concerns with those present or those who might find out about a violent incident. When on the job, in school, or out with family members, the young people in Garot’s study may refrain from violence if threatened or denigrated by others. By choosing nonviolence, they presumably believe that employers, school staff, and family members should not witness aggressive behavior or face the contingencies of a violent encounter (2010, 128–131). Another “good reason” to walk away is to save face. When they decline a challenge in front of peers, they invoke exculpatory rationales such as saying that they are engaged in play. In other words, they never question the code but continue to espouse its infallibility, sustaining what Garot calls “an incorrigible proposition” (2007, 98).

These studies tell us that the code of the street places an unusually high burden on young people in the inner city. In the public spaces of their neighborhoods, they must account for themselves in terms of this code without challenging its authority. This behavior means calibrating the right relationship with local street-corner groups, affecting a particular appearance, avoiding and taking fights, and other difficult labor. It also means addressing a morality that may be totally at odds with what is expected everywhere else—inside the home, at school, in afterschool programs, at work, at church, and in the other settings in which teens move about
each day. This research points to two interconnected and complicated identity projects underway on a daily basis. Young people work very hard both to manage their performances on the street and to keep them in the street.

Goffman used the term “audience segregation” when discussing this daily effort.

**Goffman’s Audience Segregation**

The term is absent from urban ethnography’s treatment of code switching but the idea is implicit. Code switching is about *audience segregation*, about engaging relations on the street without contaminating relations elsewhere.

Says Goffman, we are different things to different people and we achieve this diversity in our “daily round,” by moving in and out of bounded social encounters, or “little social system[s]” (Goffman 1956, 267–268). Sometimes Goffman conceives of these little systems as “role-sets” of people in defined roles working together on a “situated activity” (1961, 90–91). This segregation of role by audience is “a device for protecting fostered impressions,” specifically credibility (1959, 49). A priest chooses to “swim with persons who are not . . . parishioners” as “the familiarity required at the beach is incompatible with the distance and respect required in the parish” (1959, 137). Scheduling, then, sets not just one’s daily round but organizes time and space to keep audiences separate so a given individual knows “where and what . . . to be when” (1961, 91).

How might this segregation break down? Audience segregation breaks down during intrusions into demarcated space (e.g., the “backstage”) or chance meetings in public or transitional spaces like an elevator (Goffman 1956; 1971). What happens then? Not much, usually. Goffman developed the audience segregation concept over decades, beginning with his 1956 article, “Embarrassment and Social Organization,” and expounding upon it until his final
book, *Forms of Talk*, in 1981. Over time, he clarified that breaches in audience segregation typically generate embarrassment or almost no strain in the encounter. When a man, out with his son, runs into his boss, a simple “greeting and introduction” will do. Neither the child nor the boss needs to rethink who this man really is (1971, 76).

Maintaining audience segregation matters most for persons with stigma because they stand to be discredited upon entering what Goffman calls “a mixed social situation” (1963). Those already deemed suspicious, hiding parts of their lives, and under surveillance have the most at stake if exposed further. The prostitute “adjusted to her urban round” who runs into “a man from her home town” stands to be discredited should he bring this “news home” (1963, 78–79). While audience segregation represents a basic enterprise of daily life, it takes on heightened significance for persons with stigmatized involvements, attributes, or group memberships. This concern with the exacerbation of marginality was paramount to Goffman, who delved into the issue throughout *Stigma* (1963). By considering only his most famous book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), scholars have lost this point when adapting audience segregation to online life. This chapter shifts our attention back to Goffman’s concern as it related to the code of the street. Now that the social world on the corner is also networked online, teens must work even harder if they are to keep their experiences on the street separate from their lives at home, school, and work, and beyond the sightlines of police. This effort has major implications for a young person’s status and reputation within and beyond the community.

Let us now turn to the literature on “context collapse” so that we may apply it to the street. **Context Collapse**

In a recent review article, Davis and Jurgenson (2014, 1) note the emergence of an academic literature on the “the meshing of social contexts online.” Davis and Jurgenson attribute
the introduction of the term “context collapse” (originally “collapsed contexts”) into online literature to danah boyd’s master’s thesis of 2002. In a 2013 blog post, boyd discusses her recollection of the coinage of this term, which she said was inspired by Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and media scholar Joshua Meyrowitz’s (1985) *No Sense of Place*, which considered Stokely Carmichael’s dilemma of which vernacular to adopt during radio and television appearances aimed at diverse and disconnected audiences.

boyd developed “context collapse” over more than a decade, focusing on two kinds of collapses, which, as Davis and Jurgenson highlight, both relate to intentionality. On the one hand, context collapse means that in social media we combine sets of people we know from different areas of our life. This is intentional but represents the ongoing dilemma of communication with a range of people whom we would never otherwise address simultaneously. On the other hand, our capacity to restrict what we share to this extraordinary audience is undermined by the fact that *any* material published online may reach unknown others, or what boyd calls “invisible audiences.” And what others place online may reveal information about ourselves that we did not intend to disclose.

This lack of intentionality and loss of control in networked environments means that items may readily be “taken out of context,” the title of boyd’s 2008 dissertation. This is all the more likely to happen given the nature of social media content as “persistent, replicable, scalable, and searchable” (boyd 2010b). At the heart of this issue is what Nissenbaum (2009) calls the loss of contextual integrity: when material produced in one setting moves into a second setting, the norms around its original production cease to matter as the material is assigned new meaning for a new purpose.
The agenda of context collapse, however, is not guided by its historical link to stigma. It misses its teeth as a result of this disassociation. In boyd’s 2014 expansion of her dissertation, *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, she writes that “[w]hen teens interact with social media, they must regularly contend with collapsed contexts and invisible audiences” (31). But the stakes are low and, as Goffman finds of face-to-face life, breaches in audience segregation are often no big deal. We hear that teens might be “excited” as school friends and summer camp friends combine or “they might find it discomforting” (31). When “a teen girl was obsessed with a popular boy band called One Direction even though her friends at school were not,” she expresses her adoration on Twitter with a community of fans and uses Facebook for “talking about school” with her classmates (40).

In this book and other research, boyd outlines a variety of techniques teenagers use to manage impressions online, such as partitioning audience by platform in the example above. I apply, as we move along, some of boyd’s important findings—and those of other scholars—to the milieu of the street to think through the significance of context collapse in relation to marginality. I begin with Sarah’s fight video to orient us towards the collision between the code of the street and context collapse and the resulting conditions under which inner-city teens must navigate the code. We that see that these properties of social life are antagonistic notions: the code is specific to its setting, while context collapse is integration across settings.

**Sarah’s Fight Video**

According to the code, one’s reputation on the street is a function of how he or she performs in a set of peer showdowns, particularly fights, each of which is evaluated by others on the scene who decide and disseminate who won. We also know from scholars like Randall
Collins (2008) that even in the most violent neighborhoods, fights are rare occurrences and, when they happen, they transpire very quickly. Fights are fleeting events before a fixed audience.

But fights in the internet era work differently. With the technology to film and upload video from phones, the role of the videographer in the street fight emerges. Often videographers appear by accident; other times they act as collaborators with one or more of the antagonists whom they record.

Videography means the fight is harder to contain. Fight videos extend the temporality and spatial framework of otherwise ephemeral encounters. They generate high stress for teens on camera because their enactment of the code of the street becomes visible to a wider peer audience than that present at the scene and because it may also be seen by a range of adults. Fight videos are characterized by boyd’s four properties of social media communication: they are persistent, replicable, scalable, and searchable.

Let us consider eighteen-year-old Sarah’s situation. Whereas JayVon draws on his home street as a system of support, Sarah wishes to escape the streets of her neighborhood. Sarah lives in a housing project in West Harlem and attends Brooklyn College. On Facebook, Sarah generally writes about her college experience, boyfriend, interest in fashion, and other facets of her life removed from the street life of her neighborhood. In one post, she uploads a picture of her to-do list handwritten on loose-leaf paper. It includes typing an essay on Hamlet and studying for a Spanish final. She adds a caption, “Have to Get The Work Done Before I Can Party. I Guess Being Successful is My Motivation. #DiaryOfACollegeGirl.” I met Sarah through the summer employment program, which she attended over two consecutive summers. She distinguished herself as an active and thoughtful participant in the workshop series. Seated at the front of the room, she eagerly counseled her peers on the working world, college application and
financial aid process, and transition (which she completed a year early) from high school to college,

At the end of a job readiness workshop during which a guest speaker said “the first thing human resources at a given company does when making hiring decisions is look applicants up online,” Sarah told me about a video of a fight she got into with another girl during her senior year of high school that was uploaded to Facebook and YouTube. Sarah said she had been a “star pupil” at her East Harlem high school, in front of which the fight had occurred. She had feared it might interfere with her standing in school or her pathway to college so she had immediately “reported” the video to Facebook as “inappropriate” and Facebook had taken it down. However, a second video of the same fight taken by an eleventh-grade boy still appears on his YouTube profile. When I asked Sarah why this video had not been taken down, she explained that she had been under the impression that there was no way to remove a video published by another person on YouTube, having read information to that effect (which is incorrect). She said that she had not approached the videographer because she had never spoken to him before and did not feel as though she could confront him.

About six months after chatting at the workshop, Sarah and I watched the precisely one-minute video on YouTube, where it had been viewed 4,842 times in the nearly two years it had been up. Sarah tells me she fought a classmate named Halima, someone she had previously considered a dear friend. Halima felt disrespected by Sarah after a third party told her that Sarah had disclosed embarrassing information about her sex life. On the day in question, Halima confronted Sarah outside school; they argued and parted ways. The video begins when Halima came back, walking up the block with the emergent videographer in tow (Sarah does not believe
that he and Halima coordinated the taping). When people “see a fight,” they “videotape it and put it up.” “I wasn’t a willing participant,” Sarah adds.

In the video, Halima approaches with “her coat off” and Sarah, coat still on, hands her book bag to a friend. Then the girls flail punches at each other with one hand, using the other to pull clothing or hair. They hit the ground after about seven seconds, with Sarah on top, punching Halima. “I wasn’t trying to hurt [her]—I was practically trying to restrain her.” Then Halima rolls on top, punching Sarah several times in the head. As Sarah rolls back on top, Halima kicks her in the face, which draws “oohs” from the crowd that has gathered. “Once she kicked me in my face, I knew that all this lovey-dovey stuff that we shared before went out the window. So then . . . I really wanted to hurt her.” After the kick, Sarah holds Halima down and attempts to push her head against the sidewalk. Other girls intervene, pulling the two apart and bringing them back to their feet. Friends whisk Halima away while Sarah remains. “I wanted to fight her again because I felt like she disrespected me. . . . I was embarrassed ’cause you kicked me and it was on video. I was so embarrassed.”

Since we were watching the video almost two years later, Sarah conveyed memories of her emotions at the time as well as the emotions she feels at present. When she spoke about the embarrassment of getting kicked in the face on camera, her imagined audience (then or now) were her neighborhood peers for whom such a hit showed badly. She also told me that she was proud of her overall performance, particularly in comparison to other instances when she had gotten jumped: “I stood up for myself and I did well.” Sarah said that some of her family members and classmates were also impressed by how well she had fared.

Sarah also expressed her sentiments to an audience beyond her neighborhood peer world. When we first spoke about the video, she told me that she had been afraid that faculty would see
it before she graduated from high school and that it might spoil her reputation as an exemplary student and provide grounds for expulsion as per DOE policy. Her fear now is not as specific. First, she says, “Suppose I got famous and people who did know me around this time they brought this out. This could slander my whole character.” Then she poses a second hypothetical scenario: “suppose” her employers at the summer program had “seen it and then they said, ‘okay, we can’t have Sarah here because Sarah likes to start trouble and Sarah fights.’” While a detective could presumably locate the video, an employer probably could not. Sarah’s name is not attached to the video nor does her face appear in sharp resolution. But the video is retrievable on YouTube by searching only the name of her high school and the word “fight.” On the one hand, we can all relate to the fact that sensitive information about ourselves has been exposed on the internet and that it may become and remain public without our consent.

But, on the other hand, Sarah’s video is troubling specifically for someone navigating the code. Sarah appears highly driven to get out of her neighborhood, a place where, as she says, “people walk around with no hopes.” Yet she confronts the code in the public spaces where she lives, and the code matters deeply to Sarah in this context, as she makes clear when she tells me about getting into another fight over the summer between high school and college (which also involved videoing and efforts to restrict its exposure). Sarah explains this second fight as follows: a girl came to “my neighborhood disrespecting me . . . in front of a lot people” including “girls from my neighborhood [who] used to pick on me.” “I was just upset, like, you coming in my projects . . . you’re coming to embarrass me. These are people that see me every day, these are people who know me.”

It is teenagers like Sarah who are most seriously confronted by context collapse. The time one spends on the street is compounded as it migrates online. Assuming the video is played in its
entirety each viewing, its total screen time is 4,842 minutes or about eighty-one hours. Meanwhile, she never consented to her appearance in the film. Such exposure complicates the containment of the code and the pursuit of opportunities beyond the neighborhood.

As I thought more about the two videos of Sarah’s fight in front of her school and reread the transcriptions of our interviews, I realized that her priority was to have it removed immediately from Facebook because its presence there made her identifiable in the fight and might lead to her being discredited. But she was ultimately okay with its remaining on YouTube because there—without her name attached—an employer would probably never find it. After all, she did not take steps to remove the video after our conversations, and she expressed to me not just embarrassment but also pride that she had handled herself well in a fight, a sentiment shared by others, even family.

Sarah’s story provides an introduction to the stakes and considerations in play as the code of the street migrates online. We look now at three genres of visibility work that teens accountable to the code perform in the online environment. I draw on what others have found in different settings.

**Partitioning**

Teenagers use partitioning to separate peers from the adults in their lives (Ford 2011) just as office workers do with their personal and professional ties (Vitak et al. 2012). In the early stages of this study, I observed an analogous project underway in Harlem in relation to the street.

As teenagers adopt and quit branded social media, different norms emerge around the use of each platform. When I began my study, the teenagers I met principally used Twitter. In 2009 and 2010, Twitter served as the place for online talk among peers, primarily face-to-face friends and “associates” (Jones 2010), but also among peers one could know face to face residing in
Harlem, the Bronx, and other proximate areas. As the dominant social media, Twitter served as the coordination hub for interactions in other media, such as internet-based video chat or phone-based texting. Adolescents did not interact with the adults in their lives on Twitter; elders were segregated from these networks and believed by teens to be Facebook users rather than Twitter users. During this period, many teens simultaneously maintained a Twitter profile and a Facebook profile.

On Twitter, teens rarely used their real names for profiles. Instead, they drew on nicknames, names of their streets or local crews, birthdates or anniversary dates, consumer brands, and other sources of inspiration. Faces in profile photos were sometimes obscured or entirely out of the frame of the photograph. The accounts were often protected (set so as to be visible only to accepted followers on Twitter rather than to anyone online). Thus they had a partial cloak of anonymity to the wider world of parents and other adults. In her dissertation, boyd (2008b, 147) writes of such efforts by teens across demographics as “security through obscurity.” By “providing false information to make themselves unsearchable or using privacy settings to limit who can access their profiles,” teens “structure their presence in a way that allows them to be visible to those who matter while being invisible to those who do not” (147–148).

But on Facebook, first and last names (“government names”) were more common than on Twitter (where users go by “@names”). Faces were generally in full view. Profiles were rarely categorically closed (Facebook offers more nuanced privacy settings than Twitter). As Davis and Jurgenson (2014) emphasize in their review of the literature on context collapse, user intentions and design specifications mold together in the way in which social media is used.
As a violence interrupter, I noticed that teens generally refrained from aggressive talk and references to conflict between neighborhood groups on Facebook; instead they took this content to Twitter. During a set of interviews between September and November of 2010, I asked twelve teens from six Harlem neighborhoods, “Is there beef on Facebook?” I choose the expression “beef” because this was the general term violence interrupters and young people use for various forms or phases of conflict involving actual or potential violence. Eleven of the twelve indicated either that there was no beef on Facebook or far less beef on the site than there was on Twitter. Said the lone dissenter: “Of course, there’s beef everywhere.” Generally, teens delineated clear differences in the two media. Seventeen-year-old Rochelle said “Twitter is like a kids’ site” while “Facebook is more of a calm, grown thing. . . . It’s basically a . . . friends-and-family network.”

Nineteen-year-old Smalls told me people “be talking a whole lot of mess over Twitter,” but when I asked “Is there beef on Facebook?” he responded:

Nah, not that I know of, and if there is, it shouldn’t be on there. I feel that Facebook is more of a thing for mature, adult-type-of people. It’s more of a thing for college people or people who are just leaving high school. Even if you’re in high school and your mind state is mature, you know, you’re willing to talk as an adult or handle yourself a certain way, I think that’s what Facebook is like. I have not seen anybody beefing over Facebook.

Eighteen-year-old Sierra reported that “Twitter is a big chatroom” where people “put on a show” and “get to arguing” while she’s “never heard of, like, arguing on Facebook.” She explained further:

Jeff: So why do you think there wouldn’t be beef on Facebook? What is it about Facebook that’s different?

Sierra: Because Facebook, I don’t know. It’s hard to argue on Facebook, ’cause it go on your wall, everybody sees it. Like, your family members see it. And some people hide this [beef] from they family members, like, they outside doing what they do and in the house they a different person. So, like, why argue on Facebook if you know your mother
or your uncle or somebody has a Facebook? So I don’t think people argue on Facebook ’cause of that.

J: So you’re saying people have their family members follow them on Facebook?

S: Yeah.

J: But not on Twitter?

S: On Twitter? I don’t think grownups really, like, parents really have Twitter. I think they may have Facebook ’cause Facebook is, like, getting connected with your old friends like from high school or something like that. Like, Facebook is not really for kids. It’s like for adults.

The teenagers I spoke to revealed different expectations for the audiences and kinds of talk on each platform. The teens explained Twitter as being a space for kids and conflict while they associated Facebook with college (boyd 2011), maturity, and adults.

Teenagers’ dual use of Twitter and Facebook enabled a simple structure of audience segregation. Twitter was a platform for engaging peers while Facebook was one for reaching mixed company including adults. Teens partitioned “street” and “decent” selves accordingly.

But even as teens reported these differences over three months, Facebook gained steam. In January 2011, a violence interrupter from Project KeepAlive talked specifically about Facebook as an engine for beef during a presentation at a Harlem Children’s Zone school. In February, an NYPD social media specialist told me that the rivalries in Harlem that he and his partner monitored online had shifted largely to Facebook. That same day, Amina and Kandi sat in The Lab tagging photos on Facebook, ignoring their Twitter profiles. Amina informed me, “Twitter ain’t got nothing on it. Everything go down on Facebook.” By March, teens coming to The Lab were using Facebook for all peer communication and had stopped accessing their Twitter accounts. By the spring of 2011, Twitter accounts had become obsolete—like the MySpace profiles they had replaced. The exception, however, was young people who explicitly
fashioned themselves as writers and solicited an audience far beyond the confines of local neighborhoods, one that was even international in scope.

There are different and potentially interlocking explanations for Twitter’s demise in my field site. Adolescents like seventeen-year-old Eyana noted the limited shelf life of any media. Teens always want “the next new thing.” Twitter was the latest in a line of branded social media to come in and out of fashion in Harlem. Over the last six years, teens have moved from Sconex to AOL Instant Messenger to MySpace to Twitter to Facebook and now, increasingly, to Instagram. A period of overlap precedes each migration. The Twitter/Facebook phase was unusual in so far as adults had established their presence on Facebook. Generally, teenagers adopt media first, and adults arrive later or not at all. With adults in one place but not another, teens adopted the strategy of partitioning. Design features of Facebook may also have first attracted teens under various forms of surveillance to a platform that offered greater control over the visibility of content and was designed to be more insular for its users. As a social networking site that prompts its users to provide real names and links profiles by kinship ties, Facebook makes it easier for youth and elders to find and connect with one another. The NYPD social media specialist offered an altogether different explanation. He pointed to Twitter’s alleged technical limits, calling the platform “a disaster” prone to “backlogging” and “shutdowns.” Facebook simply functioned better.

The concentration of social life on Facebook signaled a new chapter in code switching. Elders were no longer categorically excluded from the digital lives of young people in the neighborhood. This opened new possibilities for cross-generational contact. As we see in the material on integration, sometimes teens were open to this engagement with adults. Other times teens worked to conceal their lives as well as those of their peers. This adjustment was not just a
response to parents and elders online but also to increasingly evident police surveillance. In early 2011, word spread of the first in a series of local gang indictments that drew heavily on teens’ digital content. Local news focused on a seventeen-year-old who uploaded photos of himself and others posing with guns in an alleged conspiracy.

Now let us look at how street life is tempered online.

**Tempering**

When teenagers and adults converge on Facebook, teens’ efforts shift to restrictions on profile content and its presumptive meaning to adults (boyd 2012). To restrict content, teens censor themselves, watching what they say and which photographs they post. As Hogan (2010) and van den Berg and Leenes (2010) have found about adults in the professional world, teens also present a more cautious self. They censor one another, warning “you hot” to avoid talk that might interest police. When tempers do flare, young people mitigate the intensity of antagonism by “throwing subliminals.”

**Self-Censorship**

Let us first consider self-censorship online (Marwick and boyd 2011). In April 2013, I interviewed Slinky, a twenty-year-old African-American male in the social scene on 129th Street. Describing his posts on Facebook over the last couple of years, he remarks, “I just gotta watch what I say.” He says that compared to the image he presents to his friends, “To my family I gotta be more humble, more concerned about what I say or what I am. . . . I can’t put it out there in vulgar terms.” He continues: “If I’m mad about something, I can’t just start cursing all across Facebook.” “I just gotta be me,” he says, but “a bit toned down.”

We could easily imagine a twenty-year-old from an affluent suburb taking the same precautions online to regulate how his parents or other adults might see him. But in Slinky’s case,
he must also preempt concerns or inferences regarding gang involvement. In May 2012, an old mug shot of Slinky appeared in a photo roster of gang members shown to community members by police during a “gang information meeting.” About a year before the meeting, Slinky was shot on the street near his apartment. The bullet shattered his ankle and surgeons inserted a steel rod running from the bottom of his foot to his knee. Upon his return home from the hospital, Slinky’s mother Beatrice put her son on “lock down.” He was cut off from seeing neighborhood friends and prevented from leaving the house by himself. Beatrice arranged for home schooling. After having repeated both his freshman and sophomore years of high school, Slinky began to excel scholastically, posting photographs of A-range marks and starting a photo album entitled “100’s” on his Facebook.

Slinky’s mother, father, and extended family in New York and Virginia all converged on Slinky’s Facebook profile upon their introduction to social networking sites. Said Slinky, “They just had a burst of technology go through them, ’cause they was definitely not messing with no . . . [other] social media.” He regularly received their feedback. “During family gatherings they’ll talk about what they see me liking or what they see me posting or what I was going through at the time of whatever I posted.” Family members instructed him to take down “vulgar” material and gave positive feedback on photos of high grades. Beatrice appealed to Slinky to delete photos depicting “any hand signs” or showing Slinky in large groups for fear these could be used as “conspiracy pictures.” Slinky complied.

Slinky’s “toned down” profile is both a response to his family’s concerns and a reflection of maturation into adulthood. Whereas he once “got respect” on the street for “never back[ing] down,” his priority at the time of our interview was preparing for his freshman year at Howard University. He could not sound more excited about going to college and “traveling the world.”
Beatrice’s concerns with the potential forensic implications of her son’s photos came on the heels of a gang indictment on the corner of 129th Street. The indictment included nineteen males between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five from the social world on the corner. Based on investigations starting in 2007, the indictment listed seventy-one “overt acts” constitutive of a conspiracy “to assert control over the vicinity of West 129th Street . . . by means of violence.”

Twenty-two of the seventy-one acts referred to posting photographs or video online (twenty-one photographs and one video). Allegations of publishing digital content appeared alongside illegal gunfire, gun possession, and other alleged crimes. Four of the twenty-one photos and the one video show an (indicted) individual with a gun. Sixteen of the remaining seventeen photos show an (indicted) individual standing alone or with other (indicted or unindicted) “co-conspirators.” The final photograph is a graphic that depicts a group name and set of nicknames. The photographs often include texts of group names, nicknames, or boasts superimposed over the image.

For one teenager in the indictment, a “gun photo” became the basis for discrediting him at his bail hearing. After eighteen-year-old Kenny’s arraignment on two felony counts of criminal possession of a weapon and one felony count of conspiracy, the assistant district attorney recommended bail at $75,000 cash, an amount the prosecutor argued was consistent with the facts of the case and the risk the defendant posed to the community. The prosecutor summarized the defendant for the judge. He said that Kenny had been apprehended, along with two others, with a loaded handgun (almost a year before this court date). Kenny, according to the prosecutor, belonged to a gang and was like the other gang members “in Harlem who feel the

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20 These “overt acts” appear on an indictment document filed by the prosecution and presented to a grand jury, which voted to indict. This action gives the District Attorney’s Office permission to prosecute the named individuals on felony charges. The burden of proof is relatively low in this instance. A majority of the grand jury (comprised of between sixteen and twenty-three persons residing in New York County) must consider it “more likely than not” that the investigated targets committed the alleged crimes.
need to post photographs of themselves holding weapons”—a reference to an online photograph cited in the conspiracy indictment. When the judge asked if the photographed object was a “real weapon,” the prosecutor argued that, while it might not be, the guns recovered in connection with the conspiracy were “real.” He added that even with a fake gun, “there are real consequences of pulling it on people.” I heard from a co-defendant in the indictment that Kenny was holding a BB gun in the photograph, which seems consistent with the prosecutor’s wavering response. But with this nearly three-year-old photograph, the prosecutor discredited eighteen-year-old Kenny. When Kenny, who had no previous criminal or warrants history, was arrested in connection with the indictment, he was not on the street but in a high school class. The photograph was marshaled not to corroborate the gun of which he was charged with possession but as a statement on the kind of person—or gang member—Kenny was at present in order to determine his bail. The judge decided to set bail at $50,000 bond or $21,000 cash. This amount was beyond the means of his family so Kenny was remanded.

In the wake of such instances, “gun photos” have become far less common on social media in Harlem. In January 2012, eighteen-year-old Christian spoke about his own evolution of photographs on social media. Reflecting on his MySpace profile at age fourteen, Christian described two pictures that had accompanied a previous nickname he had taken from his favorite comic book series. In one photo, “I had, like, two blunts in my mouth and I had two guns.” In the second photo, his cousin holds one of the guns, which the two had bought in the neighborhood for $200. He recalled putting up these photos so that girls would see them. Looking back, Christian, who earned his GED diploma in spring 2012, called these photos “embarrassing.”
Censorship of Others: “You Hot”

Teens also temper the flow of street life online by censoring one another. This may be done through admonishment for “hot” talk presumed to attract police. Let us consider the following conversation about “heat” on Facebook. On a sunny afternoon in March 2012, I drove Kamal (nineteen), JayVon (eighteen), and Isaiah (twenty), three friends from the corner of 129th Street, to a diner. This exchange followed Kamal’s interruption of Isaiah’s description of a flirtatious exchange on Facebook.

Kamal: Yo, a lot of y’all niggas be hot on Facebook. . . . The other day . . . I seen Talib talking about he got the chase from the boys [cops] and he tagged, like, everybody else that was there.

JayVon: Nah, he ain’t tag me, ’cause I wasn’t there.

Kamal: Y’all niggas is wild.

JayVon: I don’t care.

Kamal: I’m just saying in general.

JayVon: I know that. I know what you talking about. . . . The stuff I be writing, I be saying it from verses . . . [in] songs.

Kamal: If y’all niggas ain’t realize, most of these niggas that’s from the block is in jail it’s because of the internet.

JayVon: Yeah, I know that.

In 2013, the strategy of encoding messages in lyrics that JayVon references was challenged by a large indictment in East Harlem. Rap lyrics posted on defendants’ social media functioned as admissions of gun possession, a story picked up by local and national press and hip-hop publications.

“You hot” often comes in the moment before talk online veers towards incrimination. After a friend was arrested for robbery, Rugged posted a show of support on his wall, “FREE
MY FUCKINGG DUN [friend] KYLE”. When a mutual friend of Rugged and Kyle asked, “WHAT HE SNAPPED [arrested] FOR?” Rugged responded, “YOU HOT!” The mutual friend proposed that they move the exchange from the public space of the wall to the personal space of the inbox. Rugged, however, wanted the conversation off Facebook entirely: “I ANIT [ain’t] SAYIN NUFFIN OVER THE BOOK.”

Characterizing the street as “hot” is common parlance for police presence on the street. The use of “you hot” online suggests a digital form of what Stuart (2013) calls “cooling off the block”—strategies to reduce police attention by those under surveillance. Working on Skid Row in Los Angeles, Stuart documented the interplay between police and men on the block as they preempted and adjusted to each other’s movements. Becoming “copwise” extends to the online environment as well.

*Throwing Subliminals*

Another way that teens temper the code of the street online is by mitigating the intensity of antagonism. As with any in-person conflict, there are different levels of provocation. The least pressing technique is the use of indirection, a genre of verbal sparring discussed for many years in the context of the ghetto as well as in other contexts such as white high-school locker rooms (Ayoub and Barnett 1965). Dollard (1939) writes about it as “playing the dozens.” Mitchell-Kernan (1971, 95–96) uses the term “signifying” for a general claim left for others to apply to themselves, rendering it “true.” What Fisher (1976) calls “dropping remarks” is an accusation ostensibly made to a third party but “for” an intended target within earshot. Anderson’s (1978, 160–61) account of “selling wolf tickets” has a similar structure. The person campaigning “radiates a general and unfocused hostility,” which may become “more direct” through “baiting
and taunting someone” who, in turn, ignores or “responds to the campaign” with “gestures and words” that “tell the campaigner that he is indeed in the market” for a public “wolf show.”

In the on- and offline worlds of Harlem teens, this interactional technique is called “throwing subliminals” or “subs.” It refers to making a comment in public about another person without naming this individual. These comments may be disparaging, and when they are, they initiate or renew conflict if the targeted person elects to respond with another “sub” or by addressing the challenger directly (thereby raising the level of antagonism). “Subs” can be used as a pathway to aggression face to face or as an alternative to a confrontation in person.

Sometimes it goes as follows. On a spring day, thirteen-year-old Carla comes by The Lab after school and gets on Facebook. Carla attends a public middle school in Harlem that has recently announced its upcoming closing for reasons of student safety and poor test performance. She posts on her Facebook wall the following: “Whennn It Gets HOT Bitches Dont Know how 02 Act, I Hateee Bitches That Act Hollywood Likeee U NOT Like That. Shawty Likeee 12. I Gotta Trick That Ass.” We discuss the post and ensuing conversation. Earlier in the day, Carla, an eighth grader, confronted a seventh-grade girl at school for wearing fake Burberry clothing. According to Carla, the girl does not have the right to dress in a designer brand—even fake Burberry. This is acting “Hollywood.” Carla tells me, “I do not like this girl,” but when I probe, she does not offer reasons. Carla’s post garners support from two female friends, an older one who “likes” her post, and a school friend also in the eighth grade. Carla’s school friend comments: “Whoo youu Talkingg bout”. “That Liddle Stink Bitch Whoo Think Shee All That,” writes Carla.

The school day has ended but Carla keeps the intimidation going, extending the life of an otherwise fleeting encounter and placing it before a wider and varied audience on Facebook.
However, Carla leaves the targeted classmate unnamed and makes only vague reference to their earlier encounter. Carla leaves it to her classmate to respond, thereby “naming” herself as the intended recipient. The classmate does not address the provocation. Had Carla made a direct reference to her classmate, this would have been seen as more disrespectful—a more pressing public challenge. There is a hierarchy in the threat level of digital provocations. It corresponds directly to personalization. A more serious affront would, in increasing order of aggression, provide the classmate’s first name or nickname, a link to the classmate’s Facebook page, her full “government” name, or marshal photo or video of the targeted classmate.

This is not to minimize the meanness of Carla’s behavior but to underscore the gradations of antagonism that enable young people to temper the intensity of aggression as the code of the street extends online. For anti-violence workers, “subs” are lower-level concerns that do not require immediate action. They are more often exchanged between females and are therefore not seen as a pathway to gun violence. By contrast, as we see in the next chapter, when a video of a young male embedded in back-and-forth shootings shows his fearful renunciation of his block, Pastor directs a “parent walk” past the areas involved in the rivalry.

boyd describes “social steganography” online as the use of “pronouns and in-jokes, cultural references and implicit links to unmediated events to share encoded messages that are . . . inaccessible to outsiders” (2012, 349). On Facebook, “subs” can be deployed for double duty. They serve as an encoded message within the peer world as well as a screen between peers and adults. Nineteen-year-old Desiree sometimes “throws subs” in this manner.

Desiree is a nineteen-year-old student at a local community college who studies criminal justice and blogs in her free time. When we meet for an interview in September 2011, she pauses our conversation to take phone calls from her boyfriend in jail at Rikers Island. Desiree and her
cousin Nika, who introduced us, maintain that she dates young men with high status on the street. As Nika explains, by dating young men who “sell drugs or shoot people,” Desiree attains a degree of power in the neighborhood. She “knows everything”—whether “somebody is getting hit in their house by their boyfriend” or “when someone plans to retaliate.” Nika gives the example of Desiree regulating a couple’s relationship by having a guy “she’s talking to” come to the block to beat up the boyfriend, of whom Desiree disapproves. This gendered role offers Desiree power at the cost of vulnerability to violence.

Involvement in such neighborhood drama might also undermine her standing at school or at the salad shop where she works. How does she contain her street life? Desiree utilizes partitioning and “subs.” Desiree, a writer with a following as far as London, as she tells me, was still using both Twitter and Facebook in September 2011. She says, “On Twitter, I’m free with everything. I say whatever I want. It can be vulgar, it can be nice, it can be nasty, I can do whatever I want because that’s just Twitter.” But on Facebook, her mother, her boss at the salad shop, and her mentor at Harlem Children’s Zone check up on her.

According to her cousin Nika, Desiree “does way more . . . subliminals on Facebook. So she’ll say a quote or something. But on Twitter . . . she can have direct arguments.”

“I use subliminals all the time,” says Desiree. She describes couching criticisms intended for specific persons in song lyrics or ostensibly general observations such as this one, which she wrote the day before our interview: “Everyone but the person being cheated on knows she being cheated on.” This post is “for” a particular female, who is left to name herself as its target. On Facebook, teens like Desiree may “throw subs” to spar with each other without making conflict obvious to concerned adults.
Integration

We have just seen efforts to reduce the visibility of street life. In this section, I depict a different approach that teenagers may take, one that challenges the assumption that teenagers do not want the adults in their lives to know what they are up to on the street. The teenagers in my fieldwork sometimes integrate “decent” and “street” depictions of their lives as a strategy for getting help from the adults around them. In fact, outreach hangs on the trustful willingness of teens to reveal the violence in their lives to the adults around under the assumption that they will receive aid, not punishment, if they do so.

Below I illustrate how teens may integrate “decent” and “street” faces online. In an episode from seventeen-year-old Tiana’s life, we see how Tiana gets help from peers and adults who hold her accountable for a lifestyle change she pledges. Next, we see how and why nineteen-year-old Andre code switches between “decent” and “street” over the course of an entire summer. In this case, Andre holds the adults accountable for their pledge to help him.

Tiana

I met Tiana in 2010 when she was fifteen years old. She sometimes fought several times a week. That year she made herself the president of an all-girls fighting crew comprising neighborhood friends. She later got a tattoo depicting the name of her crew. But in January 2012, at age seventeen, Tiana announced to friends and family in person and on her Facebook wall that she had “officially retired” from fighting. Tiana spoke about leaving Harlem for a fresh start in Delaware and began taking steps toward enrollment in Job Corps, a federal program that provides no-cost education and job training for the young and poor.

However, at about 12:30 p.m. on a Tuesday afternoon in late January 2012, I saw a post and set of comments on Tiana’s Facebook wall alluding to a fight between Tiana and a girl
named Gabriella. When I checked again around 1:30 p.m., the material was no longer there. At about 3 p.m., I saw Tiana on the sidewalk hanging out with friends. I bought her a soda and we chatted in front of the deli. Tiana said, “My neck hurt,” and spoke about having a hair-extension track pulled out while fighting Gabriella the day before. Tiana said she had won but was again prepared to fight her that day after hearing that Gabriella had told others she was the real winner. But the conflict, she told me, was now over.

The support of friends and family on Facebook helped Tiana walk away from a second fight with Gabriella. At approximately 12:30 p.m., Tiana wrote on her wall, “GABRIELLA BE LYNGGGGGG BUT WE GONE SHAKE [fight] AGAIN THASS ALL !” Within minutes, a set of onlookers discouraged a second fight, reminding Tiana that she has pledged nonviolence. Rochelle, a friend and sometime rival dealing with her own reputation for fighting, wrote: “I THOUGHT U WAS A CHANGED PERSON SMH [shaking my head]”. Tiana pushed back: “BITCHES DON’T WANNA SEE ME CHANGE :( but being changed & bein pussy is 2 different things right or right ?” Rochelle responded: “RIGHT BUT U NEED TO LEARN HOW TO BE THE BIGGER PERSON. . . . U GONE KEEP FUCKIN UP UR FACE OVA DUMB SHIT.” “But my face not gone get fucked up in this situation I know,” insisted Tiana. Tiana’s neighborhood friend Mona then responded to Tiana’s assumption that others did not want to see her change: “But your not doing it for ppl [people] your doing it for yourself . . . . Let her [Gabriella] lie.”

Tiana, Rochelle, and Mona went back and forth for about six minutes before a friend’s mother asked Tiana, “Why do u want to fight Gabriella.” Tiana did not respond, but then her aunt got involved, instructing her niece to “cut it out.” She questioned whether Tiana really knew what Gabriella had said about their first fight, adding that “real” friends would not “feed u
hearsay,” particularly if they “see u tryin to be a better person.” She then added “I love you.”

Tiana stepped down, announcing “IM NOT FIGTHING HERRR . . . IM JUST GOING TO DELETE THIS POST,” which she did.

This public discussion transpired over about forty-five minutes, culminating in Tiana’s decision not to confront Gabriella. As explored in the next chapter, scholars of informal social control maintain that “eyes and ears on the street” keep sidewalks safe (Jacobs 1961; Duneier 1999). The “eyes” in this case belonged to community members watching online (boyd 2014). The intervention worked in this instance because Tiana did not conceal her street life but let it flow onto Facebook.

Andre

Let us go beyond a single incident into the integration of “street” and “decent” faces to consider a strategy sustained over time. Andre, like Tiana in the instance above, does not conceal his “street” side from adults. On the contrary, he synthesizes “decent” and “street” depictions of his life into an urgent call—a demand, even—for help. I shall now describe in detail Andre’s experiences growing up entrenched in neighborhood violence and how he deploys code switching to navigate his predicament. This extended ethnographic account allows us to see closely the mechanics of code switching in the age of the internet.

Background. In September 2010, I took Andre and a friend on an improvised tour of Columbia University’s campus. Andre, a black and Puerto Rican male born and raised in Lincoln Houses (public housing) in Harlem, was seventeen at the time and had stopped attending high school. He told me he would soon be getting his GED through Job Corps and that he planned to go to college.
At the time, however, Andre was deeply ensconced in a conflict involving young people from Lincoln Houses and the partnering St. Nicholas Houses—“St. Lincoln”—and young persons from the corner of 129th Street and Lenox Avenue (“Two-nine” or “Lenox”). In September and October of 2010, I spent forty-nine days working with fellow violence interrupters to mitigate aggression between these neighborhood groups. By mid-October, the two sides were said to be “at war” after two separate shootings directed at Lenox Avenue.

Then in the first week of November, Andre boarded a plane to Buffalo, New York, to begin Job Corps. His departure represented a major change for Andre, who was born in Harlem Hospital and had, up until this flight, spent his entire life living in Lincoln (save for a five-month confinement in a juvenile facility). By attending Job Corps in the Buffalo area, Andre distanced himself from a neighborhood rivalry in which he had been stuck since childhood. When I interviewed Andre one day in my car, he explained his entry into this conflict as a result of being bullied:

Jeff: Have you been bullied?

Andre: No. Never when I got older; when I was younger, yeah.

J: Tell me about that.

A: When I used to play basketball I used to—they used to take my basketball, chase me, try to jump me. I just played ball and chilled with girls.

J: How old were you? What age are you talking about?

A: Nine, ten.

J: Describe some of that bullying—like where it happened, what happened exactly.

A: All right. I used to go to the park [on 131st Street and Madison] and play ball and chill.

...  

J: Okay.
A: I used to play ball there and then, like, they had a beef with people from my block so I guess . . .

J: Who is they? Two-nine?

A: Yeah. So I guess after they realized they couldn’t get to them [the older guys from Lincoln Houses] and they see me every day they just took it out on me. So I just stopped walking over there and the people I was cool with—who I used to play ball with—they wasn’t helping [me], so I just stopped going over there. I started hanging out on Lex [a park on 128th Street and Lexington], playing ball over there. [Then] [they] kept going over there too so I just hanged out on my block.

Andre started carrying a knife in middle school, using it for the first time in seventh grade:

A: [W]hen we was on a bus one day, I come home from school and I see somebody from my block and he was getting jumped [by guys from Lenox] so I ain’t never helped nobody but I just felt bad for him so I went out there and I stabbed somebody for him. I helped him out . . . And ever since that, I just felt so good and I felt like nobody was gonna touch me no more so I just kept doing it.

This intimate involvement in violence has been part and parcel of Andre’s education and its frequent disruption. After completing pre-kindergarten through fifth grade at one local public school, Andre attended eight different middle or high schools, half of which have since closed for safety and/or performance reasons. The GED school at Job Corps would be his tenth school over the course of his seventeen years.

From November 2010 through October 2011, Andre participated in Job Corps, taking GED classes and learning the construction trade (with a focus on roofing). He graduated from the program with a GED diploma. When he returned to Harlem over the 2010 holiday break, he spent a lot of time with his girlfriend instead of with his friends. On the Wednesday night after Christmas, Pastor and I were driving around when I spotted about twelve guys from St. Lincoln on Lenox Avenue. After we pulled over to redirect the group back towards Lincoln, Pastor called Andre, who was not with the group. “I love you. I love you because you listen,” Pastor told Andre. He praised Andre for staying off the street and encouraged him to stay inside because he
had “a future.” Over this period, Andre also distanced himself online from neighborhood friends as social media was blocked on computer browsers at Job Corps and Andre rarely posted on Twitter or Facebook.\footnote{Participants instead communicate with peers outside the program by phone or postal letter. Andre and his peers do not use email for casual correspondence (i.e., non-school, non-work communication). Electronic messages are sent via social media, using the private message feature.}

After graduation, Andre moved back home. In November, December, and January, he generally stayed off the street, again spending time with his girlfriend. He looked for work on foot and online. Guys from Lenox chased him on at least two occasions but he let this “slide.” The beef between the two sides also subsided temporarily after the indictment on 129th Street. During these months, Andre posted only a handful of times on Facebook.

At the end of January, Andre began to post more frequently, starting with an announcement that his dating status had changed: “SINGLE.” In early February, a friend from Lincoln posted on Andre’s wall an old picture from Andre’s MySpace profile of Andre squeezing an imaginary gun trigger at the camera. That same month, St. Lincoln and Lenox resumed their conflict. After four teens in the 129th Street group jumped Qadir, a teen from Lincoln, and took his expensive coat, Andre retaliated with his group by jumping a teen from 129th Street (taking and later selling the teen’s iPhone).

Over March, April, and May, Andre continued his pursuit of college and work. He submitted an application to CUNY’s community colleges with the help of Job Corps staff. In early April, Andre used The Lab to print job applications for Modell’s Sporting Goods, making three copies to drop off the next day at locations in Manhattan and the Bronx. He said he would also stop at several Foot Locker stores and at Yankee Stadium, which outreach workers told him was hiring for the new baseball season. On April 30, Andre posted on his Facebook wall: “I NEED A FUCKING JOB!” He remained unemployed through May.
In the first week of June, someone fired a shotgun at a basketball court in St. Nicholas Houses, hitting four people between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five and killing one of them. A few days later, Andre and I were chatting on the subway. He interpreted the week’s shooting as the result of St. Nicholas “falling off.” By failing to stay on the offensive, the guys from St. Nicholas—not Lincoln—had become the victims, he explained.

The same week as the shooting, Andre’s aunt secured a job for him doing maintenance at public housing. Seven months after graduating from Job Corps, Andre had work. But only ten days into the job, Andre, walking by himself, encountered his rivals. They chased him. He got away but later ran into Talib and Amina (from the Lenox group) on 125th Street. When Andre and Talib squared off, Amina placed a call sending for the others. Andre punched her in the face. Amina pressed charges and the next day Andre was arrested at home. He spent the night in jail and was arraigned the following day on a misdemeanor assault charge. The judge issued a temporary order of protection against Andre, which prohibited contact with Amina, and released him. Following protocol at his municipal job, Andre told his boss about the criminal justice contact and got fired after his boss spoke to the court.

We now have a sense of Andre’s life in relation to his neighborhood. He is involved in an enduring rivalry he effectively inherited as early as middle school. At age seventeen, he isolates himself from this violence for about fifteen months (November 2010–January 2012) to focus on job training, schooling, and finding work. Then, from February through June 2012, he continues his pursuit of work while gradually resuming his place in the neighborhood conflict. Starting at the moment at which Andre is processed in court for striking Amina, let us look closely at how Andre code switches between “decent” and “street” to work his audience over the course of a perilous summer.
Campaigns for respect on the digital street. According to Anderson, “the code of the street emerges” through the “campaign for respect” (1999, 68). This campaign involves courting conflict; retaliating if attacked; and cultivating “a self-image based on “juice [being feared]” (72). Beginning with the Amina incident in late June, Andre aggressively incorporates Facebook into one such campaign for respect. But Andre also leverages his Facebook profile for a second campaign to go to college. This “decent” undertaking proves to be every bit as much about respect as is his efforts through violence.

The day after the judge releases Andre, he posts on his Facebook wall a photograph of the restraining order with a caption mocking Amina for snitching by using the court system. Twenty-four comments expressing a variety of reactions are posted within the first forty-eight hours. He receives encouragement from a friend in Lincoln active in the same rivalry against the Lenox group: “Smh bro snitchin like kids oooooooooo I’m tellin mommy.” He is also admonished. An older cousin, in particular, takes issue: “Hey dumbass take this shit down!!! This is also a form of harassment !!!!” When Pastor sees the post, he calls Andre to insist on its removal. Andre does not comply, leaving it up under the assumption, as he later explains to me, that by outing Amina as a “snitch” in the neighborhood, she will not return to court within the judge’s allotted time frame, prompting his charge to be dropped.

On July 2, Andre calls himself “Mr. Unstoppable” on his Facebook wall for the first of several times, taking this nickname from an incarcerated member of the Lenox Avenue group. On July 5, a municipal summer job program for young people starts. Roughly 30,000 participants between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four begin their summer jobs citywide. Andre is not one of them but many of his peers from Lincoln, St. Nicholas, Lenox Avenue, and elsewhere have been selected through an online lottery. On this day, Andre receives the first in a
series of acceptance letters from community colleges in the CUNY system. He posts on Facebook a letter from LaGuardia that generates thirty-four likes and prompts caring comments from Andre’s peers and elders alike. Pastor writes, “right! like that.” A friend’s girlfriend offers, “Congratulations.” The mother of Rone, his buddy from Lincoln, comments, “Congrats Andre that’s wussup proud of u now talk to ur boy [her son] about doin the same thing!!!”

On Monday, July 8, Andre calls me to ask if I will drive him to the Bronx to the admissions office at Hostos Community College (his first choice of college) to see if he has been accepted. I agree to take him in the morning.

When I get up Tuesday morning, I see that I missed two text messages from Andre at around midnight (messages I later learn he simultaneously sent to Pastor). The first text is a photo of Andre laughing in a stairwell holding an Air Jordan sneaker by its laces. The second text reads, “Tell you man come get his kicks LMFAO [laughing my fucking ass off].” I recognize the sneaker as Christian’s. I visit Andre’s wall where I see the same photo along with this message: “mr. unstoppable HERE NOW TELL THAT NIGGA I KNOCK OUT TO DAY COME GET HIS KICKS LMFAO AHAHAHA”. The post receives 26 likes within nine hours. Andre later amplifies the aggression by tagging Christian in the post, which brings viewers a click away from Christian’s profile picture in which he wears the shoes. Christian’s Air Jordan represents a “trophy” in Andre’s campaign for respect: “Possessing the trophy can symbolize the ability to violate somebody . . . to enhance one’s own worth by stealing someone else’s” (Anderson 1999, 75).

On my Facebook news feed this same Tuesday morning, I see numerous posts from local teens on their way to summer work. Christian, who holds a coveted summer job through the municipal program (about 100,000 applicants were not selected), writes on his wall: “Up Getting
ready for Work i was really bout to go back to sleep but . . . Stack or Starve, Good Morning everyone; [winking emoticon]”.

I call Andre. He asks if I’ve seen “my man’s” sneaker. I tell Andre he needs to return the shoe to me. He protests on the grounds that the Lenox guys did not return Qadir’s jacket. “I’m taking you to the college. I’m doing you a favor. You do me a favor and bring me the sneaker,” I say.22 He agrees. But Andre carries only his iPhone and (in his basketball shoe) an ID when I pick him up. “Where’s the sneaker?” He tells me a friend put it in a bucket on the roof of a building in Lincoln. I have Andre call his friend to bring down the sneaker but the friend does not answer. Before I will agree to drive, Andre promises to find the sneaker when we return—he keeps his word, bringing the shoe to The Lab, and Christian has it back by the end of the day.23

At Hostos, we walk to the admissions office, where Andre learns he has been tentatively accepted upon receipt of paperwork from CUNY’s centralized admissions, which is estimated to arrive in two weeks. Andre hears about the process now—vaccinations, financial aid forms, and other bureaucratic steps marked on a postcard he is given. He wants immediately to walk over to the financial aid office, located a couple of blocks away. On line at financial aid, he speaks loudly about the beef with Lenox Avenue and plans to “be on my bully” until he gets work: “If I’m not working, they not working. If I’m not eating, they not eating.”

The clerk calls us to her window where she asks about Andre’s financial situation. She hands Andre forms and marks questions he should answer and places that he or his mother should sign. She asks how many people live in his household. “Six or seven,” he responds. She

22 I felt manipulated by Andre and obligated to keep Christian safe as best I could. I assumed retrieving Christian’s sneaker quickly would nip this conflict in the bud as well as rebuff Andre’s seeming expectation that he could have me deliver “my man” to “come get his kicks.”

23 On Tuesday afternoon, Christian responds to Andre’s provocations online. He posts on his wall in short succession: “LMS [Like my status] if you wanna Fight”; “I’m Happy i dont live in The Projects Niggas is DustBuckets”; “Store run . . . i hope I run into someone special lol”. Andre likes the first post without responding to the other two “subliminals.” Christian and four others chase Andre on one occasion.
asks if he or his mother has worked in the last year (“no” and “no”) and inquires about potential household financial streams, typing his answers in her database. Andre says his stepfather contributes money and his family receives food stamps.

On the drive back, Andre calls his local Job Corps counselor to schedule a consultation to update her on Hostos and to talk about City Year, a federal community service program to which he has also applied. “Miss, Miss, I’m on a rampage right now,” he says into the phone, presumably to communicate the immediacy of his case. After he gets off the phone, Andre tells me he will promptly handle his financial aid forms with his mother and asks me how soon I can bring him back. He wants to set his schedule for the rest of the week. He has recently completed license training to work as a security guard and says he needs to make an appointment with Malik from Project KeepAlive for help with job placement. Andre hops out on 135th Street. “Good looks,” he says in appreciation.

Andre continues to integrate his two campaigns for respect over the rest of the summer. He elaborates on the “Mr. Unstoppable” theme with a pair of photos of himself listening to headphones on the street: “I AM OUT HERE AND I CAN’T BE STOPPED BY NO BODY”. He posts a photo of himself holding a Yankees cap he has taken from a teen on Lenox Avenue and another photo in which he stands on the corner of 129th Street, his palms up to the sky, with the caption “THIS IS HOW I WALK HOME EVERYDAY LOL [laughing out loud]”.

Meanwhile, he posts acceptance letters from four other CUNY community colleges following the LaGuardia letter. He indicates this on his wall on his way to Hostos and posts updates while there. After our first visit, I accompany Andre to Hostos on two other occasions leading up to the start of the fall semester. In July and August, he makes a total of about ten trips to campus to complete placement exams and assorted bureaucratic tasks.
On Monday, August 27, Andre calls me from Hostos, at the end of a day spent traveling between the campus’s four principal buildings in his effort to secure enrollment. At Andre’s request, I accompany him to campus the following morning. On the subway ride over, he tells me he will be taking a “Liberal Arts” curriculum. I ask why he picked this program. He explains that the guys around him “ain’t even make it to college.”

On campus, our first task is to sign up for classes in Building D where we are told we have arrived too early. We head to financial aid in Building A. Deterred by the full waiting area, Andre suggests we shift tasks again to work on getting his ID made in Building B. Andre complains about “the fucking goose chase.” He says they have him “mistaken for Boo Boo the Fool” and tells me he could be picking up crack to sell in Lincoln, which he deals sporadically. When we come on another long line in Building B, we return to Building D to try again with classes. This time security directs us to wait in a large, dark auditorium. We sit.

I take this opportunity to ask Andre about a wall post from the previous day at 6:27 p.m.: “I THINK I LOVE COLLEGE !!” This seems inconsistent with the frustrations of enrollment. I ask what he was referring to. Says Andre: “the jawns [girls]: I could be here all day.” I ask him about the twenty people who by 10 a.m. today like the post. Eight of the twenty are young people from Job Corps. One is a Job Corps counselor in Buffalo who has taken a lasting interest in Andre—a different counselor from the woman he spoke to on the phone who is in charge of helping him in Manhattan (Andre’s Facebook network also includes a third Job Corps staff member). Then there are young people from Lincoln and Rone’s mother, old schoolmates, and three girls from other neighborhoods. The exhilaration of being around new girls is not what these supporters have in mind.
On August 31, Andre posts a photo of his ID card, which bears the sticker “FALL 2012 STUDENT.” He includes the caption: “COLLEGE LIFE AND IT WAS A LONG WAY COMING!” Midway through the following week, the post has fifty-three likes and several caring comments, including “Proud of yu fam yu came along frm wen we was in 3rd grade” and “Stick with it cuz [cousin]!! Don’t be getting caught up in the street shit leads no where. Good luck.”

Audience work: code switching as a strategy for help. Andre simultaneously works the teens and adults around him in person and online. On one level, he code switches for his peers. After Andre returned home from Job Corps, he came to feel increasingly vulnerable in his peer relationships both with regard to his adversaries on Lenox Avenue and his friends in Lincoln. In his eyes, his safety hung on both sets of peers believing he was violent. He described what happened as follows:

J: Why’d you go to Job Corps?

A: I left for a better life. To change, to see new perspectives, get my high school diploma, try to make something different, a change. I came back and things ain’t changed though. The game’s still the same. I mean, like, I chilled out when I first came back but only, like I said, only the strong survive. I got a little weak when I came back. I didn’t want to put no work in. I just wanted to chill, go to college, play ball, get a job. I got weak so once I got weak I felt people was getting on my back, getting back on my case so I had to get strong again. I had to start putting in work again, hurting people, doing whatever it takes to get back on top.

J: Okay, so you’re putting in work. . . .

A: And I just started . . . [in] the wintertime [when] they robbed my man [Qadir] for his coat, I just started putting in work. . . .

Andre had gone to Job Corps “to change” the course of his life but “things ain’t changed” when he returned home. Not only was the same violent rivalry still there but the work he had trained for was not available. So he begins “putting in work” in the form of violence and its publicity. He tried to intimidate Amina because of her attempt to stop him by invoking the law. He
launched a campaign around the persona Mr. Unstoppable, a name already resonant in his peer world and meant to show those on both sides of the beef that he was “strong again.” He attacked his rivals and posted his “trophies” (the sneaker and cap) online. He staged provocations such as the photograph of himself at the corner of 129th Street. The personal use of violence to control and punish others is what Black (1983) calls “self-help.”

But violence to deter violence only entraps Andre. He needs the help of others to enroll in college and find work outside his neighborhood (shifts that do not assure his exit from neighborhood violence). His “street” performances are not just for his peers but also for the adults, whom he holds responsible for his schooling and employment. Pastor, to whom he listened by going to Job Corps, must see to it that Andre has a future despite it all. His local Job Corps counselor and Malik must deliver on their plan to find him a job. As someone in academia who represented “the college life” on our tour of Columbia, Andre expects I will help him get into college. Andre makes plain that his cause is urgent and essential by brandishing the threat or feat of violence against young persons from 129th Street and Lenox Avenue, his rivals over the last ten years and now the perceived competition for the time and resources of local outreach. On multiple occasions, Andre said that he gets more attention by being creating trouble.

But these same concerned parties also continue to help Andre because he appears genuinely committed to going to college and to finding work. Online he calls attention to his pursuit of a “decent” future with documents of his progress. This makes his efforts—and potential desistance from violence—credible. In his campaign for respect vis-à-vis a college education, Andre marshals photographs of his acceptance letters and Hostos ID card as hard evidence of his capacity to achieve “the college life.” This “proof” may improve opinions of others dubious of Andre or renew the faith of those rooting for him.
Credibility is central to Anderson’s earlier work on respect in *A Place on the Corner* (1978). The black men who gather at Jelly’s Bar and Liquor in a Chicago ghetto struggle with one another to be seen as respectable. Since “[b]eing believed is a problem for many of the regulars at Jelly’s, particularly when the wider society’s values are at issue” (68), “one must display convincing proof” that he is “somebody” rather than the default expectation of “a nobody” (19). This evidence, therefore, is “usually put up front before someone else actually calls for it” (19). Like the men in Anderson’s study, Andre presents unsolicited evidence that he is a decent, college-bound young man. College, as Andre reminds me when I ask about his choice of curriculum, is very unusual for someone like him. In the eyes of the old heads, Andre’s “street” and “decent” campaigns for respect synthesize into credible calls for help.

**Marginality on the Networked Street**

That Andre renders his involvements in violence and the pursuit of school and work visible online affords outreach workers broader understanding and instant access to their charges, enhancing these face-to-face relationships. The caring community (local and nonlocal) that is not in daily contact with Andre (Job Corps staff and alumni, in particular) stays informed of his struggle and channels support on social media. Goffman (1963, 7, 19) writes that when a stigmatized individual enters “a mixed social situation,” “he will find that there are sympathetic others who are ready to adopt his standpoint in the world.” One such group are the wise: persons with mainstream status “whose special situation has made them intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatized individual and sympathetic with it” (28). The wise in Andre’s online following relate to him as a young man in trouble and wish to help him gain traction in adulthood.

But more often, according to Goffman, when audience segregation breaks down, persons with stigmatized involvements experience *discrediting*. The risk of being discredited online is a
central message in local job readiness programming. At Hostos, a sign in the lobby of Building A announces a workshop by the Career Services Office with the warning “Facebook and other social networks are becoming the new employers’ background check tool.” At a 2012 workshop at the municipal summer job program, the NYPD social media specialist told roughly 300 young people, “You better make sure your Facebook pages are clean.” Bringing up MySpace, he asked, “How many of you have cleaned it up before you forgot the password?” Such content left up may “bite you” on “that job application” or “the civil service exam.” He was also transparent about police practice: “Guess what? The police are monitoring Facebook;” with “a whole unit dedicated to” this work, a reference to the social media unit in NYPD’s juvenile justice operations.

The stigma of the street was depicted carefully in research published about forty years ago, well before social media. William Chambliss (1973) wrote an article entitled “The Saints and The Roughnecks.” Chambliss studied two groups of white adolescent boys from Hannibal High School, one composed of teens from upper-middle-class families (“the Saints”) and the other from poor families (“the Roughnecks”). Chambliss saw that the two groups engaged in about the same level of deviance. But none of the Saints were arrested, while the Roughnecks were repeatedly in trouble. He explained the difference primarily by the fact that the upper-class gang had cars and drove to pool halls, taverns, and other places indoors that were not in Hannibal. The poor boys, on the other hand, congregated almost every night on the corner in front of the drugstore. Because the Roughnecks were usually around, police routinely picked them up after the commission of any crime. Over time, the police and the teens adopted an increasingly antagonistic and distrustful stance towards each other, reinforcing the latter’s deviance. In other words, time spent on the corner was the mechanism by which this class-based differential in
punishment came about. This is an important point because today the time teens spend on the street is compounded online—recall that Sarah’s one-minute fight translated into eighty hours of screen time over two years. Kenny’s “gun photo” surfaced nearly three years later in the courtroom. The corner—already the most stigmatized place to be—has become even more visible as contexts collapse online.

At the public defender’s office where I consulted, attorneys review social media profiles of clients (teenagers charged with violent felonies) for material that might be used against them by the prosecution and, in some cases, local news media. A supervising attorney whom I interviewed, an African-American man in his thirties, spoke of teens’ social media content in terms of “making statements.” In the legal community, “we have a rule, basically: if you say something essentially inculpatory about yourself—you know, ‘I killed somebody,’ ‘I beat somebody up,’—that’s admitted as an admission [of guilt]. If you say, ‘I didn’t kill anybody,’ that’s considered self-serving and not gonna be admitted.” “So when you have these kids” involved in “gangster culture” using social media, “[e]verything they’re saying is an admission” even when “they’re rapping” or “talk[ing] shit.”

[I]f you eavesdropped on any corner in 1970, you would hear “I’m the baddest this. I do that.” But nobody had it recorded. Now, they type it down, it stays up forever, and some DA gets to say... “You’re not violent? Well, why are you saying [online] you can beat everybody’s ass?” Because he cannot say, “I’m sixteen and I don’t have anything; I don’t work anywhere; I’m flunking out of school.”

I asked the attorney if “judges and juries and everyone” in the courtroom were “really that gullible.” He responded that “unless you’re in a specialty court with judges that deal with kids all the time,” it really is “that bad.” He later brought up a demographic disconnect: “[I]f I had more judges who came from these neighborhoods,” such as Central Harlem, from which he estimates half of all defendants in Manhattan Criminal Supreme Court come, “maybe they would
have more understanding.” “If I had many, many more jurors who came from these neighborhoods [perhaps they would have more understanding].” But “people who don’t really know the community” are making decisions about inner-city teens.

The attorney speaks very broadly about social media as forensic evidence and the court community. In these comments, we do not hear about defense strategies for challenging digital forensics or defense attorneys’ comparable use of social media material for discrediting witnesses who complain. But we do hear how easily talk on the digital street may become admissions in court as it shifts context. We also hear a potential bias against “tough fronts,” namely, that their projection online indicates admission of a violent crime, an issue currently playing out in courthouses across New York and elsewhere. The complexity with which teens negotiate the code of the digital street—the “contextual integrity” (Nissenbaum 2009) of this dynamic—potentially gets lost or ceases to matter.

As a counterpoint, however, the people in law enforcement I met when participating in a juvenile gang task force explained social media surveillance as the painstaking collection of only one type of data. It is meaningful insofar as it fits a pattern with other data from surveillance on the ground, informants, recorded phone calls in or out of Rikers Island (the city’s main jail), and other traditional sources. In other words, more information allows police to do their job better.

This chapter shows how teenagers navigate the code under conditions of reduced online audience segregation. We see how teens partition, temper, and integrate the digital flow of street life in relation to decent pursuits elsewhere in their lives. Teens in the inner city are the ones dealing with context collapse at its most critical level. They must think hardest about it. Sarah sagely controls fight videos she did not consent to by keeping this material out of view of employers without destroying evidence of an impressive fight performance. Tiana is
purposefully public with her threat against Gabriella, allowing her aunt to talk her down—a face-saving way not to fight. Andre places the credibility of anti-violence workers on the line by going online with his campaign for respect, weaving in his ambition to go to college. In the milieu of the street, teens, community elders, and authorities are all leveraging context collapse for their own purposes. We thus need to center the study of context collapse on those with the most at stake: marginal teens juggling multiple audiences, accountabilities, and entanglements, and other populations deemed suspicious. This focus puts us back on track with Goffman’s fundamental concern with the intensification of stigma when audience segregation breaks down.

We build on these themes in the next chapter as we explore how Pastor enacts a longstanding community tradition of do-it-yourself surveillance on the networked street corner.
Chapter 4: SURVEILLANCE

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we studied how teenagers navigate the code of the streets as it expands online. When the eyes and ears of concerned adults similarly follow, fresh opportunities to monitor and intervene emerge. Police and prosecutors similarly leverage digital sightlines onto the street. How does social control operate today? How is it organized in neighborhood spaces that are physical and digital? In what ways does the surveillance of teens by elders in the community interact with police surveillance, and toward what ends for local youth and the community writ large?

To direct this inquiry, we must look towards the intersection of two literatures—one on do-it-yourself surveillance and the other on the networking of public places. We find that a traditional social role in the inner city—that of street pastor—now depends on the command of local media, particularly on understanding how different generations and constituencies use technology. We will see in this chapter how the street pastor leverages the many eyes and ears on the street to adjudicate his own form of community justice.

Below we evaluate two literatures to underscore the social role of the street pastor in networked publics. We travel with Pastor to understand the community’s response to the code of the street and to reconstruct this traditional role in terms of modern communication. We end with a close look at the ways in which Pastor “walks the thin line” between community residents and police and the moral authority he holds through the diversity of his forms of communication.

Do-It-Yourself Surveillance

In her classic study of street life, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs (1961, 32) proclaims that “[t]he first thing to understand” about “public peace” in cities is
that it “is not kept primarily by the police” but “enforced by the people themselves.” Public safety derives from a steady “supply of activity and eyes” on the street (40). Certain features of the built environment invite this caring attention. When buildings face the street rather than “turn their backs or blank sides” to the sidewalk, people watch the neighborhood from their stoops and windows (35). If “[s]tores, bars and restaurants” line the street, people “us[e] the sidewalks” and forge ties with “storekeepers and other small businessmen,” “great street watchers and sidewalk guardians” themselves (36–37). People out and about “attract still other people” (37). Highly used streets bind neighbors through little verbal exchanges in public that also signal to “strangers” that the “natives” care for their neighborhood. Blocks with such vitality deter antisocial actions, motivate people to respond when others need help, and foster public responsibility for children playing and teenagers cavorting.

Jacobs calls the above “do-it-yourself surveillance” (39). She claims that when those “using and most enjoying the city streets” police themselves, “safety of the street works best” and with the “least frequent taint of hostility or suspicion” (36). Choosing a term other than surveillance, urban scholars typically call such neighborly concern and capacity in public space “informal social control,” “collective trust,” and “collective efficacy.”

But Jacobs grants that not everyone watches the street as closely. Fewer still make sidewalk affairs their business. Across affluent and poor neighborhoods alike, Jacobs emphasizes the conspicuous presence of public characters, “self-appointed” custodians of the street (68). The “main qualification” of the public character “is that he is public” and that “he talks to lots of different people” (68). Public characters facilitate interactions and activity on the sidewalk. They make and distribute the news. By keeping “in frequent contact with a wide circle of people,” information travels through public characters and “does not move” in areas “where public
characters . . . are lacking” (68–69). In East Harlem, reports Jacobs, children from a single block with public characters quickly learn of enrollment spaces at a local music school while those in the nearby projects, who are cut off from public characters, miss out.

Although Jacobs emphasizes that a public character “just needs to be present” and requires “no special talents or wisdom,” she recognizes certain occupations that typically align with this neighborhood role. “Basic” or “anchored” public characters include “storekeepers or barkeepers or the like” whose businesses face the street (68–69). Local proprietors naturally interact with a high volume of people each day. The “other public characters . . . depend on them” for aggregated information and access to the publics that form through these businesses (68).

Other public characters belong to the “roving” variety that is dependent on “the street grapevine” (68). Jacobs highlights two occupations related to this type: settlement-house workers and pastors. These figures traffic in local gossip. Jacobs gives the example of a settlement house director who “makes a regular round” of Lower East Side shops (68–69). “He learns from the cleaner . . . about the presence of dope pushers in the neighborhood. . . . He learns from the grocer that the Dragons [a youth gang] are working up to something and need attention” (69).

When Jacobs herself becomes a public character by leading an initiative to save a park, she utilizes a network of local stores to leave and pick up petition cards. Jacobs also offers an example of a place without a proprietor that nonetheless draws people in a manner useful to the roving public character. On Rivington Street, the settlement house director frequents “an unused breadbox” that teenagers sit on and gather round in order to intercept their gossip (69).

A communication system operates along the street through public characters. The street becomes what Suttles (1968) calls a “communication channel” through which information flows across otherwise segmented individuals and groups. In the news system that Jacobs describes,
anchored public characters—the proprietors—either pass along aggregated data or provide hangouts for roving characters, who both collect and disseminate information at these points, as Jacobs does with her petition cards. Suttles, writing about a Chicago ghetto in the 1960s, also finds that the “street grapevine” is entrenched in stores.

That the “ganglia” of local gossip lies “in the stores” (Jacobs 1961, 68) reflects in part the technology of the time. Media scholars Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012, 81–108) emphasize that prior to the mid-1990s such opportunities for accessing information and socializing were tightly bound to place. In Jacobs, we see that public characters were required to report to specific places (presumably at specific times) to exchange neighborhood gossip. People themselves are, according to Suttles, the “communicative devices” that physically transport the information.

We would say today that neighborhood “publics” form in physical and digital settings, in many cases sliding between the two. A person on the street is still an embodied “communicative device,” but he might also carry a phone to communicate with people elsewhere, transmitting information digitally. We may thus assume that today’s roving public character traffics in gossip he gleans both in person and online and has the tools to create his own mobile informational infrastructures.

Let us explore the contemporary mechanics of do-it-yourself surveillance by considering the social role of the street pastor, one the city’s “more formalized kinds of public characters” (Jacobs 1968, 68). Before we follow this roving figure and delve into his “telephone ministry,” we need to know more about his role in history. How entrenched is it in the inner city? What exactly does the street pastor do? The answers to these questions force us to qualify one of Jacobs’s assumptions. Do-it-yourself surveillance appears to be—or has become—a misnomer.

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insofar as the primary duty of the street pastor lies in managing relations between community residents and institutional actors, particularly the police.

*The Street Pastor: A Recurring but Unusual Figure in the Inner City*

On the one hand, scholars have established that African-American clergy typically play an extra-religious role in inner-city communities. The black church serves civic, economic, and political functions that date back to slavery and the coordination of the Underground Railroad (DuBois 1903; Frazier 1964; Pattillo-McCoy 1998). “Black spirituality,” says Venkatesh (2006, 218), was never “organized only around the analysis of texts and scripture” but evolved “out of the church’s central role as a social and religious center, an institution that responded to both profane and spiritual matters affecting black Americans.” Cavendish (2000) offers national data to support this claim. He finds, in his analysis of national survey data, that black parishes are significantly more likely than their white counterparts are to be involved in the outreach and delivery of social services.

On the other hand, the literature appears to indicate that clergy rarely venture onto the street to serve the community. Ministers usually help those who come to church. In their classic Chicago study, Drake and Cayton document a proliferation of storefront churches during the first years of the Great Migration. The central ambition of “pastor and congregation,” they claim, was “to build or move into a larger edifice,” a goal accomplished in many instances. “The enterprising pastor who leads his congregation from store-front to edifice is well on his way to success in the church world” (416). It seems that the shift farther away from the street marks success for the ambitious pastor. For clergy “to appear on the street is . . . a rare event,” as pastors typically “offer their wares from their pulpits.” Unwilling to do street outreach, most pastors “gratefully accept a convert here and there.” (618). Many of “Bronzeville’s lower class”
did not want much to do with church either, rejecting “the alleged cupidity and hypocrisy of church functionaries and devotees,” with “preachers bear[ing] the brunt” of this hostility (650).

Writing about Boston’s Four Corners in the late 1990s and early 2000s, McRoberts (2003) indicated that most churches in the area (thirteen in number) “drew a thick line between themselves and the street,” and perceived the street as the “evil other” (83). Four other churches saw the street as “a recruiting ground” and “attempted, often in fits and starts, to sacralize the street through outdoor preaching and door-to-door proselytization” (86). But only one church in Four Corners “felt called to engage the street on its own apparent terms rather than proselytize or avoid it altogether” (91). In this conceptualization, the street represents a “point of contact with people at risk” (91).24 Members of Azusa Christian Community “wanted to offer spiritual salvation to all, but in the meantime attempted, through preemptive and palliative social services, to treat the causes and consequences of youth violence” (91). This church provided a drop-in facility for local kids and used boxing tournaments “to settle ‘beefs’ between individuals and rival ‘crews’” (91).

The church’s founder and pastor, a man named Eugene Rivers, led a team of “street patrollers” through Four Corners and Codman Square several days and nights each week. “They approached youth congregated on corners . . . and anyone else willing to stop and talk about their needs . . . and current events,” including “shifts in intergang relations” (92). On some nights, McRoberts observed Pastor Rivers “engage nearly every person he encountered in the street, sometimes calling them by name” (93). In addressing young people, Pastor Rivers “appropriated idioms associated with the street by way of meeting youth at risk where he felt they were cognitively situated” (94).

24 McRoberts also identifies a fourth variety of church. Two churches in Four Corners mixed the “recruitment ground” and “point of contact” frameworks (94–97).
We might say that pastors like Eugene Rivers who gravitate towards the street are atypical. Most clergy prefer to use the pulpit as their platform and church members as their congregation. Yet we find illustrations of the street pastor in urban scholarship and a fictionalization of the role in the HBO drama “The Wire.” To understand better this unusual but recurrent character in the inner city, I turn to rich accounts in the urban literature: first, Sudhir Venkatesh’s study of Pastor Jeremiah Wilkins in Chicago, and then back to Pastor Rivers and two partner ministers, Jeffrey Brown and Ray Hammond, who led Boston’s Ten Point Coalition, a group about which McRoberts and his collaborators at Harvard have written at length.

*Pastor Jeremiah Wilkins*

Venkatesh (2006) introduces us to the work of Pastor Wilkins. Pastor Wilkins first preached, “on street corners, in front of stores . . . and anywhere else people gathered” (224). In 1979, he got his own space, converting the shell of a food store into a “storefront church.” Pastor Wilkins took in those involved in gangs, prostitution, and hustling and became a “personal mediator” for gang disputes, domestic abuse, police–community confrontations, and other violence. Over the course of the 1980s, this role expanded as he went “from personal mediator and problem solver to social service provider” with the decline of “municipal resources . . . for police, libraries, and city services” (228). Pastor Wilkins filled in gaps in services with his own ventures, such as the establishment of a day care center at his site, and lobbied for his charges at municipal agencies and banks (225–228). This kind of extra-religious work placed Wilkins and other grassroots clergy in his network in “direct encounter with citywide public and private institutions” and with “more powerful black clergy,” serving “the wealthier commuters” who came from the suburbs and “were directly tied into the city political machine” (228–229).
Pastor Wilkins and other clergy addressed “breaches in the social fabric of the community” brought on by spiking unemployment rates in Chicago’s black communities (exceeding 50 percent by 1990) and gang activity around crack cocaine (242–246). As Wilkins’s collaborator Brother Patterson describes, “If someone got shot by the police . . . we tried first to make sure the gang didn’t go after the cop [so the courts could handle this]; we made sure kids could get to school on time, safely; we brought the undercover detective and gang leader together” (246–247). Street ministers became “the liaison” between neighborhood residents and police. “They recovered stolen goods” after individuals or business had been robbed. They “redirected day laborers from criminal activity by finding them off-the-books work as janitors and general laborers” and “sent addicts to rehabilitation centers” (247). This was work generally carried out “alone and on the streets close to their church” without any “corporate auspice” or differentiation “between faithful and secular” (247).

*Pastor Eugene Rivers and the Ten Point Ministers*

According to McRoberts and his collaborators Christopher Winship and Jenny Berrien (2000), three ministers, Reverends Eugene Rivers, Jeffrey Brown, and Ray Hammond, led a coalition of clergy able to “change the relationship between the police and Boston’s inner-city communities from one of open antagonism to one of partnership” over the course of the 1990s. Through this partnership, Boston was able “to succeed in substantially reducing homicide rates without imposing a ‘police state,’ as some people fear happened in New York City” (266). The clergy created an “umbrella of legitimacy” for police to work under to address “the problem of youth violence” (279). The authors indicate that this legitimacy was granted conditionally. The street pastors expected the Boston police to focus on “truly problematic youth” in the community, which both sides agreed were responsible for a disproportionately large share of all violence.
Police had to deal with this faction in a manner “perceived as fair and just” while involving the pastors—and by extension “the community”—in their processing. If police met these conditions, the department could expect to proceed “without recrimination from the press or the community” (279). If unmet, the ministers, particularly Pastor Rivers, publicly criticized BPD in the media and elsewhere, putting police “out in the rain” (267).

*The Middleman*

Mariana Valverde, in her book *Everyday Law on the Street* (2012), challenges Jacobs’s assumption that social order derives from community residents acting separately from the law.25 The accounts of street pastors above show us that these custodians of the sidewalk manage not only community members but also their interwoven relations with institutional actors, particularly the police. Street pastors get in the middle of all conflicts and cleavages. They are very much brokers of social order, which calls to mind another traditional role in inner-city communities of color: the middleman. In Mary Pattillo’s (2007) articulation of the middleman, she names the pastor as one such figure in this important and delicate position. The middleman moves information and negotiates resolutions between those in power (“the man”) and those without it (“the littleman”). Says Pattillo:

> The person in the middle, if she’s good, speaks at least two languages in order to translate, has two sets of credentials for legitimacy, and juggles a double-booked calendar to keep all relationships cordial, memberships current, and constituencies appeased. (113)

We would expect that this brokering role has become increasingly important as the criminal justice system sweeps into the everyday lives of inner-city youth (Goffman 2009; Rios 2011). As we shall see, the street pastor manages youth/police relations and translates one side’s “reality” for the other. But today, do-it-yourself surveillance is not only shaped by the

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25 To be clear, Valverde (2012, 7–8) emphasizes “areas of law that work without fanfare and without police—paving roads, maintaining parks, dictating the size of yards, inspecting homes and public buildings, and regulating city traffic” and so on.
intensification of policing in public space but also by the technologies that network these spaces online. Let us now think about the social role of the street pastor and questions of social control in relation to the networking of public spaces.

**Networked Streets**

Systems of communication and surveillance on the street are not confined to the face-to-face flow of information that we hear about in Jacobs and Suttles. In the 1980s and 1990s, numerous technology scholars focused on how systems of telephone and internet data “parallel and interweave” with the city’s physical and social spaces (Graham and Marvin 1996, 72). Their research considered how public space had shifted though media use and the technologies of the day. In our era of “locative media,” mobile devices linked to the internet and physical location, or the street, as Eric Gordon and Adriana de Souza e Silva (2011, 2) explain, “is no longer limited to the perceptual horizon of the person walking down it.” Through our smartphones, the street “contains annotations and connections, information and orientations from a network of people and devices” (1). The authors call this condition of public life “networked locality.” This facet of street life is sometimes associated with the flow of web-based data pertaining to real estate prices, restaurant reviews, “check-ins” on platforms like Foursquare, and other consumer possibilities (Varnelis and Friedberg 2008, 33–36; Humphreys and Liao 2013). As people move through public space, they contribute to and draw upon a knowledge base online, which guides their next move.

Others working on the pairing of digital information and physical space focus on community mobilization. Community activists who “[h]istorically . . . have been quick to incorporate media such as publications, radio, television, and film to mobilize constituencies,” have, for many years, used online communication to harness “one-to-one communication, one-
to-many broadcasts, and many-to-many media” (Lim and Kann 2008, 89). Being an activist means getting one’s point across in media that already exists and creating new media for the same purpose.

In terms of mobilizing community members within a neighborhood, Keith Hampton (2010) finds that the use of mediated communication by residents can enhance social cohesion and collective action in higher-poverty areas. Digital platforms that enable both “instantaneous and asynchronous communication” can be used to “overcome barriers” among neighbors, such as “temporal mismatches” in their schedules and “psychological hurdles” (1116).

In one way or another, the research above is all about do-it-yourself surveillance and how an overlay of information about public spaces provides a basis for action. But any DIY surveillance operates within more vast systems of tracking conducted by corporate and state entities. The legal scholar Timothy Zick (2007) sees this issue as a loss of free speech through corporate and state access to what we say or do in public. In this spirit, Zick associates the use of smartphones in public with two other shifts in the streetscape that collectively generate “a continuous, running record of most public activities” (2007, 2). Zick points to the provision of “vast public internet access networks” by private corporations and government and the proliferation of closed-caption television cameras and other “surveillance devices” (10–11).

The horizon of the street has expanded since the writings of Jacobs and Suttles. With the networking of public space in mind, we can better appreciate the environment in which the street pastor now operates.
Running with Pastor

Before we go out with Pastor, we first need to know about his relationship to the streets. It must be considered an evolving relationship. In fact, his ministry is part and parcel of this evolution.

Pastor does not have a church or even a conventional religious affiliation. “Some would call me a Baptist-Pentecostal, some would call me nondenominational,” he explains. “But a child of God—that’s all that I really am,” he says. Pastor belongs to Harlem’s Baptist Ministers Conference and collaborates regularly with Christian ministers. A Muslim, however, pays his paycheck at the senior housing facility where he works as a services coordinator. The office where Pastor serves the seniors doubles as a drop-in center for youth. I opened “The Lab” in this same space. Pastor’s boss, a real estate developer of affordable housing for the elderly, leased Pastor an SUV as a birthday present. Pastor’s office, vehicle, and apartment near the seniors’ facility serve as the physical sites of what Pastor calls a “fluid” pastoral practice. As a church-less pastor, he calls what he has a “telephone ministry,” a term used by other grassroots clergy also.

“How come you don’t have a church?” I asked Pastor one evening.

“Getting other people to understand what it is that I do outside of the pulpit is difficult,” he says. “People have a traditional idea of what a minister is, and they’ll read in the Bible about Jesus and how Jesus went from place to place teaching hope and spreading the good news, but they don’t see that that is the role of preacher or minister.” The tendency of local clergy, he says, is to preach from the pulpit and to fundraise for their church. But “the streets is where it’s at for me—it’s where the experiences are, it’s where the memories are, it’s where the lessons are, [and] that’s where the teaching moments are.”
That he is without a church is not because Pastor bucks the training of the cloth. Quite the contrary, Christian theology and official titling are fundamental to his identity and beliefs. He was licensed in 1999 and ordained in 2000. He holds a Master of Divinity from the Theological School at Drew University. Most days of the week, he dresses in either clerical clothing or a suit and tie, and he carries a leather-bound Bible. He guests as a preacher at an AME Church, officiates marriages, and presides over funerals. His credentials and appearance are fundamental to his work and status among other clergy, local residents, and governmental authorities and institutions.

But another set of experiences and credentials predates his gradual turn towards pastoral life. These qualifications make his ministry meaningful to local teenagers and ensure that he is “in touch” with the hardships of the poor. His traction with the kids on the street sets him apart from other clergy and earns the respect of parents and other adults in the community, the police, courts, and other institutions.

On Pastor’s website, he calls himself “a product of the streets of Harlem.” “I’ve always had an affinity for the streets and the nightlife,” explains Pastor. “After a while came some comfortableness with it—being out, moving around . . . and what the young people might call ‘vamping’ now, I just called breaking day then.” Pastor says he is “built for” what he does. He has the stamina to be out for long hours over multiple days and practices what he calls “verbal judo” to motivate in others the talk and action he wants.

This capacity comes from experiences over many years and phases of his life. Pastor recalls staying with his aunt on 138th Street during his pre-teen years. “At the let-off for the bridge from the Bronx,” he and his buddies waited for cabs to stop at the light and would then “reach in through the window or open the door, grab the money box, and run.” “That was how
we kept money in our pocket, either that or getting a bag of weed, breaking it down into joints and selling it at parties.” As a teenager living on 175th Street and Macombs Road in the Bronx, he remembers his motivations as being similar to those of teenagers today: “I want to look good and I want to eat and I know I need money for that.” He describes coming down from the Bronx to Harlem to sell “heron [heroin] and coke.” He and his friends would “walk through St. Nicholas Projects selling our drugs. By the time we got from end to the other end, we had a bag full of money.” Then they would take a Topaz car service cab “to 128th Street and 129th Street and Lenox Avenue . . . to a bar there called The Inner City, [where] we would go in the back of the bar and count up our money, divvy it up, and have the man’s money and have our money.” Then “right there on 129th Street where we were getting our drugs” from Nicky Barnes, they would drop off “the man’s money” in “I want to say, [building number] 49.” Pastor centers his ministry on the exact streets he previously worked on as a drug dealer.

In his late twenties and early thirties, after spending nearly a third of his life in jail or prison for drug and violent offenses, Pastor moved gradually into an activist role. He got involved with Sonny Carson and his Blackwatch organization, which led to a series of rallies again police brutality in the 1980s known as the Days of Outrage. Pastor joined X-Clan, a hip-hop group, with Carson’s son Professor X.

Pastor says that when he visited his birthplace of Ellery, South Carolina, as a child of seven or eight, his grandmother told him he would be a preacher like his father, a role he resisted until age thirty-four. In his mid-thirties, Pastor began his youth ministry, first with two kids whom he taught how to read in his living room using the program Hooked on Phonics. After cycling through borrowed spaces, one of which was in a church, he took a services coordinator position in 2000 and moved into his current office.
Jacobs (1961, 69) writes that public characters often adopt “a pertinent specialty of some sort.” After Jacobs led a petition against the bulldozing of a park, she “automatically” became “the sidewalk public character on petition strategy” (70). We know from the Boston and Chicago examples that street pastors manage neighborhood violence, both among young people and between police and residents. Today Pastor often carries a “RIP” binder with photographs from social media, news clippings, funeral programs, and other materials related to young people who have been killed by gun violence. Pastor is known as a specialist in this domain.

He attributes the origins of this reputation to two key events, both of which took place in 2007, before I met him. First, the local precinct’s crime prevention officer referred him to five families with teenagers. Pastor came to know these kids and their parents, all from the 129th Street area, along with the kids and families from the areas on the other side of this rivalry. Second, he and Ray, the retired postal worker with whom he had partnered since the living-room ministry, orchestrated a peace treaty between the 129th Street and St. Lincoln groups. They “sealed” the treaty with a basketball game at the park on 130th Street and Fifth Avenue, which Ray refereed. With a big audience of teenagers from both sides of the conflict photographing and writing about the event on MySpace, the primary platform at the time, the influence of the two men grew. This traction along 129th Street—once known as “the corridor of violence”— built Pastor’s reputation and enabled his migration to other areas of conflict in Harlem.

_The first two weeks of a new school year (Tuesday, September 7, through Tuesday, September 21)_

On a Tuesday in September 2010, the day before the new school year starts on a Wednesday, I join Pastor and Ray in front of the Mormon church on 128th Street and Lenox Avenue at about 5:30 p.m. Pastor has just parked his familiar black SUV curbside, and he and Ray stand between the SUV and the church entrance. Kaseem, whom Ray has been mentoring
closely, is the first of several teenagers to join the gathering. A basketball player who usually
dresses the part, Kaseem wears a t-shirt, mesh shorts, white athletic socks, and sports sandals.
Underneath his red Washington Nationals cap, he has inserted earbuds from an iPod and raps
along to nineties hip-hop. Later he tells me his taste is “old school.” A middle-aged woman
approaches Pastor to ask if he is the pastor of the church. “I should be,” he replies. “Let me stop,”
he says, affecting embarrassment by his presumption. Pastor explains that his ministry is about
engaging young people where they are, and invites the woman to “hang out with us.” He goes on
to say that he does not have a church but worships nearby at Emanuel African Methodist
Episcopal. One of Pastor’s motives for holding court at this end of the block rather than on the
129th Street corner is to continue lobbying the pastor of the Mormon church to open his facilities
to the neighborhood kids, particularly the basketball gym on the fourth floor (an effort that will
eventually lead to the introduction of a Thursday evening basketball program).

Fifteen-year-old Tiana, carrying her BlackBerry with its pink bedazzled casing, walks up
moments later. She appears with Cheryl, a young woman of about twenty who lives on the block.
They sing and dance along to “Teach Me How to Dougie,” which is playing from Tiana’s phone.

Pastor, Ray, and the young women chat. Cheryl remarks that the boys from the block are
in trouble with “all of Harlem” and that she expects that they are going to “get it” at the
upcoming Harlem Day Parade. Adding to their ongoing rivalry with the guys from St. Nicholas
Houses and from Lincoln Houses, about fifteen teenagers from the 129th Street scene have
gotten into a separate beef at a party in East Harlem on Saturday night.

Pastor and Ray are worried about a violent start to the school year, to which Tiana may
have added fuel to the fire with her three BBM lists. She broadcasts a list of “TOP 10 HARLEM
TEAMS,” that places two age-graded groups from 129th Street first and second, another set of
rankings for the “tOP10 Hoodz” in the Bronx (where Tiana lives with her mother), and a “List of Smuts” with the names of forty-one girls from twenty-two different blocks, buildings, or neighborhoods across Harlem, Washington Heights, and the Bronx.

Pastor, who is in Tiana’s BBM (BlackBerry Messenger) network, promptly speaks to her about the destructiveness of these lists and tries to warn and mobilize parents with a text blast: “Because our youth play points and broadcast it this way. We have violence on our streets. This will be the cause of pre and back to school violence in our communities. (Put together and broadcast by leader of girl crew),” with the top-ten teams list copied and pasted below. While we hang out on the block into the early evening, he texts and tweets CompStat metrics that indicate higher homicide and felony assaults citywide this year as compared to last year. “Catch the wave of peace,” he includes. Pastor takes Kaseem aside to reprimand for him for “gassing”—encouraging—the lists that Tiana circulated.

Some of the teenagers gathered are right in the thick of neighborhood violence. Association implicates others. Those in their later teens and early twenties have “stepped back” but cannot easily disentangle themselves from “the beef.” One such youth, about twenty, asks Pastor about job leads. Pastor tells him to a call a partnering City Council candidate to do short-term campaign work that pays ten dollars per hour. The young male worries that he might encounter old rivals if he is placed around St. Nicholas Houses. Pastor encourages him to see this opportunity through, adding that he will need to register online for the Democratic Party. He tells him that he simply needs to cover up, as he gestures to him to zip his hoodie and roll down his sleeves to obscure tattoos of his nickname and old crew. “You’re there to do a job. You’re not there to represent,” Pastor explains. Near some of the guys involved in Saturday’s drama, three
boys, all approximately ten years of age, greet Ray as they pass. Ray wants to engage them now, he tells me.

Pastor heads off to prepare for a funeral service in honor of a man who lived to the age of 101, and Ray and I chat with a rotating set of boys and girls, who have migrated to lean against a beige Mercedes parked in front of the laundromat on the corner. One who stays put is a boy on crutches with both of his legs in casts after a “DT” car—an unmarked police car—hit him. I meet an eleventh-grade girl new to the scene who has been living in a shelter a few blocks away.

After the first day of school on Wednesday, school is closed for the rest of the week for the Jewish holidays. On Thursday afternoon and evening, the boys from 129th Street and their counterparts from St. Lincoln chase each other on several occasions after Slinky is spotted on a bus on 125th Street. Meanwhile, Tiana and another girl fight next to Marcus Garvey Park following a nasty rumor about Tiana that has been spread on Twitter. Pastor pulls her out of the fight.

On Friday, an anti-violence event sponsored by NYPD brings together community-based organizations to distribute materials in front of the State Office Building on 125th Street. At one table, a big bulletin board appears with the words “Just Say NO” and acronyms for local male crews and female crews written inside crossed-out circles. That night, at about 7:45, when I run to the store, I see Pastor and Ray out with teens on the corner in front of the Mormon church. Pastor tells me he was walking his wife’s dog near his apartment (about three-quarters of a mile away), when he heard that boys from Lincoln Houses were spotted on 125th Street “mobbing up.” About twenty to twenty-five teenagers from the 129th Street group circulate about the block. One yells that the Lincoln group is near. About twelve boys stand in line from the buildings to the curb on the next block, on the Mormon church side of Lenox Avenue, only between 128th
Street and 127th Street. Pastor, a Yorkie tucked under his arm, walks towards the Lincoln group, while Ray pushes the other group towards the laundromat at the other end of the block. Pastor, Ray, and many of the teenagers present have been through a variation of this before. The groups in this rivalry and others in Harlem enact a script in these tenuous moments. The announcement of “Pastor on Deck,” “POD,” or “Pastor” establishes that violence should not happen at this particular moment.

This script offers a way out of the impending showdown that is not shameful. Sometimes the “POD” script stops presumptive violence as rivals converge. Sometimes knowledge of Pastor’s presence prevents this convergence in the first place. A confrontation may move elsewhere, away from Pastor, or transpire after he leaves. Sometimes the intervention fails to avert violence. In this case, the intervention “works” but then breaks down.

Once the St. Lincoln group walks towards their rivals, Pastor walks off the block and into the street on 128th Street and Lenox Avenue. “A-yo Pastor is here. No violence,” he announces in a loud voice. I walk out into the street so that Pastor and I stand parallel. The cars stop. Pastor, as if moving traffic, directs the group to the other side of Lenox Avenue, the west side, where traffic travels south. I follow Pastor’s lead. The group splinters and teens hedge forward but no one passes the “line” that Pastor and I have formed, which is now a diagonal. The St. Lincoln teenagers walk northwest. We have herded the group to the island that partitions the flow of traffic and onto the west side of the avenue. If we can keep them moving north past 129th Street, they can then be steered west to St. Nicholas or east to Lincoln, out of trouble. But the intermittent taunts pick up and the St. Lincoln group stops walking. I look over my right shoulder in the direction of the laundromat. I see one of the teenagers from 129th Street, broomstick in hand, leading a charge of his group. The two sides square off in the street on the west side of the
avenue. Arms flail; thrown bottles break on the pavement. I hear someone yell, “He got brass knuckles.” The adults’ control of the situation ends instantly.

Pastor announces “fallback” and we retreat to the east side of Lenox Avenue. Cole has taken a seat in the back of Pastor’s unlocked SUV. Pastor opens the door and hands him the dog. I hear the first gun shot, and hurry to the curb side of the vehicle. Pastor yells “get low.” I crouch against the SUV along with Pastor. Others duck by parked cars. “Get down,” I say as three more gunshots go off. Pastor has already come up to a stand, his arms crossed on the top of his car, as he watches as best he can. Some of the teenagers from 129th Street return, their rivals having dispersed. No one appears to have been hit. Teenagers look around for one another; some family members have come too, and one asks Pastor where his younger brother is. People chat in little clusters, acknowledging and reconstructing the experience.

There are no sirens or flashing lights. One patrol car from the local precinct slows down, the two officers inside look on, and one smiles slightly before the car drives off. This decision to leave matters to Pastor might have been out of deference, but this time I imagine it was out of spite. Anti-violence workers alongside whom Pastor sometimes works have recently called for the precinct commander to be fired following a shootout between police and a gunman that led to one fatality and the wounding of four civilians and two officers. After media criticism of the actions taken by police, and specifically a demand for the commander’s job, I have noticed that the presence of police in targeted areas within the confines of the precinct has been unusually low.

I return home and collect accounts from Pastor and others the following day. Pastor’s night has just begun. He drives to his apartment to drop off the dog and put on his bulletproof vest, given to him by the police department. He sends a text message blast to update residents:
“About 25mins ago shoots fired 128th Lenox ave.” He indicates also that the firing came from the St. Lincoln side and that no one was hit. He returns to 129th and Lenox Avenue, expecting to hear from both Royce, who often leads the St. Lincoln alliance, and Drew, who led the broomstick charge. As Pastor explains the following day, both teens know he has “seen them commit a crime”—although he did not actually see the shooter. They also violated the “POD” script, most egregiously on Royce’s side by shooting with Pastor present. They will want to make amends and probe the status of any police investigation (of which there is none in this instance).

While two teens hang out in Pastor’s parked car on Lenox Avenue, Royce calls Pastor. Pastor tells the boys that he is driving to Lincoln. Neither boy provokes violence in this rivalry so Pastor believes he can bring them along as messengers for his peace treaty. One boy asks the other if he should take off his brightly colored sweater to appear less obvious. Pastor picks up Royce, who indicates he is ready to talk to Drew. Pastor instructs Ray to get Drew, who goes in Ray’s car. Pastor and Ray arrange a meeting of their vehicles so that Royce and Drew can squash the beef with Pastor and Ray present. After they shake on nonviolence, Pastor wants to get out the word that these two rival leaders came together in peace. Pastor returns to 129th Street, and once an audience of teenagers hangs by the car, he asks his two passengers if they should “check their underpants.” This intentionally bizarre comment prompts a discussion of going to Lincoln and Royce and Drew’s reconciliation. Then he alerts the older generation, texting at 1:16 in the morning that he and Ray have met with one leader from each side following the shooting. He adds: “Our attempt at peace with these two is a start of something bigger and lasting - pray with Us!”
But the peace only holds through the night, and the next day brings violence between the two sides, particularly as older teens from 129th Street get involved. Shots are fired at St. Nicholas Houses in the afternoon and then at Lincoln Houses in the evening. The police presence on Lenox Avenue remains conspicuously low during the several hours I am out. After I turn in at 11 p.m., I hear the sound of emergency vehicles coming from Seventh Avenue after midnight.

My wife walks in having seen police cars and ambulances just north of our street on her walk from the subway. Pastor forwards a text from one of his spotters: “Did you hear me Rev. 1 shot dead between 132/133st 7th ave. I almost tripped over him. Didn’t even know he was there.” The teenage victim dies not on the street that night but a few days later in the hospital. He is not from 129th Street or St. Lincoln but from elsewhere in Harlem.

On Sunday, a man believed to be in his twenties is shot in the hand on Eighth Avenue, which makes at least five shootings in Harlem over the first weekend of the new school year. That evening, Pastor texts a recap of the shootings and his count of “ova 12 fights from 120th through 139th Madison to St Nic. More violence to come! Community! Community and you out here?” He texts again about an hour and a half later: “Many have asked what can we do? Emergency meeting this Thursday at 7:30pm,” he announces with the details of the hosting pastor and church location. He adds, “Tell three people and call those that want your vote. This violence will only get worse! AAD [African American Day] parade is coming.”

On Monday afternoon, Pastor and I make a brief appearance at the monthly Baptist Ministers Conference and grab takeout to eat at the office. Tiana comes by with Cassie, a girl who had been sitting with the boys on the Mercedes last week. In the middle of a meandering conversation, Pastor asks Tiana where she can buy a gun. Tiana, perhaps caught off guard, offers two names, before saying, “Don’t snitch on me.” Tiana brings up party options for her sixteenth
birthday next month. Pastor advises her to have it outside of Manhattan and not to invite the boys from 129th Street. Tiana wants Pastor to give her the community room across the hall and to work security. They leave the matter open. A friend of Tiana, a junior at a high school downtown, and later JayVon and a freshly tattooed Cole, drop by. We chat about Friday’s shooting and the condition of the shooting victim; everyone seems uncertain about the violence. Then the rain starts, leading Pastor to rejoice that he can go home early to his wife. When it rains, the “staging areas” shut down and violence is rare.

I sit up front in Pastor’s SUV and the five teens squeeze into the back for drop-offs. We leave the boys at a subway station and then drive to the shelter to leave Cassie. Pastor asks Cassie when they are going to have “a talk.” “Huh,” she says. He says he wants to hear about her parents whenever she is ready. Cassie furrows her brow as Tiana smiles, having brokered the introduction. Pastor asks Cassie about her favorite food (candied yams and mac n’ cheese). He will take her out to eat these when they have their chat, he promises.

On Tuesday, I take a bunch of guys from 129th Street to a basketball court on the east side, away from the beef, to play ball for a few hours after school. While hanging by a bench after the games, I relay a text from Pastor that the boy shot Saturday has died. “They be clappin’ [killing] niggas,” Isaiah responds, shaking his head. Elton says that two girls had been with the boy that night. He and Isaiah agree the girls were paid to set him up, an account I also hear elsewhere and a variation on a common explanation for why boys get killed.

On Wednesday, Pastor sends texts and tweets in memoriam of the young man while doing bereavement work with his family. He then adopts more provocative language to mobilize an outing of the shooter: “If a member of KKK killed some one in ur community; would that killer b allowed to walk, enjoy and continue in ur community? WWUD [What would you do]?”
Two friends of the deceased, introducing themselves by their Twitter handles, manage speculation on the street from their friends’ public Twitter profile, “Yu All Need 2 Shut All Dha Rumor Shyt Up U Dnt Kno Wah Happen.”

On Thursday, the precinct commander addresses the community council, tying Saturday’s killing to the controversial incident the previous month in which police fired on a young man holding a gun. Says the commander, “The way people can instantly message today” makes crowd control extremely difficult for police. Leading up to each of these separate shootings, mobile communication enabled groups of young people at parties to converge en masse on a single street. The commander and two of his critics spar over details of the shootout involving police. Meanwhile, at a church further uptown, residents at the emergency meeting coordinate monitoring duties at Sunday’s parade.

Over the weekend, Pastor tweets for the teenagers in his Twitter network, adopting their spelling and language choices in the hopes of getting his message through. In one he writes, “Last week Dave C was shot in da head! Crazii thing is every week some gettin it bad. And da beat goes on. SMH fakes dis week who next SMH!” In another he writes, “So I'm thinkin 2 order my RIP tag early an beat da rush. Forward pic and name 2 gotta get bodiedbagged_dis weekend.com”.

On Sunday, before the post-parade scene along Lenox Avenue picks up, I chat by a deli with Dorsey from the 129th Street group. He cautions that tonight “it’s gonna be Grand Theft Auto out here,” a reference to a top-selling video game in which players earn points for violence. A message circulating on teens’ Twitter networks this morning asks: “Is It Gonna Be A Parade Or A War?” Dorsey tells me there is a post-parade tradition of settling scores, but in the next breath explains that much of the anticipation is just talk “on the internet.”
At about 6:10 p.m., I head to Lenox Avenue, one avenue east of the parade route, to find a teenage scene under tremendous police scrutiny. I see police patrol cars, auxiliary police cars, mobile command units, Interceptors, motorcycles, police on horseback, a retrofitted school bus, and a range of unmarked vehicles from Chevrolet Impalas to Jeep Cherokees. Police vehicles with flashing sirens drive in caravans up and down the avenue. Spotlights are set up on street corners while police personnel in uniform and plainclothes patrol. While there are some, mostly male, adults present, this is a teenage gathering under heavy police scrutiny. Groups of young people momentarily “post up” on a corner until police instruct them to move along. Guys call out and after girls; some girls stop, but most keep walking. Teenagers are not walking alone but in groups, some so large that the group spans the entire block. “Mobbing” is constant throughout the night, with neighborhood groups, often teamed up, calling out their names and ’hoods as they walk back and forth along the avenue. The largest groups are two rival cross-borough gangs that have absorbed smaller block-based groups. At one point in the night, six police officers on horseback are behind one of these gangs, pushing the teens north. At the front of the group I recognize Cassie, who has cultivated 2,074 followers on Twitter, roughly ninety-five percent of whom are male.

But there is no significant violence on this night, no gang fights or gunplay or anything beyond the level of what Pastor calls in a text blast “a skirmish.” The police presence effectively offers a controlled environment for “mobbing,” in which rival groups can pass one another repeatedly over several hours gesturing and calling out at one another without actually doing violence. Instead, teenagers dramatize the dangers on Twitter. Meanwhile, street workers focus mostly on convincing teenagers to get in their houses before they get arrested and on shuttling kids home.
On Monday afternoon, Pastor and I watch 129th Street from the car. Tiana joins us to charge her phone and chat. Things are quiet. The next morning, I accompany Pastor to a Religious Leaders Breakfast hosted by the District Attorney. In attendance are about twenty black clergy, a constituency that the DA courted and relied on for his election. Over eggs and coffee, the DA thanks those present for their community work and fellowship, twice acknowledging Pastor by name. The DA outlines the organization of his office, partnerships with NYPD, and “hot spots” of concern in Manhattan, including the rivalry around 129th Street. When he gets the acronym wrong for a group from Lincoln Houses, Pastor politely corrects him. Afterwards, Pastor takes an opportunity to talk to the DA about two cases, one in which a teenager, later released, is doing time for a shooting he did not do. The DA directs one of his ADAs to take down the details. The ADA indicates that they will look into the matter.

The Social Role of the Street Pastor

This account, which covers two weeks running with Pastor, reveal the kinds of relationships and strategies that he employs in his effort to control youth violence. I now take apart Pastor’s work during this period to depict the social role of the street pastor in its constituent parts. I reference additional events related to the people and situations introduced and draw further on the concepts of the public character and middleman and the material on Pastor Wilkins and Pastor Rivers. I start with Pastor’s BlackBerry, the hub of his “telephone ministry.”

Pastor’s Network

Over these two weeks, Pastor gets timely information that the boys from St. Lincoln have assembled on 125th Street before the showdown on 128th Street. He hears immediately about a young person’s body on the street on Seventh Avenue and subsequently reports on the shooting victim’s condition. He recaps in detail a violent back-to-school weekend. He pools the many
eyes and ears on the street to render in real time something akin to a weather report—the current conditions and his forecast of what is coming. How does he know what he knows?

To understand Pastor’s network, I downloaded the address book on his BlackBerry in July 2012. The address book included 1,350 contacts, an unusually large total from which I took a random sample of ten percent. I interviewed Pastor about each of these 135 contacts. I then put aside his contacts outside of Manhattan and those for whom Pastor did not have a specific geographic affiliation. I mapped the remaining 107 contacts, adopting a symbology for the roles each individual plays in Pastor’s ministry. The maps (Illustration 1 and Illustration 2) appear below to show the two areas that Pastor effectively bridges: the uptown world of Harlem where most of his contacts are based and the downtown world below Central Park, starting in the 40s, where courts, other government functions, and news media are located.

We see in these maps the tremendous variety of Pastor’s network. The middleman, says Pattillo (2007, 116), is “situated between powerlessness and power.” Pastor is tied, on the one hand, to young people, parents, and other residents of Harlem, and, on the other, to government service providers, government staffers, police personnel, a prosecutor, and a judge. He is linked to fellow clergy and community organizers, community-based organizations providing services, street workers known as violence interrupters, and several professional or graduate student journalists. We might think of these actors as being in the same intermediary plane as Pastor—between those with and without “power of the state.” His network includes also a financial planner from a midtown firm who speaks to teens about financial literacy and an undertaker at a funeral parlor uptown.
Illustration 1. Pastor’s Uptown World
Illustration 2. Pastor’s Downtown World

- community organizer
- financial planner
- government staffer
- journalist/news organization
- judge
- prosecutor
- service provider (CBO)
- service provider (government)

Meters

© Jeffrey Lane, 2013
This 10 percent of Pastor’s phone world includes boys ensconced in gun violence, along with some of their girlfriends, parents, siblings, and cousins. We find caseworkers from the Office of Child Support Enforcement, a gang intelligence detective, the commanding officer of a housing police sector, an NYPD community affairs liaison, an Assistant District Attorney, a federal judge, the “big preachers” tied to community reinvestment initiatives (Venkatesh 2006), activists from the NAACP and the New Black Panther Party, a pastor at Rikers who facilitates clergy visits, an NBC anchorman, and a case manager from a senior care center downtown who hires Pastor’s referrals. Among these contacts are “spotters” who keep Pastor abreast of happenings in their buildings, on their blocks, or within the agencies in which they work. Nine of the teenagers or young adults in the sample are spotters—males and females worried about their peers even if some in the group fight or shoot. One teen occasionally dials Pastor surreptitiously so he can listen in as troublesome plans or interactions emerge. They text him about impending fights and unsupervised parties where Pastor may show up to work “security,” sometimes enlisting the help of a couple of Muslim men whom he pays what he can. Pastor also prays and pulls this information out of his young people, texting or calling them when he wants to know something. By far the most important teen spotters are Pastor’s “specials,” the girls most enmeshed in neighborhood rivalries.

Pastor also organizes his contacts into one or more lists to receive his “text blasts.” These blasts often pertain to neighborhood violence. Others announce job openings, classes, meetings, legislation, deaths, protests, arrests, weddings, graduations, fires, fundraisers, and so forth. Some contain scripture, affirmation, and opinions. Pastor curates numerous lists. One list comprises the adults (presumed to have unlimited texting plans) who have specifically opted to join his outreach network. Another covers parents of participants in a municipal summer youth
employment program. One list is for all young people in his ministry; another list is for young people in the summer job program; still other youth lists are broken down by geography to avoid conflict when Pastor announces job opportunities and programming. Three “media” lists roughly correspond to news format (print, television, and radio). Then there is a “white shirts’ list” of commanding officers at local precincts. Through these lists, Pastor creates his own restricted publics.

Pastor does not need to canvass the stores to exploit the street as a communication channel. On the contrary, through his BlackBerry, he controls numerous channels of street news. He sustains a physical presence on the block and at community meetings and digitally on BBM, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media. He aggregates the eyes and ears of his spotters, who are attuned to the physical and digital spaces of their respective streets.

**Intergenerational Convergence of Old and New Media**

The do-it-yourself surveillance that Pastor coordinates across Harlem integrates a range of media and media users. He understands patterns of adoption and styles of communication across his various constituencies. Using one-to-many media, he speaks to the adults in their language on their short-form medium of texting. He speaks to the teens on Twitter, affecting his language accordingly. “Crazy” becomes “crazii.” “This” becomes “dis.” Speaking at least two languages is the key to the middleman. Pastor follows nearly 2,000 Twitter profiles, the majority of which belong to teenagers in Harlem and the Bronx. He gets help culling this vast material. He uses a customized Twitter application created by two programmers who operate a market research firm and who reached out to Pastor after reading about him in the newspaper. The programmers have configured their application so that Pastor receives alerts when specific users tweet or when slang associated with violence appears.
To get deeper in the know, he takes reports over the phone from one middle-aged man and one elderly man who routinely listen to citizens’ band (CB) radio for police and emergency response communication. Pastor also subscribes to two services that send automated emails with incident reports related to police, fire, and rescue operations (services that aggregate CB radio, local news media, and other sources).

Pastor brings to life Mizuko Ito’s (2008) point in her introduction to *Networked Publics*, namely, that information flows “top-down, bottom-up, [and] . . . side-to-side” as publics “traffic in both professional and personal media” (3).

This DIY surveillance is remarkable not only because of its assortment of systems but also because of the way that information migrates across them. Pastor takes information produced for one audience and gives it to another. Pastor, in many instances, takes content generated by teens in peer networks and transfers it to adults, as when he texts Tiana’s BBM rankings to warn of potential violence at the start of the school year. He collapses contexts.

The capacity to bridge digital networks that are sorted according to generation is a key facet of contemporary DIY surveillance. On a Wednesday in November six weeks after the parade on Lenox Avenue, a link for a video circulates on teenagers’ Twitter networks. The video shows a frightened teenager being held by his backpack strap on 125th Street. The boy on camera renounces his home block during the intimidation. The link on Twitter is retweeted widely and the video is viewed 1,715 times within its first twenty-one hours online.

When the video circulated in 2010, Twitter was the principal social medium for teenagers. They would not find their parents on this platform, which, with rare exceptions, was unfamiliar to elders in the community. Pastor, as the only (known) adult present in many teenagers’ networks, saw the video post immediately. On Thursday, after seeing tweets suggestive of
retaliation, Pastor sent a text message blast to parents and other adults: “This is going to be a problem Friday is the word,” and included the video’s URL. He called for “a parent walk” at 9 p.m. Friday night that drew roughly forty adults and teens, many of whom walked in honor of the boy killed on Seventh Avenue or a second victim killed the following weekend. The group held signs with memorial photos and anti-violence slogans. Pastor organized the route to pass through the areas involved in the video drama. He acted in this instance as a generational intermediary, leveraging fluency and strength of network in the dominant short-message medium for teenagers (Twitter) and for parents (texting). The modern street pastor does not simply adopt a multiplicity of media but understands adoption trajectories across the community.

Camera Eyes

The mechanical eyes of mounted cameras also line the streets of the city, particularly in ghetto areas. On some blocks of Harlem and within its housing projects, closed-caption video feeds directly to the police. The private cameras affixed to residential and retail buildings similarly fall within the purview of police, which can readily expect landlords and proprietors to turn over requested footage (without warrants). On the heels of many a shooting in the area, I have observed detectives approach staff at the laundromat for access to their videos.

Pastor has contacts he may call upon to glean what police have or do not have on video. But he does not necessarily need this information to leverage the cameras on the street. The presumption or fear of being on video may be enough to get teenagers to comply with his intervention. I offer an example, based on an account I collected from Pastor.

Following a night of nasty attacks between the 129th Street and St. Lincoln groups, Pastor picks up Royce from Lincoln Houses and brings him to a diner in the Bronx to assess the situation. Pastor probes about a shooting in which someone in Lincoln Houses was hit in the arm.
Royce tells him that he saw one of the guys shooting at 129th Street. Pastor has him describe the gunman’s clothing and where he stood when he fired. The alleged location of the gunman places him in the line of a camera affixed to a recently opened deli. Pastor brings Royce back home and texts a description of the gunman to the young man whom Royce identifies. The young man calls back in panic, assuming Pastor has learned that the police have him on video. Pastor then picks up the young man and another person from 129th Street and brings them to the same Bronx diner for a talk. Pastor mentions the deli camera and the young man admits his part. Pastor expresses his disapproval and explains the possible punitive outcomes, given that the youth is currently on probation. He describes “the effects” his prison sentence will have on particular family members. The young man appears remorseful and anxious and indicates that he will “fall back” and “lay low.” Pastor operates steps ahead of both the participants in the rivalry and the police, based on an assumption of video documentation though he does not even know if the camera is functional.

Visibility

Jacobs tell us that a public character’s “main qualification is that he is public” (1961, 68). What does it mean to be visible on the street today? Pastor strives not just for presence but also for salience, which means making his presence in the neighborhood felt in person and online. Pastor, Ray, and other dedicated outreach workers are regularly on the block, particularly during afterschool hours when the street becomes a social scene for teenagers. Just by being consistent, they achieve some prominence in the life of the sidewalk. They become familiar faces with recognizable vehicles. Kids and adults expect to find them on the block and remark on their absences. Neighborhood people know that they can gossip with them or check with them about lines on jobs. But Pastor also implores people to pay attention to him. On an unseasonably warm day in March 2010 when the public schools let out early, I sit in Pastor’s parked SUV with
Pastor and Ray between 1:30 and 3 p.m. I watch as Pastor calls out from the open window to passing kids who do not at first acknowledge his presence. He even playfully scolds those who have failed to say hello on previous occasions. These efforts are one sort of visibility work.

Another line of visibility work entails activism and amplification. On some evenings, Pastor and other community leaders “take over” specific blocks or corners in memory of the deceased or as declarations of non-violence during occupancy. Typically, megaphones or portable speaker systems are used and the working assumption is that the community is complacent with youth violence and needs to be “woken up.” The messages amplified may be particularly provocative. The appropriation of the KKK acronym is one such theme. During the parents’ walk after the video link on Twitter, Pastor announces through his megaphone that “the KKK is alive and well in Harlem.” After repeating the refrain twice, he adds, “Yeah, I said it,” and finally an explanation: “Kids Killing Kids between the hours of 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. every Friday and Saturday.” Of course, the “POD” script serves as the highest order of visibility work in person. When it works, it indicates that, because Pastor is present, violence cannot occur.

Pastor also cultivates an online presence by posting neighborhood news, opinions, crime statistics, photographs of community events, and other content throughout the day on multiple social media, often tailoring this material and choice of language to his presumed audience.

Pastor employs the same shock tactics online that he uses in person. In the days leading up to the parents’ walk, he texts and tweets variations of the KKK/Kids Killing Kids message, adding bits like “whr are the freedom fighters?”

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26 To the hilarity of those immediately gathered, Pastor invited me—the white man—to take over this call, which I declined. While Pastor is clearly steadfast in his work, he retains a big, dry sense of humor that he expresses constantly.
Between Life and Death

The final facet of this social role that I wish to highlight is a position between life and death. We see this when Pastor puts his body between antagonists. We also see it when he concerns himself with matters of bereavement and justice after a young person is killed. Whenever a teen dies violently in Harlem, Pastor connects through his broad network to the mother and other family members of the deceased. He spends hours or days at the home in the aftermath of the tragedy. He may help raise funds for funeral arrangements and may speak to the local press on behalf of the family. In the long term, he encourages family members to develop a charity or cause in honor of the deceased. He works on bringing the killer to justice, probing his contacts for leads and taking any range of measures. In the month after the young man was killed on Seventh Avenue, Pastor drove the mother of the deceased to Lincoln Houses to meet Royce. Pastor assumed Royce might have “good” information about the killer but did not alert him that he was bringing anyone to meet him. Upon their arrival, Pastor introduced the two, using a pseudonym for Royce. Once Royce saw this mother’s pain, “his heart,” according to Pastor, “fell to the ground.” Pastor asked for his help in revealing the killer. Royce, affected and caught off guard, pulled Pastor aside to give him a name. This information did not, however, produce an arrest.

Walking the Thin Line

“By supporting police activity that the coalition believes is beneficial to the community and being critical of activities that are not,” Pastor Rivers and the other Ten Point ministers established “an umbrella of legitimacy for police to work under” (Berrien, McRoberts, and Winship 2000, 284). As Venkatesh says of Pastor Wilkins and his collaborators, they repair “breaches in the social fabric” (246).
Such harmony often proves tenuous. So too is the special status of the street pastor as one truly “in the middle.” Boston’s Ten Point ministers were vulnerable to charges within the community of “selling out” if seen as “too supportive of police.” “It is critical” therefore, “that their relationship with the police be seen as being at ‘arm’s length’” (Berrien, McRoberts, and Winship 2000, 280). According to Venkatesh’s theory, by maneuvering within “the shady world” and communicating with opposing constituencies, Pastor Wilkins becomes the subject of ongoing skepticism. People within and beyond the local community question, for instance, whether “policing gang disputes” benefits residents or “end[s] up strengthening the gang” (257). Being associated with “street gangs” also poses “a problem” for clergy in securing funding lines from reinvestment initiatives (266–272).

When I interview Pastor in September 2012, he tells me that he sees himself “walking down a thin line between community and NYPD.” He says he is “trying to get community and NYPD to have a better relationship, because in my understanding we need both working together for a sustainable community,” and continues:

I always want to have in mind that I have the right to speak truth to power. For me, truth is what is reality. Power is on either side: power in the community, power in the NYPD. That I can speak the truth of the reality to the community and I can speak the truth of the reality to NYPD . . . allows [me] to sleep at night.

And yet, he adds, “the pressure that comes to bear” from “either side,” sometimes leads him to “smoke cigars and drink whiskey.” “That’s as honest as I can put that, Jeff.” He laughs.

How does Pastor “speak truth” or translate one side’s reality to the other? Below I consider this key facet of his role as well as the inherent pressure it brings.

Translation

Translation is the ongoing task or even mandate of the middleman. He relies on his “varied training to translate the interests, demands, and perspectives of the man to the littleman,
and vice versa” (Pattillo 2007, 117). Going in one direction, Pastor translates the reality of the police world to the community, which in many instances refers to the young people in his ministry. On a Tuesday afternoon in March 2011, for example, I spent a few hours in Pastor’s office with his boss’s teenage son and four of the “specials,” Rochelle, Dedra, Carla, and Lexus. Rochelle tells us that she has spent the last three nights in Royce’s (unsupervised) apartment in Lincoln Houses. She describes a teenage party scene with kids smoking blunts. One night, a boy who “wants to be down” with the group is “beat on” and suffers an asthma attack, prompting someone in the apartment to call an ambulance. Police, accompanying the ambulance as per protocol, arrive. Teens scatter, some going out the second-floor window.

Pastor then explains police procedure to Rochelle, and tells her what he expects will happen next. He says any police response requires “a 61,” an informational form detailing what police saw at a given location. Royce, says Pastor, is already “on the hot list.” Any activity inside his apartment will be of interest to the local precinct. Captains are briefed on the “61s,” and information from these forms can be used to get a warrant. “So keep going up in there,” says Pastor to Rochelle, sarcastically. Ten days later, Rochelle says police have raided the apartment.

Working in the other direction, Pastor communicates the reality of community residents to police. After an officer kills an unarmed teenager in the Bronx, Pastor rallies around the family of the deceased, who live in the Bronx and Harlem. He becomes a liaison. He expresses the distraught condition of the family and their specific grievances directly to the police commissioner. He becomes an activist. Pastor calls for transparency in the circumstances of the teen’s death by text message blast. He accompanies the family to meetings with an assemblyman and with Al Sharpton and then to a rally in lower Manhattan. I meet up with Pastor during preparations for a second rally in the Bronx. We head to a local copy place where Pastor greets
the owner, adding to his order of buttons and t-shirts with the teen’s image, birth and death dates, and the words “Gone Too Soon.”

At the rally in the Bronx, Pastor’s role shifts again from community activist critical of police practice to peacekeeper protective of police efforts to maintain order. At a march with an estimated attendance of 1,500 people, Pastor performs crowd control. Later he shares his disappointment that the rally provided for some an occasion to yell obscenities at police and “to party and smoke weed.”

Police may look to Pastor to “take the temperature” on the street. When asked for his opinion, Pastor—under the impression that a retaliatory shooting was forthcoming—endorsed a precinct commander’s decision to barricade two blocks temporarily after a shooting. The barricade means that, aside from the street’s residents who carry identification, these blocks will be closed to foot and vehicle traffic during certain hours each day. Some residents criticize the barricade as an inconvenience, if not a form of subjugation within a “police state.” Pastor rejects these complaints. “Seventeen people were wounded” by gunfire last year within “one four-block area,” says Pastor during an annual peace rally at City Hall Park. “But people were more angry that the block was shut down than they are about violence in our community. That doesn’t make any doggone sense.”

Other activists who take the microphone call attention to practices by police they deem violent and racist, particularly in relation to “stop, question, and frisk,” the focal point of “a silent march” the previous weekend. The stop, question, and frisk event drew thousands of marchers along Fifth Avenue, including four Democratic mayoral hopefuls and Al Sharpton, as well as vast coverage in the news media. The peace rally by City Hall, by contrast, never exceeds fifty
people, including only one Democratic primary candidate. Only three student journalists cover the event.

At the peace rally, a principal representative of Sharpton’s National Action Network speaks. She praises a set of grassroots anti-violence activists. Then she says, “We gotta put some money behind” this work because “at the end of the day when we have people killing one another within the community, it opens up the door for the police department . . . to come into our community and terrorize us.” She states, “Stop and frisk is not a solution.” She asks residents to come together to “work on the local issue of violence.” “Until we do that,” she says, “we are going to continue to see not only the cannibalism . . . in our communities . . . [but] also the disrespect . . . from the New York City Police Department and the elected officials.”

We hear contrasting notions of the police as serving or violating the community. What community leaders say about police at these events may have ramifications for the possibility or status of any kind of working relationship. Prior to my meeting Pastor, personnel in supervisory positions inside one precinct were hostile to Pastor’s relationship to local youth and penalized him for public criticism of a band of officers known by some in the neighborhood as “the goon squad.” At one point, a bag of crack was planted in Pastor’s car.27 But turnover in the precinct enabled an open-door relationship to develop that Pastor believes has empowered his work. For Pastor, this status is worth nurturing and he distances himself from activists, who, he believes, have an irreparably frayed relationship with the police.

Skepticism

By being in the middle, Pastor is the subject of ongoing skepticism. Over dinner in December 2010, Smalls told me that the young people from 129th Street took to me faster than

27 Pastor, Ray, and another community activist corroborated this story. I never spoke to anyone in the police department about this.
they took to Pastor. He said this was because some people thought Pastor was “a cop,” an assumption Pastor helped protect me from by vouching for my involvement in the community when I first arrived. Smalls said Pastor’s capacity “to get people out of jail” and to predict certain events made it seem as though he was part of the police. At different times, teens from 129th Street agreed among themselves “not to talk about things” in front of him.28 I have heard teens call him a “snitch” on multiple occasions.

That Pastor plays both sides or takes the enemy’s side is another recurring criticism. Sometimes this issue is more about jealousy than mistrust. One day in front of the Mormon church, for instance, some in the 129th Street group complained to Pastor that he spent too much time in Lincoln with boys like Royce. After he had already shown off his B+ on an essay for his global class, Kaseem begins to affect the way in which Royce wears a hoodie and walks. He holds out his essay again and says “matter of fact, make this an F,” a reference to Royce’s struggles in school. Then he teases that Royce gets to “ride everywhere” with Pastor because he requires extra attention.

During an interview, a prominent defense lawyer who regularly represents young people from Harlem tells me she has been watching Pastor “from a distance for a long time.” She suspects his on-the-street intervention is driven by “machismo.” She calls these efforts “dangerous” and “futile.” It is futile, she explains, because the violence is “anarchic” and youth are being told to stop without being given an adequate alternative. She continues by stating that his “profiling and tracking” of young people plays right into the hands of police. Pattillo warns that, despite good intentions, the “black middleman,” may be forced to accept Audre Lorde’s adage: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (2007, 114).

28 Such skepticism or evasion, however, does not necessarily hinder Pastor’s work since he a) inserts himself into teenagers’ conflict without their approval, b) has numerous points of access to information, and c) is routinely called upon after a teenager gets into trouble precisely because of his traction with law enforcement.
The Moral Authority of the Street Pastor

When I discuss this kind of skepticism with Pastor and probe why he does what he does, he usually points to two motivations. “I just care about saving lives,” he says, distinguishing his concern from its implications for police as well as for “the developers,” with whom his efforts are also sometimes aligned in the eyes of residents. In reference to the barricade, Pastor explains that while some “people might say, ‘ah, that’s messed up: you work for the police’ . . . I say I just saved some innocent person’s life.” He clarifies, “I didn’t tell on nobody—all I did was I made sure the block was shut down.” Pastor also talks “about leaving a legacy” based on “building a good community” on the same streets that some might say he took from as a drug dealer in his earlier years.

But what I see in Pastor’s story is specific moral authority linked to the breadth of his social relations on- and offline. McRoberts and his collaborators delineate a moral authority the Ten Point ministers wield. There is a general “faith in the good intentions and political purity” of these men as clergy. But it has “little to do with public belief in specific religious tenets.” Given the historical prominence of the black church, pastors inherit a “residual, yet consequential” status in communities of the inner city (280–281). As clergy on the street, these figures possess specialized knowledge through their relationships with young people. Youth, therefore, “know” that when clergy cooperate with police, “the ministers are doing so in an informed way.” For the parents, “the ministers’ street work” indicates that “they truly care about these children.” These men can therefore “discern the ‘right’ answer” when it comes to the legal fate of a given young person (276–277). Moreover, the ministers adopt a position that “cuts across political lines since it rejects the liberal position that these youths need to be solely thought of as victims, but also
rejects the conservative position that these youths alone should be responsible for straightening out their lives” (280).

Pastor’s position in the middle can be thought of as a function of communication. Those who keep open lines of communication with Pastor inform the knowledge he shares across the community and the decisions he makes. He protects those who talk to him. In fact, by keeping the flow of communication going, they have done enough. Behaviors need not be modified to speak with him again; the point is to stay in touch. Given that each contact is networked within his or her respective world, Pastor effectively aggregates worldviews. He curates this information as he goes, channeling it to the people he believes it is for, translating it as needed. He gives something to everyone in his network, which is why he continues to hear from his contacts. This is not to say that everyone gets exactly what he or she wants or that Pastor gives equally or without bias, but only that these informational transactions are the basis of his social role. In this way, he is deputized to represent the interests of an entire community and to administer a special form of justice. It is a justice on the street that differs from the retributive model of the code or that of the police or judicial system. It is its own morality.
Chapter 5: INTIMACY

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we saw the creation of communication channels that link eyes and ears on the street across neighborhoods and generate the moral authority of the street pastor. We turn now to the application of social technologies to encounters with the opposite sex. Again, a layering of digital information on these streets directs courses of action to take in person. I document a new style of relations in public between unacquainted boys and girls. I consider how these relations have historically played out inside ghettos—on the streets and public spaces of the neighborhood. Then I introduce a literature on new media that concerns the “affordances” of technology in romantic matters. We come to appreciate digital media as a buffer against the uncertainty of encounters in person.

This affordance holds high value in the inner city where teenagers face elevated rates of pregnancy and interpersonal violence. I find that young women have found a way to extract from a distance some of the social rewards of being wanted. This gain, however, comes at the cost of new forms of exposure and exploitation. Online a woman’s body may become the site of surveillance by various parties and a public showdown between neighborhood rivals.

What is happening between the sexes with technology in this context is both similar and different from changes in intimacy underway in more affluent settings. One driver of difference is a relationship psychology and pathway specific to the inner city. This dynamic bears down on courtship rituals widely in play. We start with just this issue.

Sex Relations in the Ghetto

Kenneth Clark’s classic study of Harlem in the 1960s depicts an understanding of romantic matters that young people learn inside a segregated ghetto. Teens in the ghetto, Clark
says, take to “unstable and temporary liaisons” since this is the relationship they have most typically “observed in their own home” (1965, 71). “The marginal young Negro male tends to identify his masculinity with the number of girls he can attract,” as this “stereotyped picture” offers a foremost status unavailable in the home where the female is “the dominant person” or in the labor market (1965, 70–71). To the female, “[s]ex is important, but it is not, as in middle-class society . . . used to rise into a better family or a higher income bracket. The marginal Negro female uses her sex, instead, to gain personal affirmation. She is desired, and that is almost enough” (72). For the girl and boy alike, the “time-contained” sexual relationship is “related to urgent human need for acceptance” (72). “This innocent sophistication includes the total acceptance of the child if a child comes” (72). In Edin and Kefalas’s 2005 interview study of 162 single mothers in eight economically depressed areas, women describe their pregnancies as “not exactly planned” yet “not exactly avoided” either” (37).

“In the ghetto,” Clark contends, we do not find “the demand for abortion or for surrender of the child that one finds in more privileged communities” (72). Having a child is not seen to foreclose future options for boys or girls. “On the contrary, a child is a symbol of the fact that she is a woman, and she may gain from having something of her own,” (72)—a finding confirmed in Anderson (1990), Williams and Kornblum (1985), and Edin and Kefalas (2005). With parenthood, the couple’s relationship generally falters. Says Clark, both may share “a realistic, if unconscious, acceptance of the fact that nothing else is possible” for them beyond the pregnancy (73). Indeed, a recent summary of the literature on inner-city romance establishes “that young disadvantaged men are often involved in casual romantic relationships that result in pregnancy. When this occurs, most men . . . stay involved with the mother during the pregnancy, are optimistic about the future” of the relationship and being active in the child’s life. But “these
men face a host of barriers to realizing this optimism. Economic disadvantage, incarceration, and mistrust undermine the stability of their romantic relationships, and most relationships end within several years after the birth” (Tach and Edin 2011, 77–78).

The same “sex codes” Clark describes had been written about in the 1940s by Drake and Cayton (in Chicago) and were then written about again in the 1980s by Elijah Anderson (in Philadelphia). They establish that the desire for status and affirmation through sex takes on added intensity when households are less stable and fewer alternative validations exist. Young people in the inner city begin their sexual lives with the real possibility of becoming parents during or by the end of their teenage years. Young women who have children will likely do so without a spouse or enduring partner. Without a doubt, this relationship trajectory exists alongside other “scripts” available to young people inside ghettos (Hannerz 1969) who mix and match from various “models” as they make their own decisions about sex (Harding 2010).

But to begin any study of encounters between boys and girls on the streets of the inner city, we must be cognizant of what is at stake in these meetings. There is a salient story of how things might go that is absent from the dating psychology of more affluent teens. The jockeying between boys and girls everywhere operates against this backdrop in the inner city.

**Encounters on the Street**

In pre- or early adolescence, says Harding, boys in inner-city Boston/Cambridge learn that the “way to meet potential sexual partners is to talk to them on the street, at school, or anywhere else, and to get their phone numbers” (2010, 162). Young guys such as thirteen-year-old Elijah in Harding’s study “practice ‘hollering at girls’ or ‘spitting their game’ in full public view and as girls compete for the public attention of boys” (163). The “contest,” says Anderson
takes place in public and begins “between the boy and the girl even before they meet.”

Amy Best (2006) writes about downtown San Jose, “where hundreds of young adults . . . gather to cruise up and down a strip of street that extends over ten blocks, to see and be seen” (2006, 1). Along Santa Clara Street, young adults assemble in sex-segregated vehicles. “Boys hoot and holler across cars to gain the passing attention of girls” (63) in cars or on foot. Girls follow with a range of responses from engaging “fully by talking or giving their telephone number” to “a slight smile” to “ignor[ing] them completely” (63). If a male gets ignored and cannot “recover,” “the young woman who was the object of his attention can suddenly become the object of his wrath” (63).

On the streets of inner-city St. Louis, the female teenagers in Miller’s (2008) research regularly experience “sexual come-ons or comments by young men in the neighborhood” (47). As in Best’s study, these exchanges slide between “‘playful’ and problematic” (48). According to Miller, young women face “a lose-lose situation” in neighborhood spaces dominated by young men (52). The boys in Miller’s sample criticize the girls as “stuck up” if they ignore or respond angrily when boys call out to them (51). But the girls are also held “culpable” for “incidents of sexual harassment” by “not acting sufficiently ‘stuck up’ or dressing in ways that [are] defined as provocative” (51). Consequently, “the most prevalent theme in girls’ descriptions of risk-avoidance [is] to limit the time they spen[d] on the streets” (Miller 2008, 62).

These cross-sex encounters appear highly fraught and potentially dangerous. Women retain limited capacity to regulate the attention they receive from male peers—if, how, and from whom it is expressed. Giving feedback is plagued by the (perceived) physical risk of rejecting a
man in public, which he may experience as humiliation and to which he may respond with (further) aggression.

Before we move forward with what digital media affords these relations, let us first look back to an earlier time on the street to see how meetings may be brokered without this underlying hostility. A set of older accounts of city life emphasizes the romantic potential of the street for the young urban poor. Willis (quoted in Walkowitz 1998, 19) describes this sequence in Victorian London on the streets in and around “working-class districts”:

A young man would “sign on,” that is, show his preference, by “glad-eyeing” a young woman. Their eyes would meet; both would walk on and look backwards. The young woman might slow down to look in a shop window, while the “boy” would raise his hat... Both would be “putting on the high hat,” each pretending to be in a “loftier” social position than they really were.”

Goffman provides a similar example of “feigning interest in a common store display” so that two strangers “might bring each other into discrete conversation” during a pickup on the street (1971, 209–210). Rook (1908), writing on Edwardian London, and Addams (1909), describing Chicago in the era of settlement houses in The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets, emphasize the use of the street by working-class youth as a hub for romantic and sexual relationships. Rook describes the conversion of Fleet Street on Sunday evenings into a “Love Lane.” Young women employed as “domestic servants” leave their employers’ homes by afternoon, “shed[ding]...cap and apron” to dress up for Fleet Street, where they walk alone or two, three, or four abreast (32–33). Young men walk about with each other, and a process of “merging” takes place whereby a man approaches a woman “of the same class” and “the two... suddenly merge into a couple,” walking and chatting together (38). In the digital age, we find variations of both these kinds of accounts of relations on the street between the sexes.
Romantic Affordances of Digital Media

Throughout this dissertation, I have written about the affordances of media in matters of the street. Scholars of information and communication technologies use this term to delineate “the perceived capabilities” of a given technology (Hampton 2010, 6; Gaver 1991; Gibson 1979). To write about the “social affordances” of internet and mobile communication is to consider the new possibilities and problems for social life that emerge in the on- and offline worlds (Bradner 2001; Wellman 2001). Instead of thinking that technologies prefigure or induce particular uses, scholars in the affordances tradition see a medium of communication as a set of elements adapted by people to their ongoing relations and concerns, often with the motivation of making things easier. Almost always, “unintended consequences” appear as well.

Romance is one of the many domains of social life in which the affordances concept is often applied. A rich literature deals with the modern mechanics of intimacy for teenagers and young adults. The peer worlds of interest are typically based in school—high school or college. In the “Intimacy” chapter of Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out, Pascoe (2010, 122) summarizes the norms, or at least ideals, around off- and online romance:

According to most of the teens we talked with, it is appropriate to meet people offline and then pursue the relationship online; if one does meet someone, one should meet that person through friends; one should proceed slowly as he or she corresponds online using the appropriate communication tool; and when breaking up, one should do so in person, or at least over the phone.

Relationships should begin and end in person. Varieties of communication correspond to specific emotional intensities. Social media contact is less intimate than texting on the phone, which, in turn, is less intimate than interaction in person. Mediated communication affords a pacing of relationships. Summarizing research by Christo Sims, C. J. Pascoe writes, the “asynchronous nature of written communication (private messages and comments on social network sites, text
messaging, and the more synchronous IM) allows for slower, more controlled intimacy exploration and development” (2010, 123, referring to Sims 2007). Written communication reduces the stress of otherwise anxious instances in person, which may ease the experience of men when “making moves” to advance the relationship. Baron (2008) indicates that written messages do not necessarily provide clear information, as teens adopt language designed to hedge potential presumptions or affect casualness.

In The App Generation, Howard Gardner and Katie Davis regard the digital management of intimacy as disaffiliation. Interactions “may feel more comfortable,” but without putting themselves “out there,” teens “can’t truly connect” (2013, 119). By filtering matters of the heart through the apps on one’s phone, teens remove risk and emotional investment. This approach fosters isolation and reduces empathy, the authors contend. We are likely, however, to think about this arms-length behavior differently when we consider it in terms of street life. Such mitigated risk-taking, as we shall see, may be thought of as street smarts. In terms of aggression, digital communication has been shown to shift its perpetration from embodied to online forms, even if the underlying hostility remains. Qualitative work by Draucker and Martsolf (2010) and Sullivan, et al. (2010) finds that adolescents in disadvantaged contexts use computer-based communication to perpetrate psychological forms of dating violence (like pressuring another person into sexual talk online) rather than physical or sexual manifestations of it.

Romance scholars also depict social media’s vast surveillance of potential, current, or past dating partners. This practice, documented among college students, may be called “interpersonal electronic surveillance” (Tokunaga 2011) or “social surveillance” (Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe 2008) or colloquially, “Facebook stalking.” “By connecting on Facebook,” Fox and Warber (2014) write:
Partners are able to post messages on each other’s profiles, search a partner’s extended network of friends, view each other’s photographs, examine a partner’s history of posts and pictures, message each other privately, or identify the other as one’s romantic partner in the relationship status (i.e., going “Facebook official”). (3)

Indeed, monitoring another person is one of the most popular uses of social media (Fox and Warber 2014 Joinson 2008). This action ties directly to a desire to reduce uncertainty in relational matters (Knobloch and Solomon 2002; Knobloch and Theiss 2011). But online surveillance may instead compound or foster new varieties of anxiety (Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais 2009; Elphinston and Noller 2011). Young people, we learn in this literature, introduce layers of mediated communication between and before face-to-face engagement, using digital contact to ease anxious interaction and opting to “read” each other on social media.

Teenagers in Harlem use these same digital dating techniques. But, as we know, the stakes are different. The risks of pregnancy and dating violence (Miller 2008; Van Wyck et al. 2003) are greater. As we shall see, the surveillance of romantic partners intersects with other forms of surveillance in the neighborhood. But the most salient difference relates to the basic premise of acquaintanceship as it concerns social media.

The romance literature on networked teens and young adults overwhelmingly assumes that young people use social media to manage ties that already exist face to face (Fox and Warber 2014; Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin 2008). Of a 2011 sample of college students (81 percent white), Ellison and her coauthors report: “Initiating connections with strangers is clearly not a typical usage of Facebook” (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2011). For this reason, Nicole Ellison and danah boyd (2007) use the term “social network sites” rather than “social networking sites.” Mayer and Puller (2008) report that less than half of one percent of the Facebook friendships they studied in the context of university campuses appeared to be solely online. In
other words, social media is treated as an extension of school, work, or other finite worlds based on familiarity in person.

The size of Facebook networks typically reported in research reflects this social proscription. According to the most recent nationally representative Pew data, the median number of Facebook friends for twelve- to seventeen-year-olds is 300 for boys and 350 for girls. In a study of sixty-nine UCLA undergrads published in 2012 by Manago, Taylor, and Greenfield, self-reported networks range between twenty-nine and 1,200 friends. “The most common network size, as indicated by 20% of participants, fell in the range between 200 friends and 299 friends. The mean was 440, and the median was 370.” Other research with college students places these figures in or below the mid-hundreds (e.g., Lewis et al 2008; Young and Quan-Haase 2009).

Like young people across demographics, teenagers in my research use social media to communicate with close friends and maintain relations with existing face-to-face ties. But familiarity in person is by no means the primary reason to connect online. Quite the contrary, a basic purpose of social media is to sort out the romantic possibilities and problems of public space in the neighborhood. Social media can be treated as an extension of the street and point of contact with the unknown people around us. Consider the Facebook networks of thirty teenagers (fifteen males, fifteen females) from the scene on the corner of 129th Street and Lenox Avenue (an overlapping but slightly different set of teens from the thirty I reference in the wall post analysis). These networks include on average nearly two-and-a-half persons of the opposite sex to one person of the same sex.29 This pattern holds for both males (2.4 females to every one

29 This basic network analysis was completed in August and September 2011 with the help of a research assistant. To estimate gender breakdown, my research assistant traversed the list of friends on each sampled individual’s Facebook profile. Working his way through the last page to load, he coded the presumptive sex of the top two and bottom two friends to appear on each page.
male) and females (2.3 males to every one female). When this simple network analysis was completed in August and September 2011, the mean network size was 1,340 friends. Network size increased to an average of 2,159 friends by November 2012 for an average gain of 819 friends in roughly fourteen months. This expansion could not reasonably be explained by the development of new relationships in person or subsequent inclusions of existing personal relationships. Facebook users typically acquire seven new friends per month, according to nationally representative data collected in November 2010 (Hampton et al. 2012). Teenagers in Harlem incorporate unfamiliar peers of the opposite sex into their networks on Facebook or other primary social media (i.e., not specialized dating sites or applications).

I discuss how this happens and describe shifts in public space in the process. But first, I point out another finding in this basic network analysis of the thirty teens on the corner. Nearly equivalent to the opposite-sex-to-same-sex ratio of 2.4 (in 2011), the average female network is 2.3 times larger than that of the average male network. While females’ networks averaged 1,901 friends and 2,159 friends in 2011 and 2012, respectively, the average network size for males was 778 in 2011 and 1,351 in 2012. As in physical space, females are the primary subjects of—or primarily subjected to—attention from strangers.

**Encounters on the Digital Street**

Teenagers in Harlem have connected street space and digital space in their norms of acquaintance. Their posture online is not just inward to their existing face-to-face world but also outward and open to the social possibilities of public space. One young male’s Facebook bio announces “ITS YA BOY!!!!!!!!!!!” with the words “Follow Me” and a self-description: “COOL,FUNNY,LAID BACK AND MOSTLY BE ON THAT CHILL TYPE WAVE”. Across

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30 By the date in November of this data collection, four of the thirty persons sampled (two males, two females) had either deactivated their Facebook accounts or elected to restrict the visibility of their network. These profiles were omitted from the calculations.
platforms (whether the medium consists of one-way ties as on Twitter or Instagram or two-way ties as on Facebook), teens invite others to “follow them.” Their friends support this effort by inviting followers on their behalf. One teenage girl posts a flattering photograph of a female friend, her lips pursed and head turned to the side, along with footprint graphics to indicate “follow,” the words “my baby new insta” linked to her Instagram name, and graphics of a heart and fire. A male teenager does the same for his “bro,” posting his picture and the caption: “Everybody Stop What Chu Doing An [footprint graphics] My Bro [Instagram name]”.

Some teenagers wish to be “Facebook famous” or “Instagram famous” by collecting as many followers as possible, but networking is often about acquaintanceship. These digital ties shape one’s dating prospects in relation to peers in the neighborhood. Nineteen-year-old Eva, who thinks that more meetings take place online than in person, describes how courtship often works in her peer world. She speaks about Instagram, the photo-based platform where much of the action centers when we chat in March 2014:

You could throw up one picture and then somebody act like they relate to that picture or they like that picture . . . and then it goes on from there, like “what’s your name?” “How old are you?” Then to, like, “Oh, you wanna text?” and some girls be, like, “Yeah, here’s my number.” That’s a little connection right there.

The teenagers in this study typically have lots of these “little connections” at different degrees of contact, some still evolving while others have been cut or lie dormant. Some connections never start or they live solely online; some progress to the texting stage or even to voice or video interaction; some are experienced face to face. The lines and layers of contact among boys and girls in a community are numerous and shifting, separated and integrated.

For unacquainted peers, first contact between males and females may transpire digitally with the proposal of an online tie—a friend request or request to follow. A rejection keeps the stranger at bay; this statement of noninterest closes opportunities to watch the other or interact
online. Acceptances bring unacquainted peers closer online without necessarily implying more. It is a start but might be as far as things get. These negotiations change how young people move through their neighborhoods. Boys and girls in Harlem are around each other online and on the sidewalk—their co-presence in digital space anticipating or even replacing a meeting in person. When teens connected online but unacquainted in person pass on the sidewalk, they may or may not engage one another. When boys on the corner watch girls pass, they sometimes recognize them from social media. Among themselves, the boys may sort out what name a girl goes by on a given platform and whether anyone “has her” in his network. Sometimes nothing happens. In other instances, one or more boys may call out to the girl. The boy may “run down on her”—chasing after and attempting to stop the girl to talk. Girls may not respond but sometimes there is conversation or entangled conversation that may or may not lead to future communication.

Sometimes a tie on social media provides the basis for a relationship. Slinky, the freshman at Howard, “met” his on- and off-again girlfriend of the last four years on Twitter. Nineteen-year-old Desiree found her very first boyfriend on a now-closed site called Sconex. They became acquainted online and then passed each other on the sidewalk one day. During our interview years later, she recounts their seeing each on the sidewalk for the “first time”: “[T]his is how it always [goes]—this happens till this day: ‘you look familiar’; ‘oh, really, I don’t know you’; ‘oh, well you have Sconex?’; ‘That’s where I saw you from.’” They exchanged numbers; became friends; transitioned in and out of a dating relationship.

On a Wednesday evening in January 2012 when I drove to the corner of 118th and Eighth Avenue to pick up JayVon on our way to a basketball game downtown, I saw him leave two friends on the corner to run after a girl with headphones. They interacted for no more than a minute and then JayVon entered my car with her phone number. He sent her a text message that
evening. They chatted by text and on the phone that night and the next, and when I met JayVon on Friday afternoon, he asked me to lend him ten dollars to help pay for their evening movie date. When they met on the sidewalk they were already friends on Facebook, although, different from Desiree’s case, they did not discuss this connection in the moment. JayVon had never “spoken to her” online but they were around each other on Facebook, even as this memory was not explicit to JayVon when he approached.

In Relations in Public, Goffman remarks, “the readiness exhibited by two individuals to transform an incidental social encounter into the beginning of an anchored relationship can depend upon the memory each has of the having seen the other before” (191). Whether one or both explicitly remembers the other may not matter for the purposes of developing affinity: “[I]t can be said that incidental, fleeting, anonymous contacts lay a base for later anchorings but do so without our awareness” (191). What defines public urban space for scholars like Lofland (1973; 1998) is the experience of being around strangers. On the digital street, people choose their strangers. They select social media individuals they do not know but wish to have around them online. They open themselves to some strangers while closing off to others. The “incidental, fleeting, anonymous contacts” from which anchored relations may form are no longer arbitrary in the way Goffman writes of an earlier public realm.

These selections run on assumption. The unacquainted teens included in their networks are presumed to live nearby (in Harlem, the Bronx, or other proximate areas); they attend the same set of schools and programs and share the same basic experiences. Through the consumer brands they wear in their photos and the local events, celebrities, slang, street names, and other markers they reference in their profiles, they signal proximity and attunement to one another. They are found by trolling networks, by clicking on invitations to follow each other, through
suggested ties generated automatically by the platform, and by searching common signifiers in profile names adopted by teens from particular crews, neighborhoods, or even Harlem writ large. The “last name” “Slime” on Facebook, for example, may signal that he is from a specific housing project in West Harlem. “People put their ’hoods on their Facebook,” says Rochelle.

We know broadly that sexual partners typically find each other through friends of friends or by searching further along their social networks (Christakis and Fowler 2009). Teens in this social world also search their networks, but first-degree ties online are not premised on familiarity. This results in the immediate and compounding sharing of strangers rather than friends.

Just how strange these strangers are is an open question. People unacquainted in person are around each other in new ways online. After Christian got into a nasty exchange on his Facebook wall with a girl he had slept with and would not see again, I asked him about his twenty-one friends who became involved in this episode by commenting or liking content. Three were boys whom Christian knows well from the 129th Street scene. The remaining eighteen were girls, ten of whom he had never met in person. Regarding these ten, Christian expressed various ideas about who they were, their motivations for getting involved, and what they thought of him. “She just wants me to speak nicer about girls on Facebook,” he said of one young woman. “She goes to my page just to see if I violated anybody,” he added as we looked through some of their past exchanges on his wall. He was describing a pattern in their relationship. This is how he knew her.

About 45 percent of Rochelle’s Facebook network (which I later describe in detail) consists of people she has never met face to face. But she recognizes their names and faces on Facebook. She receives information about these people throughout the day—the kinds of things
they say, bits about relationships and interests. They see equivalent information about Rochelle. This informational exchange may be cut off at any moment. Teens start fresh profiles or prune their networks of “Facebook watchers” who they presume to be nosy and boring. Or one may choose to learn more about another person by clicking through the other’s profile. Rochelle typically decides to accept a boy’s friend request on the basis of a “cute” profile photo. She may never look more closely. Other times she checks him out. In some instances, Rochelle can classify boys in her network without having met them in person. She deciphers between guys whom she presumes hold status on the street and the “Poindexters”—“good boys” who are “no fun.” A basis of this distinction is whether a boy wears “Truey and Tavs [True Religion and Taverniti brand clothing]” in his photographs.

Coming of age on the networked streets of Harlem means that boys learn new styles of relating to girls in public. Some boys engage girls digitally instead of in person while others do so in both contexts. JayVon routinely calls out to females around his age on the sidewalk and online. His adoptive cousin Christian, however, prefers to make his advances digitally. “I am not one of them guys that see a girl in the street and then try and talk ’cause I hate rejection,” admits Christian. “It be like in my face: ‘Oh, I don’t want to talk to you’ and girls be making scenes and stuff.” But “on Facebook if you get rejected, it’s just, like, whatever.” Christian underscores the risk of public embarrassment when approaching girls on the physical street, an outcome perhaps more salient now that efforts may be made online.

Nineteen-year-old Smalls gives another reason males make plays online rather than on the physical street. Compared to face-to-face encounters, “picking up girls” on social media is “more of a calm thing.” He elaborates:

If I’m with a group of guys and there’s this one female walking by [and] I’m like “Yo, come here and let me talk to you,” she’s gonna be nervous ’cause I’m running with a
crowd of guys and her first thing could be, “I don’t know you, so I don’t know what your intentions are.”

On Facebook, this embodied group dynamic does not appear. Females can “just not respond” to a male’s friend request or inbox message or can “delete” a male previously incorporated into the network.

While Christian points to boys being embarrassed on the physical street, Smalls senses that girls find these solicitations uncomfortable, specifically when they involve several boys. On the one hand, Christian and Smalls appear to relate to females in much the way that Miller and Best describe the physical street: as there solely for males’ advances; to be spoken to roughly (e.g., “Yo, come here and let me talk to you”); or out of line if they do not want to talk or if they respond with anger (e.g., “girls be making scenes”). On the other hand, significant changes are underway on the digital street. The integration of media into relations among strangers inserts temporal and spatial distance into otherwise immediate face-to-face contact. Males are learning (or being trained) to channel their initial attention online instead of in person and, in some instances, to do so online in the “right” ways.

Let us explore more deeply how acquaintanceship in public space is changing. We will consider three familiar facets of encounters between unfamiliar boys and girls to see how these unfold today. First, we focus on the management of strangers and calling out online from the perspective of a young woman named Olivia. Next, we observe a “rap” (Anderson 1990) that starts on the street and then moves online as JayVon and Denelle tussle to define their encounter and the future terms of interaction. I then move to the appearances of strangers online and the moral conclusions that Christian draws from the photographs of young women. We see how these notions hold up when he meets some of these women in person. We learn about how teens handle the sexual dimensions of the street today and how they perform their gender roles (West
and Zimmerman 1987) along familiar lines but with new possibilities and consequences. Online females are exerting ever more control over the attention they receive from unknown males. But young women typically surrender sexualized images of themselves as males’ attention is directed digitally. In the final sections of this chapter, I describe two exploitations of the female body online that further fray trust issues between the sexes. The handling of strangers online allows for “fake pages,” fabricated profiles of young woman deployed for surveillance by various neighborhood actors. Profiles of young women also form “a public” at the interstices of boys’ rivalries, which complicates an already precarious position in neighborhood space.

We begin with Olivia to see how she deals with the young men around her.

Olivia’s story shows us how some young women manage calling out and other attention from unfamiliar males online. Olivia is an attractive sixteen-year-old Puerto Rican teenager who lives with her mother and older sister in an apartment in East Harlem. In December 2010, Keon, her “bestie,” introduced her to the social world on 129th Street and Lenox Avenue, where she sometimes came to hang out after school and on weekends. I met Olivia there during my daily rounds, and I got to know her better over the summer of 2011 when she participated in the municipal summer employment program where I led workshops. In July 2011, I interviewed Olivia at Columbia University. On that day, her Facebook profile photo showed Olivia standing in her living room with her palms on the back of her hips. She is wearing big pink sunglasses that obscure her eyes, a white tank top that is flipped up to reveal her navel and tattoos on both hips, and a pair of jean shorts. On her profile, she lists her actual high school, a public school with metal detectors on the Upper West Side, and her fictitious employment as a “Victoria’s Secret model.” Olivia’s mother restricts her use of their home computer to schoolwork because, as
Olivia puts it, “She thinks I’m gonna talk [online] to grown men” and worries about her getting kidnapped. Her mother, however, bought Olivia a BlackBerry Curve and pays for her data plan, giving her personal mobile access to the internet. Olivia accesses Facebook exclusively from her phone.\(^{31}\)

With her permission, we look together at her phone. She shows me a message from a boy that arrived at 1:30 a.m., the fourth message he has sent her in the last eight days, to none of which she says she has replied. His messages are identical: “Hey, Gorgeous. How you doing, and how’s life? Get back at me.”\(^{32}\) “And who is this guy?” I ask. “I don’t know.”

Her inbox is filled with unreciprocated openings from strange men, some of whom continue writing even though she has not replied. As on the physical street, so Olivia, online, is subject to repeated propositions by strangers who call out to her.

On social media, Olivia could restrict those around her to people whom she knows. Instead, she routinely accepts male strangers into her personal network, which approaches 3,000 friends at the time of the interview and increases to 4,948 (just under the imposed limit of 5,000) roughly sixteen months later. Why accept friend requests from unacquainted males?

After scrolling through Olivia’s Facebook inbox on her BlackBerry, we turn to my laptop’s browser to go over her wall. In response to the aforementioned propositions in her inbox,

\(^{31}\) Patrol Borough Manhattan North’s parent handout on gang prevention recommends parents do the opposite of the approach to online safety taken by Olivia’s mother. Tips include directing computer use to a home “common area” and eliminating the “media package” from children’s cell phones.

\(^{32}\) The inbox messages quoted in this paragraph are taken from an audio recording of the interview and, therefore, appear in transcribed form rather than as actually written.
Olivia posts on Saturday morning: “I swear BOYS Dnt Havv NUFFEN TO Do on FB [Facebook] But inbox me! I Will NEVA RESPOND so Please STOP ! Damm !” Preceding this grievance, Olivia posted the following three items:

“LMS [Like My Status] IF YU MISS ME” at 5:33 p.m. on Friday, a status five people like, three of whom are male and two of whom she has never met in person.

“GOD BLESS MY HAZEL EYESS :-* I'm THE ONLY CHILD N DA FAM WID DESE EYESS” at 6:10 p.m. on Friday.

“I’m UGLY ?” at 1:26 a.m. on Saturday.

In response to this last post, two comments reassure her otherwise: “NAH SHORTY” (1:26 a.m.) and “NEVA OLIVIA” (1:28 a.m.). When I bring up her post, Olivia tells me right away: “Oh, I just wanted attention.” I ask about the two males who respond within minutes of her post—neither of whom she has met face to face but both of whom are Facebook friends:

Jeff: Did you want attention from these guys?

Olivia: From this one: This boy is cute [pointing to the one she finds attractive]. This one is ugly [pointing to the other].

J: How did you know he was cute?

O: ’Cause I looked at all his pictures [laughing].

J: You went through his pictures, and then you sent him a friend request, or he sent you a friend request?

O: He added me [sent her a friend request that she accepted]. . . . He lives up the block from me . . . but I never seen him [in person].

J: So did he send you one of those [propositioning] inbox messages?

O: Uh-uh [negative response].

J: He just sent you a friend request?

O: And he wrote on my wall, “Wassup?”

J: Okay. So his attention, you didn’t mind?
O: Uh-uh.

J: Because he’s good-looking?

O: And ’cause he wasn’t annoying, inboxing me every single minute.

J: So did you appreciate that he said “Wassup?” on your wall as opposed to an inbox?

O: Mm-hmm [affirmative response].

J: Did it really matter that he put it on your wall instead of your inbox?

O: If it was an inbox, I wouldn’t have wrote back, ’cause I don’t know him.

J: So it’s okay for people you don’t know . . . to write on your wall, but not in your inbox?

O: Mm-hmm. Because I don’t want to have a conversation with you, ’cause I don’t know you; there’s nothing to hide, so just use my wall.

J: So if someone’s sending you an inbox message, it’s more intense? It’s more like you have to respond?

O: I don’t have to. But it’s like they want it to be private to try to take it to the next level.

Olivia’s comments underscore a major difference in how males call out to females online: they usually proposition females in private rather than publicly, as they would on the sidewalk. Using the inbox feature shields males from public failure when advances go unmet. As Christian indicates, it looks bad to be ignored publicly. Nineteen-year-old Desiree makes just this point: “When you PM me—private message me—you’re silently getting ignored. Only you and I know that you was ignored, you know—probably my friends [too], but no one else does.” By confining their come-ons to the inbox, boys can also filter for display to one another only propositions that facilitate two-way interaction.

We also see in this interview excerpt Olivia’s wishes for personal space on Facebook. She wants strange males to write her on her wall rather than inbox, which, as she explains at another point in the interview, should be reserved for more personal interactions with friends and
family. She appreciates when males like Kevin follow this protocol, and she publicly disparages males who do not (e.g., “BOYS Dnt Hav NUFFEN TO Do on FB But inbox me!”).

After our interview, I looked up the interaction Olivia mentioned in which Kevin, the “cute” male, approaches Olivia on her wall. Some two months before our interview, Kevin posts: “OLIVIA WASS GOODIE”. Later that day she replies “wassup kevinn”. As she shares in the interview, Olivia knows Kevin lives six blocks away from her but they have never met in person. I can see from subsequent wall interactions that Olivia is in no hurry to change this. She repeatedly works to keep interactions between the two of them confined to the public space of her wall. In one such managed exchange, Olivia first thwarts Kevin’s attempts to watch television with her at her apartment and then his request that she inbox him. Keeping interactions on the wall is a pacing strategy with possible safety value, which recalls the point Sims makes about the affordance of written communication to control the progression of intimacy. Any tool to pace relations with new males holds special value for girls in inner-city neighborhoods, who are at the highest risk of domestic violence. In Miller’s sample, for instance, 61 percent of girls report, “having experienced some physical violence in a dating relationship” (2008, 153). By restricting interactions with new males to the wall, females may receive some degree of protection from others looking on—somewhat akin to safety on the sidewalk through “eyes on the street” (boyd 2014; Jacobs 1961).

Olivia’s efforts to channel the attention of male strangers included in her network to her wall is also a strategy for peer status. With photos in bedclothes and a video of Olivia and two female friends “twerking” (a dance style and video genre in which female dancers are filmed from behind moving their backsides), Olivia solicits attention to her wall. If attention is channeled privately via inbox message, Olivia may use a phone application marketed to young
people to redirect private advances onto the public space of her wall. Using an application marketed to young people with BlackBerrys, Olivia and other girls post screenshots of repeated and unanswered inbox messages—this is called “getting Screenmunched.” Online Olivia depicts herself in terms of “situational dominance” (Grazian 2008, 164; West and Zimmerman 1987) over males that desire but do not receive her affection. For Olivia, the incorporation of male strangers into her network and accompanying strategies to manage their interest may be thought of as efforts to maximize the social benefits and minimize the risks of the attention she receives in public. This expands upon the possibility of sex as—in Kenneth Clark’s words—“personal affirmation.” Olivia gets the veneration of being sexy without being so in person, let alone having sex in these moments.

There is also some evidence that boys are recalibrating their approach to females whom they have not met. Christian, for example, upon establishing a connection as Facebook friends, elects to like a girl’s photographs rather than send an inbox message to express interest. He bases this strategy of liking photographs on the grievances Olivia articulates. Explains Christian, “I talked to a whole bunch of girls . . . One thing a girl hates . . . is . . . when,” upon becoming friends, “that same boy write to them a million messages, like, ‘What’s up, I’m trying to talk to you.’” “A girl would rather a boy” choose to “like one of . . . [her] photos and then . . . leave it alone.” Using this approach, Christian assumes the girl he pursues will visit his profile, like “the kind of person” she sees, and then “come try and talk to” Christian through his inbox. This approach resembles how Willis describes courtship on the streets of Victorian London, where a young man would “sign on” by “glad-eyeing” a young woman. By “signing on” with his eyes rather than calling out, the boy offers a softer show of interest. If reciprocated, the two move

33 Just to clarify, “getting screenmunched” or “screenmunching” may refer to a screenshot taken with the BlackBerry-specific ScreenMuncher application or another application on one’s device (and then posting the screenshot).
towards a meeting on the street. But in the digital context, interest reciprocated online generally leads to further mediated contact rather than an immediate meeting in person. When teens meet on Facebook, intimacy generally progresses in stages: wall to inbox to text message to phone call to in-person meeting. In other words, relations tend to advance from internet-based to phone-based to face-to-face engagements. And relations may never move past a given stage or may even move back. In this sense, there is more regulation of contact with strangers as street life extends online. This change has particular bearing on the capacity of young women to modulate attention from male strangers. We will revisit these dynamics through Christian’s dating career in the section on the appearances of strangers.

Social status as a sought-after female, however, is still precarious and cannot always be contained online. In the months following this interview, Olivia’s reputation as a desired girl factors into two incidents of violence against Olivia by two female peers. In one incident, a girl—with help from a boy—attempts to jump Olivia and take her coat inside school. In a second incident in Olivia’s neighborhood, a different girl jumps Olivia. And before our interview, unknown other(s) created a bogus Facebook profile featuring Olivia’s pictures in an effort to publicly shame Olivia as a “slide [a promiscuous girl].” By creating an image online, she cannot restrict its appropriation.

Rap

The un reciprocated openings Olivia receives in her inbox could be conceived as the opening lines of a rap. Males having rap and females seeing through it are dual parts of being *streetwise* in urban ghettos (Anderson 1990). Anderson writes that inner-city adolescent boys develop and deploy “rap” and “game” to overcome “young women’s sexual defenses” (114) and impress one’s male group, among whom “raps are assessed, evaluated, and divided into weak
and strong” (115). “The rap is the verbal element of the game,” which incorporates “dress, grooming, looks,” among other parts (114). “On encountering an attractive girl,” the boy, according to this theory, “attempts to ‘run his game’” (115). If his rap is good, he leads this girl to believe that he wants to explore a loving, monogamous relationship (he may share this intention or simply be ambivalent). This belief serves as the basis for future contact.

Relating to females in this way is not particular to teens on inner-city streets. In the same city Anderson studies, Grazian (2008) documents a similar practice among privileged male undergraduates at The University of Pennsylvania who pursue female strangers inside bars and nightclubs. Like Anderson, Grazian maintains that heterosexual male courtship is defined by gamesmanship and an ultimate concern with one’s performance and standing in a male peer group. Grazian documents “the girl hunt”: a collective activity in which males serve as the intended audience and confederates (e.g., “wingmen”) in the sexual pursuit of a female stranger. In Grazian’s words, “groups of young men employ the power of collective rituals of homosociality to perform heterosexual competence and masculine identity in the public context of urban nightlife [his italics]” (139).

Notions of “rap” and “the girl hunt” help us understand a collective pick-up effort on the street by JayVon (then seventeen) and two teenage male friends who all hang together on the corner of 129th Street. On an early evening in March 2011, I walked along Lenox Avenue with JayVon, Ren, and Pete. The three guys met eyes with a teenage girl, who smiled while walking the opposite way on the same side of the street. The three guys turned around, calling out to her. JayVon ran after her. She stopped by a cement planter. He reeled off one question after another, inquiring about her name, destination, and whether she was going to see “a man.” The other two boys approached, standing a foot or so behind JayVon. She and Pete knew each other and
hugged quickly. JayVon combined compliments on her appearance with reprimands for her not paying attention to Ren, who had begun his own effort to engage her. Ren insisted that they already knew each other, claiming that they were friends on Facebook as he waved his phone at her as proof.

She moved away from the three guys but JayVon followed until she stopped before a fenced-in lot. JayVon then grabbed her arm; “Stop moving,” he said, smiling. She smiled back. After a few moments of entangled conversation in which JayVon told her his Facebook name, she ran off, JayVon still speaking.

After this exchange, we walked to my car and I drove JayVon and Ren to visit JayVon’s mother at her job at a fast food restaurant further uptown. During the car ride, JayVon told me how he approaches girls. He tries to make them laugh first and then goes for their number, which in this instance he did not get. JayVon and Ren then compared how many “bodies” (sexual partners) each had had so far that year.

In a sense, this episode on Lenox Avenue and follow-up in the car exemplify Grazian’s and Anderson’s respective accounts. In this spontaneously enacted girl hunt, JayVon performs for his peers an exaggerated aggressiveness toward the female both to impress his male audience and to distinguish himself in the lead role. He also acts (briefly) as Ren’s accomplice by chiding the girl for not reciprocating Ren’s interest. JayVon obviously “raps” to this young female, attempting to disarm her through a barrage of questions and by making her laugh. While JayVon appears to have failed in his pursuit (she leaves without giving him her number), the focus in the car shifts to participation “in the ritual motions of the girl hunt in the company of men [his italics]” (Grazian 2008, 151), which is to be celebrated regardless of outcome. The conversation then shifts to JayVon’s and Ren’s previous alleged sexual conquests. If the ethnography had
stopped on the sidewalk, we would assume that this was a one-off interaction between JayVon
and a young woman who had run away. We would think of the physical street as the site at
which, as in generations past, males call out to and attempt to entangle female passersby,
initiating a fraught encounter that is negotiated face to face. But there is more to this episode.

Hours after JayVon aggressively approached the young woman (Denelle) on the sidewalk,
Denelle sent him a friend request (which he accepted) and an inbox message on Facebook. An
exchange ensued over multiple days, an excerpt of which, starting with Denelle’s initial message,
appears below as Illustration 3. Anderson finds that when a guy raps to a girl she “usually is fully
aware that a game is being attempted” (115). Grazian devotes an entire chapter to the ways in
which women undermine the painfully transparent advances of men. Online, Denelle initiates a
private interaction, this time calling him out: “YOU WAS THA BOY I WAS TALKIN TOO
OUTSIDE,” which JayVon confirms. The interaction on the physical street does not sever
relations but rather enables them as Denelle wrestles back control of the exchange. She both
shifts the meaning of the original encounter (retroactively) and sets the terms of future
communication. In contrast to a rapid interaction on the street, their inbox exchange proceeds
slowly over multiple days.

Denelle next shows a softer side; she tells JayVon she is “layed up” watching a movie
and snacking. When he replies the following morning, JayVon reciprocates this vulnerability, he
is also “layed up” because he feels sick.

Denelle offers her sympathy. But in the same sentence she also parses JayVon’s behavior
on the street in an effort to disentangle the person in private (in the inbox) from performance in
public (on the sidewalk): “Ooo hope uu feel better thuggman.” JayVon concedes the act: “thats
me being stupid lol i really dont be like that thoo.”
But right away he raps to her again. He compliments Denelle on her appearance (which she reciprocates), claims he has status on his block, says he is “looking for a wife,”34 and, eventually tells her, “Come see me today.” She does not, and the exchange carries into the next

34 A “wife” can also mean an exclusive dating partner rather than a spouse.
day when JayVon invites Denelle “to go to my crib” (really a friend’s family apartment). Denelle rejects the offer: “So how im supposed too come see you then? Cause i dont cheel in ppl house” (i.e., she does not “chill” or “hang out” in a strange home). This non-physical exchange never progresses to a romantic or sexual meeting.

In my initial read of the encounter on the street, I perceived harassment and entanglement. JayVon repeatedly violated turn-taking norms of conversation and the closing of the interaction was “problematic” (Duneier and Molotch 1999) insofar as JayVon continued talking to (or at) Denelle as she departed. However, the interaction did not end relations but encouraged them. Both parties later showed interest in future contact, although they diverged in what form this should take. Denelle used JayVon’s inbox to meet him again, but this time without his friends, affording her a means by which to challenge JayVon’s behavior on the street and to interact one-on-one, digitally and privately (through inbox messages). JayVon, on the other hand, pushed to meet in person, first publicly on the block where his peer group gathered, and then at a private residence.

This episode offers two key insights into sexual transactions in the public realm. First, for those inside, whether interactions such as the one between JayVon and Denelle (and not for outsiders such as me) constitute courtship or harassment hangs on a tussle for definitional control of the situation. For Denelle to regard JayVon’s approach as courtship, she takes two “lines” (Goffman 1967) in this contact: 1) that JayVon’s behavior on the street was contrived—an act; 2) that she is a player (rather than a victim) in this exchange. Denelle walked away on the street when she wanted to and chose to initiate dialogue with the boy with whom she had been talking previously. Online, JayVon grants Denelle both concessions, thus consensus—at least at the
interactional level—is reached retroactively to what happened on the street, enabling further communication.

Second, we again see how the edge on encounters between the unacquainted may be blunted online. Alongside JayVon, who detains Denelle on the sidewalk, Ren fumbles through his rap, retreating to their alleged digital connections when face to face with this young woman. It is less emotionally taxing for boys to talk to girls online, especially through private messages. JayVon distinguishes himself through his capacity to rap face to face, not just on social media. Meanwhile, Denelle goes online to take back definitional control of the encounter on the street.

**Appearances and Moralities**

Unlike his adoptive cousin JayVon, eighteen-year-old Christian, as discussed earlier, prefers to express interest in girls digitally rather than on the sidewalk. Christian’s style of courtship allows us to see how some males evaluate the appearances of females whom they do not know in person on social media.

How individuals treat one another in public occurs within a framework of identification (Goffman 1971). Lofland (1973) argues that the basis of order in public urban space depends on the assumptions that strangers make about one another. *Appearential ordering* “allows you to know a great deal about the stranger you are looking at because you can ‘place’ him with some accuracy on the basis of his body presentation: clothing, hair, style . . . and so on” (27). For Christian, navigating relations with strangers starts with the appearance he intends to give off, what gender scholar Carol Brooks Gardner calls *display*—an “appearance . . . people present in public places” that “is calculated for the effects . . . others will experience” (1995, 53).

On Facebook in November 2012, Christian presents himself as a “man of the city.” Among the fifty-seven profile pictures he has used, he appears sitting on stoops, benches, or
parked cars, hanging with friends and family, or else alone, squinting for the camera as he looks onto the city. He offers himself as a “ladies man,” as well. In nine photos, Christian poses on the street entwined in some way with a young woman.

When I met Christian on a Friday morning in January to walk together to his GED school, I waited outside his building as he greeted his 1,690 Facebook friends from a laptop in his room: “Good Morning New York its Friday!” Then he posts: “I Need a Girlfriend who will Faithfully wake me up in the Morning so i could be on Time =/”. This garners likes from twelve different females. Writes one: “It’s called a Alarm Clock. Lol.” Responds Christian, “Lmao Alarm Clocks wont love you back.” “Okay good point,” she replies.

Christian then exits through the basement of the brownstone where he lives with his grandmother and aunt, two adoptive cousins, and, their mother and her sister. Christian is wearing Air Jordan 5 reissued sneakers, sagging camouflage cargo pants, a faded black t-shirt that says “Beach Bum,” a blue, red, and white Red Tag brand jacket, and a maroon knit hat made by Polo. He carries a Nike backpack and a BlackBerry. Christian identifies as black and Jamaican, though he is sometimes mistaken for Latino because of his light complexion. He has a thin beard and a stud in each ear. He has doused himself with Axe brand body spray. While maintaining this casual affect, Christian, over the next few months, quickly completes his exam preparations and passes his GED exam, which makes him a success story at the school. Peers and adults alike are drawn to Christian. When I speak about Christian with teachers and administrators at his school as well as a summer employer, each adult either says point blank, “I like Christian,” or cannot help smiling or otherwise showing affinity towards him.

Gardner (1995) writes that some men relate to the city’s public spaces “as a romantic frontier” (192) that “holds who-knows-what-promise” (191). As a well-liked young male with a
Facebook network that generates swift attention from twelve girls when he remarks “I Need a Girlfriend,” Christian prides himself as a guy with options. My observations of Christian’s face-to-face and digital dating career over five months (January–May 2012) reveal variety in the romantic and sexual possibilities of strangers meeting through digital media.

When we sit down at Columbia for an interview on a different day in January, Christian logs onto Facebook on my laptop. On the right of his profile, a side bar of friends available to chat pops up. I count seventy-four at one point—roughly two-thirds are female. Christian tends to a friend request from a female classmate in his GED program. This entails accepting the request and visiting her photos to take a closer look. Since Christian started at the school only a few months ago and daily attendance rarely reaches fifty percent (according to his math teacher), Christian knows little about this person. “[T]he pictures are the most important thing on Facebook,” Christian explains. With the right photographs, “people are gonna wanna know you.” Looking at his classmate’s pictures, Christian decides, “She’s more the nasty-girl type. Like I could tell. . . . She’s, like . . . a fast girl.” I ask Christian to elaborate. He details a set of markers that indicate for him if a female is “fast” or, as he also puts it, “hood.” These include appearing in underwear, wearing brightly colored wigs, showing piercings or tattoos, and wearing leather jackets made by Pelle Pelle. Christian contrasts this appearance with that of “a classy girl,” who wears “sweaters, dresses,” and other “nice stuff” in most of her photos. Along with display comes, on the receiving end, “stereotypy” or “facile judgments [of another person] based on the tag-ends and wisps of appearance that are available” (Gardner 1995, 53).

Christian does not find his classmate attractive, so he moves to another profile of a girl named Khia from the Bronx whom he has “found through Facebook.” The site’s friend suggestion feature generates her name and thumbnail photo. He “thought she was pretty” so he
sends her a friend request, which she accepts. Christian does not follow with an inbox message; instead, he likes some of her photos, which he continues to do now, selecting photos of Khia in conservative or comfortable clothing. By paying attention to these photos rather than ones where she appears in scanty attire, which generate likes from dozens of males, Christian hopes to distinguish himself from other suitors.

For now, Christian’s contact with Khia is limited to the wall. Over the five-month study period, I learned of three of Christian’s relationships that progressed from a meeting on Facebook to sexual intercourse. Each of these entailed a period of gradual mediated contact first online and then by phone (going from text messages to calls) before meeting in person and having sex right away. Two of the three sexual relationships revolved around “booty calls” (Williams and Kornblum 1994, 142) where partners call on each other (late at night) for sex without commitment. The third sexual relationship is more complex. In May, Christian and Taryn, a teenager from Harlem but residing in the Bronx, had sex in Christian’s family apartment. Outside of an unplanned meeting on Lenox Avenue, this encounter transpires the first time they are together face to face. Leading up to sex, they become Facebook friends after Christian sees a reference to Taryn on someone else’s wall and sends Taryn a friend request. Over a period of several months, communication progresses from written relations (inbox messages and then text messages) to conversations on the phone. Christian draws on their mediated contact to arrive at a tentative conclusion of what a relationship with Taryn would be like. He articulates to me one day over lunch that Taryn would be a girlfriend who allows him to spend time out with his friends but would require that he answer her phone calls and come home when told. Says Christian, “I love the way she talks to me”; she is “wild [very] bossy.” In the other two sexual relations I mention, sex does not hinge on definitions of the relationship. But this understanding,
even if hastily reached, appears key to Taryn, who asks during their physical intimacy, “Am I your girlfriend?” to which Christian replies affirmatively. On the day they have sex, Taryn takes Christian’s phone and edits her name in his phone book to appear as “My wife”. The morning after they have sex, she writes on his wall for his network to see, “- good morning babe, see you later ;*”. The next day she sends Christian a request, which he accepts. “In a Relationship with Taryn Corver,” his profile reads as a public verification of this status. Within about a week, their relationship ends.

The three strangers whom Christian meets on Facebook and then has sex with all appear in online photos displaying what Christian considers the markers of a “fast girl.” But none of these relations—including the two that do not involve a definition of the relationship prior to sex—transition quickly from first interaction to sexual intimacy. The transition from strangers to sex partners requires that strangers first pass through stages of mediated contact.

Moreover, relations, for Christian, that begin on Facebook and make it to the face-to-face stage do not always lead to sex, even when he meets females he labels “fast.” In January and February of 2012, Christian went on two dates with Lissa SObitchy, a young woman he met on Facebook using his strategy of liking photos. The day before their first date, Christian showed me Lissa’s Facebook account. The profile picture depicted a young black woman whose lips were puckered into a kiss. She was wearing a silver stud pierced through her left cheek, a tight plaid button-up blouse opened to reveal cleavage, and short pink spandex shorts. Christian clicked through other photos—in some she appeared in underwear—and told me that these were “meant to seduce anybody who look[ed] at her.” Lissa, he said, is “fast.” But relations proceeded slowly. Christian took me through his inbox history with Lissa, which dated back about six months before their meeting in person. The frequency of these interactions varied—“on and off”
talking,” Christian called them—alternating between daily communication and gaps of days or even weeks. About five months into their inbox correspondence, Lissa gave Christian her cell phone number and, a couple of weeks later, they transitioned to text messaging (without subsequently moving to phone calls). They met twice in person—first for a date at the movies. The second and final date took place at Christian’s family’s place, where they celebrated Valentine’s Day, exchanging gifts and “making out” (not having sex). Christian later reported that he had not called Lissa “enough” in the days following Valentine’s Day and that “she started talking to someone else.” Christian’s assumption that Lissa was “fast” based on her appearance did not hold face to face. Nor did Christian come across as eager to have sex with Lissa.

What can we say about appearances online in these instances? On the one hand, as on the street, revealing attire does not necessarily correspond to a woman’s sexual intentions. Appearances that Christian dubs as “fast” do not translate into immediate sexual opportunities face to face. What is fast—instant—is access to another person in a state of undress. Males and females alike articulate the pressure on young women to look sexier and more stylish online.

“Girls get naked for likes,” says eighteen-year-old Lacey. They “gotta front,” she says, explaining this in terms of girls’ revealing their bodies, wearing the “latest stuff,” and sometimes using a “filter to look lighter.” Eva says that “girls be putting pictures up . . . bending over in the mirror” that could “be brought up anytime,” regardless of efforts to delete them. “Everybody screenshots everything.” The costs of drawing attention in the digital realm appear to be heightened pressure to sexualize one’s image while foregoing proprietorship of these images.

But, on the other hand, we must recognize that these photographs, however revealing, may not be of the person behind the profile. Appearance and person may decouple in a public realm when it is digital. Eva’s Facebook network includes almost 4,000 friends of whom she
personally knows in the hundreds, according to her estimate. “At the end of the day, you don’t know who you really talking to,” she says about interactions online.

“Fake Pages”

This decoupling is the basis of “fake pages,” bogus profiles on social media created for strategic purposes (and sometimes simply for entertainment). Prior to meeting a girl in person, Christian sometimes wonders whether the strangers with whom he communicates really are the people he sees in the photographs. This possibility of false representation is one framework within which online courtship operates. In one of Christian’s digital relations, he became Facebook friends with a girl named Yelena. Yelena’s profile picture shows a young woman in underwear taking a self-photo in the mirror, holding a hat that obscures in shadow the top half of her face. Yelena’s bio section declares “Modeling is My Life,” along with this challenge:

“EXCUSE ME ! YES YOU I DIDN’T . . . SIGN UP FOR THIS ‘SOCIAL NETWORK’ JUST TO ‘ARGUE’ OR TO BE CALLED ‘FAKE’ If . . . YOUR GONNA BE ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE . . . DON’T BOTHER TO EVEN ADD ME . . .

Ps . . . Hopefully You’ll Get Approved.”

After becoming Facebook friends, Yelena and Christian shared an ongoing inbox correspondence before transitioning to phone communications. When Yelena invited Christian to call her, he gladly obliged. “[F]rom the [profile] picture she’s something kinda beautiful,” and he believed that the voice matched “a cute Spanish girl.” Christian and Yelena spoke roughly every other week (the voice was the same each time, he reported) and he admitted that on one occasion they had engaged in phone sex. “She was, like, the only girl I was telling, ‘Yo, I will take you out—pay for everything. You could sleep at my house—you don’t have to leave if you don’t want to, whatever; just as long as I can see you.’”

35 “Fake page” is the local term for a phenomenon sometimes called “Fakebook” or “catfish.”
Christian timed his date requests to coincide with Yelena’s posts about being out and about in Manhattan (she told him that she lived in Midtown and that her family also had a house in Connecticut). “Come see me, or I'll come see you; I'll take care of everything—I’ll pay for whatever,” but no meeting ever materialized. “After a while, like, I started even . . . [saying to] her, like, ‘Oh, you’re a fake page. . . . I don’t even want to talk to you.’” Whenever he accused her in an inbox message of being “a fake page,” she pushed back with a phone call or eventually the concession to announce their relationship publicly on Facebook. But without a meeting in person, relations faded out.

What is this “relationship” about for Christian? As a depiction of a relationship with an attractive female, Yelena confers peer status upon Christian (assuming she is seen as “real”). Christian also believes Yelena benefited socially from their connection online. Having “some guy from the hood as her boyfriend on Facebook” made her more legitimately “Spanish,” he explained to me. But Christian also regards his interactions with Yelena as being with her, at least on some level. In a sense, the person on the other end of these interactions does not matter; Christian desires the pictured appearance.

Let us shift now from the receiving end to the display side of this phenomenon. Significant others, peers, parents, and police deploy “fake pages” depicting young, local women in sexy dress to establish surveillance and gather intelligence on males of interest in the neighborhood. When eighteen-year-old Sarah was “going through some things” with her boyfriend and wondered if “he would go talk to other girls,” she created a fake page using photos she found on Google of a “very pretty” black woman with “flawless skin.” As Sarah describes her, this fictive woman “was in her twenties. She was a photographer. She was a college student, and she was into Xbox [a video game system].” After building a network of “a good fifty friends,”
Sarah sent her boyfriend a friend request from the fake page, which he accepted. She later wrote him, inquiring if he had a girlfriend. “[H]is response was, ‘Yes, I do have a girl, but I wouldn’t mind hanging out some time.’ The [fictive] girl wrote back and was, like, ‘Well, I’m sorry, I wouldn’t want to hang out with you if you had a girlfriend.’ . . . [But] they carried a conversation through the night.” Sarah later confronted her boyfriend about the exchange and, eventually, they broke up for numerous reasons.

At a November 2009 meeting for a police precinct’s community council, the commanding officer spoke about the arrests of five young males for selling the hallucinogen PCP on a corner in central Harlem. When I asked if social media plays a part in local policing efforts, he said that monitoring sites like Twitter helps both with preventative policing (such as sending cops to the vicinity of a planned party) and solving crimes. When I asked about access to this information, he explained that when a young male “locks” his Twitter profile (i.e., makes his profile private), a cop poses as “Latisha” or invents “a girl in the neighborhood,” whom he inevitably accepts into his network. This strategy of posing as local girls to monitor male teenagers has expanded into a staple of the department’s citywide anti-gang initiative citywide, Operation Crew Cut, and the Juvenile Robbery Intervention Program (“JRIP”) in East Harlem and Brownsville, Brooklyn, a program that monitors teenagers after a first-time robbery charge and directs social services to their households.

In March 2012, I spent some time with the mother of a teenage son murdered in Harlem, who uses a fake page in her independent investigation into her son’s unsolved case. I came to know Monique, a woman in her forties, through my anti-violence work, and when we met in her home, she showed me Milania Jones, the profile she and her daughter had created in the weeks after her son passed. “I try to be friends with these guys here [pointing out profiles] . . . where I
know that my son got murdered at,” Monique says. Milania’s profile picture shows an attractive African-American woman, perhaps twenty, wearing a bikini in a kitchen, a photo Monique’s daughter found online. Her bio indicates she is a fan of a famous R&B singer and a local DJ.

Monique tells me guys are “just fawning all over” Milania, whose network includes over 1,800 friends. “Sometime we answer them [inbox messages], so they don’t think we are a fake page. We confirm friends; I share things to keep the page . . . going.” Like Olivia’s inbox, Milania’s is filled with solicitations from males. As I scroll through this inbox, I see an unreciprocated opening from a young male in my research. “Washupp,” he writes.

Through Milania’s profile, Monique connects to several males—including the presumed shooter—from the street corner group near her apartment that she holds responsible for her son’s killing. She tracks their whereabouts and hobbies and looks for evidence, such as an original rap recording she believes references the murder. She shares her findings with an Assistant District Attorney. She tells me she does this work because “the police ain’t doing their job”—“[T]hey can lock this guy up any time, [but] this guy walks the street like it’s all right.”

“Fake pages” are one form of exploitation of females’ bodies online, an unintended consequence of the migration of acquaintanceship online. A second exploitation concerns the “publics” that form on or through young women’s profiles. Let us consider now, as a final point about contemporary gender relations inside the ghetto, the precarious location of young women off- and online.

*At the Interstices of Boys’ Violence*

We have seen that social media provides either a start to contact in person or a buffer against it. This networked technology bisects not just boys and girls in their romantic negotiations but also neighborhood “beefs” among the boys. Profiles of young women form a
“public” in the middle of these overlapping contests. Girls have historically been blamed for the downfall of boys, nowhere more so than in ghettos. In the previous chapter, after the boy is killed on Seventh Avenue, a rumor circulates that girls set him up, a commonplace understanding of why boys become the victims of violence. Recall the Facebook networks among the girls on the corner of 129th Street—these are almost two-and-a-half times bigger than boys’ networks and include two-and-a-half times more boys than girls. As the social networks of girls expand online, the association with trouble between boys becomes even more encompassing for young women. Girls’ profiles link boys otherwise segmented by neighborhood violence. Harding (2010) reports that, compared to boys, girls in the inner city have larger and more geographically diffuse networks that span numerous rival neighborhoods. When this network position migrates onto social media, a virtual location at the interstices of geographic rivalries opens. It accrues compounding numbers of people from more and more neighborhoods through a networked structure not based on face-to-face familiarity. Profiles of girls serve as the sites of cross-neighborhood surveillance and showdowns. According to Anderson’s (1999, 77) typology of “staging areas” for violence, the most volatile “brings together large crowds from throughout the city,” where young people represent the neighborhoods “from which they hail.” These “stages” open at dances, concerts, athletic events, roller rinks, and multiplex theaters. Now they are “always on” in digital form as well.

If we think back to Andre’s campaign for respect as Mr. Unstoppable, he does not simply leverage his own publicly visible profile but also the fact that his platform is networked. Besides Christian and a second male with whom he also shares a past bond, no other rivals from 129th Street appear in Andre’s Facebook following (and vice versa). When Andre posted pictures of himself in front of the laundromat holding the “trophies” he took from his rivals, Taye, from the
129th Street group, launched a counter-campaign depicting similar poses on St. Lincoln’s turf, displaying taken baseball caps and bikes. This antagonism ran through Andre and Taye’s 182 mutual Facebook friends, 93 percent of whom were female (or consisted of profiles that depicted females). When I asked Andre how he knew his rivals would see his provocations, he pointed to their mutual friends and Facebook’s automated notifications when mutual friends like or comment on material.

The contents of a young woman’s profile may be used to initiate or sustain rivalries between boys. When one sixteen-year-old uploaded a photo of two male friends seated on a bench in the courtyard of the housing development where the boys live, a rival of the boys and a Facebook friend of the girl posted a comment. A spiteful back-and-forth ensues on her page between boys on both sides of the rivalry. When the boy who commented on the photo is later shot, the victim’s crew holds the young woman responsible and comes after her on a public bus. She is harassed by phone and social media. Having grown up with and dated boys on either side of this rivalry, including the shooting victim, she is embedded in their conflict. Her profile becomes a “staging area” with violent implications.

For girls, the association with boys in conflict, I argue, crystallizes and expands through networked media. One way to deal with this pressing association is to embrace it, using it as a status to trade on. The status as a “special” in Pastor’s anti-violence ministry hangs in part on this access to the plans and intentions of boys in rivalries. A woman’s power,” says Nika, in the “street world,” is “directly connected with your relationship with guys.” An undergraduate sociology major at an elite college in the northeast, Nika has a special vantage point on adolescent gender dynamics in Harlem. I met her by chance at a conference where I gave a paper that referenced a rivalry involving the block she grew up on. Nika and I spoke over lunch at the
conference and then over a series of Skype interviews. She kindly introduced me to some of the young people from her neighborhood, including her cousin and neighbor Desiree, who was living on their block while attending a local community college.

I return now to a conversation I brought up in a previous chapter in reference to “throwing subs.” Nika compares two roles available to girls in her neighborhood: one taken by her cousin Desiree and the other by Nika herself. Desiree “knows everything,” from “if somebody is getting hit in their house by their boyfriend to when someone plans to retaliate.” “She gained the role by dating the guys that she dated.” She goes for “the guy who is in charge” of a street team, says Nika. “But then that won’t stop her from dating the guy who is in charge of the next team.” Between her former and current “boyfriends” and those “she talks to,” “she is, like, one of the most connected people you’ll ever meet.”

“What is there for her to gain?” I ask.

“It’s about status,” Nika replies. “Because it shows she has the power to . . . puppet people to do what she wants.” “So it becomes a game—like the game of the street—[where] . . . she can control all these guys who, like, sell drugs or shoot people.” “Every president has a first lady, and she’s the one who is actually calling the shots,” says Nika, relaying something Desiree jokes about.” While her cousin “has respect,” it comes at a cost. “She strives to be” the guy’s “number one,” which means having to constantly fight other girls.

She contrasts Desiree’s role with her own role beyond the street. “I’m kinda the go-to person” when “anyone has a question about resume building, or what they can do to get to school, or where they can find money [for school].” Peers are “amazed that I know and care what they’re doing outside of the street. . . . I have a respect in that way even though . . . they call me ‘a white girl’ for going away [to school]—like, ‘Oh, the schools around here aren’t good enough for
She links this “good girl status” to being known as a virgin while involved in a long-term relationship with a guy from the block. Nika’s role suggests that young women may also be seen as conduits away from street drama and towards scholastic and employment opportunities.

Let us return to the interstitial role played by the “specials” as it maps onto social media and relates to digital acquaintanceship. One Monday afternoon in March 2012, I sat with Rochelle at Columbia to go over a new Facebook profile she had created after issues on the site with her previous profile. According to Rochelle, Facebook had blocked her from again changing her profile name after previous alterations, often to reference a boyfriend’s street name or online handle. Facebook had also placed Rochelle on “probation” for adding people she “did not know,” which temporarily prevented her from adding any friends. On the heels of her nineteenth birthday and newly dyed blonde hair, she adopted a fresh profile, taking the name of a character in a teen comedy who plays the popular cheerleader. Within about two weeks, Rochelle collects 337 friends, including real and fictive kin, friends, associates, and unknowns. Roughly 72 percent of these ties are male. Pastor and I are the only persons over age thirty. I am the only white person in her network.

Aside from one “Poindexter,” I have known Rochelle to exclusively date boys with high status on the street—the guys in charge of street teams (as Nika says) who wear “fly clothes” (Anderson 1999, 73–76; Bourgois 1995, 157–162). She traces this pattern to a relationship at age thirteen that started when an older boy introduced himself on MySpace by his nickname and street team. She heard at school that he had status within his crew. Since then she has been involved with similarly situated boys. Some of their names are tattooed on her body, others appear temporarily as her screen name on Facebook, Instagram, Oovoo, and other platforms.

Nika’s comments are interesting in light of our earlier discussion about scholastic culture on the street. Her peers both ask for her help with their education and tease her that she is “white girl” because she goes to an elite, mostly white college in the northeast.
As Nika articulates of her cousin, Rochelle’s connections to young men provide specialized knowledge and power in matters of the street. This specialization links into and runs parallel to the middleman position of the street pastor. But the intentions vary. In a single post on Facebook, Rochelle may direct the efforts of anti-violence actors, invite new trouble, and advance her own claim as “Queen Bee.” When police pick up an ex-boyfriend believed to be seeking revenge following the murder of his sibling, she posts “FREE MY OLD THANG” with a heart emoji and a tag to his profile. This information is breaking news from West Harlem of interest to outreach workers and the teens, inclusive of the arrested ex’s rivals, the girls he is now involved with, and Rochelle’s present boyfriend on the eastside who might “feel some type of way.” For this status, Rochelle often fights other girls involved with the same guys. Sometimes she even fights her girlfriends, who tire of the drama and its implications for their own safety (Jones 2010) or feel sidelined by her focus on boys.

Over several hours that afternoon, we go through each friend. Two hundred forty-three of her 337 friends are male, twenty of whom she says she has dated or hooked up with (she says she has also hooked up with two girls in her network). Of all connections, she has met about 55 percent (185) in person. Of these 185 face-to-face ties, roughly 32 percent (fifty-nine) she knows through school (overlapping at any school she attended). Rochelle is tied to young people in four of the five boroughs of New York City (excluding Staten Island); in Poughkeepsie, New York; Hackensack, New Jersey; Pennsylvania; “down south”; and places unknown. The vast majority of her network resides in Harlem: she can say with some level of confidence exactly where in Harlem 144 ties live (141 of whom she has met in person). She suspects from profile details or other information that many others live there as well. But she cannot say where about 47 percent of her network is from (inclusive of twelve face-to-face ties).
Honing in on Harlem, Rochelle connects to others in thirty-four separate neighborhoods, inclusive of seventeen housing projects, spanning north, south, east, and west. This places Rochelle at the interstices of no fewer than twenty-four cross-neighborhood rivalries active at the time of our interview. Rochelle’s profile is a hub for these intersecting and overlapping lines of conflict. Her page is only two weeks old. She resumes her business of tending to friend requests once we wrap up.

**Conclusion**

We have explored some of how gender relations unfold in the era of the digital street. Young people in Harlem are around at each other at various and shifting digital and physical proximities. As before the internet, teenagers coming of age on these streets broker their own introductions to the members of the opposite sex, only now they manage the possibilities of public space through digital media, expanding and filtering their options as daters everywhere. But these teens do not restrict their dating prospects on Facebook to existing ties inside school or on campus and the presumed familiarity of networks belonging to these face-to-face peers. The same attunement to the wider peer world of the street extends online in the inner city. And the more things stay or go digital, the greater the distance and layering of mediated contact between bodies. The same affordances that may be cast as inhibiting the emotional growth of young people in middle-class contexts may be easier to see as safety measures and street smarts in the inner city, particularly if we consider historical gender relations inside ghettos. We see the trade-offs of digital sexuality in the surrender that happens when young women upload photos of their bodies. But peculiar to the inner city, depictions of female bodies online serve as the nexus of surveillance amongst police and rivals and not just peers and parents. Finally, the precarious position in which young women find themselves within the physical confines of the
neighborhood becomes a “staging area” as it maps onto social media. While females like Desiree and Rochelle attempt to shift this network position favorably, the romantic frontier of the digital street remains very much the vision of boys like Christian.
Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

This study reconsiders the life of the street as it is lived today by teenagers in Harlem. We see how school days, marginality, surveillance, and intimacy play out on the networked streets of a changing ghetto. Inner-city teens—and some of the adults concerned about them—use media to organize relations on the sidewalk. By linking data online to people and places in the neighborhood, moral and legal decisions are made, and courses of action taken. Further, today’s generation learns its street smarts. The life of the street can no longer be taken on its own terms. It is worked out in the media.

The digital street provides a new way to think about how the urban poor use media. Usually research on “digital inequality” deals with differences in skills, practices, access, and other assessments at the individual level—rarely is it situated within neighborhood issues (Hampton 2010). The present research shows us that teens use media to nurture social scenes in public places and to sort out matters of status, safety, and acquaintanceship. For the adults, systems of surveillance and intervention similarly hinge on communication channels along the street. From this perspective, the inner city is a center of digital innovation.

The digital street is a pathway of change in Harlem. Through media, the kids on the corner have changed their experience of being out on the street. But those in power also leverage media to change the street, specifically to get kids off it.

In late 2006, a SkyWatch Tower first appeared on the corner of 129th Street and Lenox Avenue. In January 2007, the NYPD, the Manhattan DA’s Office, and the local Field Office of the FBI began a four-year investigation centered on gun violence. Investigators collected photographs appearing on MySpace and Photobucket, a free storage and editing site that allows users to layer text onto their photos. Some of these photos evolved into a gang roster and
evidence of threats against rivals and weapons possession. The District Attorney marshaled these materials alongside other evidence, including arrests and recorded Rikers Island phone calls, to indict nineteen young men on a conspiracy to possess firearms. Between 2008 and 2011, a similar investigative strategy and combination of evidence produced a conspiracy indictment on gun and drug charges just blocks northwest in the vicinity of Abyssinian Baptist Church. Fourteen teens and young adults were included; other indictments followed.

In late 2011, following the indictment on 129th Street, NYPD Community Affairs hosted a forum on the basketball court inside the Mormon church. About 130 people attended. The NYPD’s primary social media specialist described a world of street-corner groups in conflict across Harlem: “You live there, I live here, that’s all we need.” He held up printouts of “RIP photos” that depicted recent homicide victims with memorial messages superimposed. “Anybody have any idea where I got these from? You can get them too—right on the internet.” “We need to get in the game,” he says.

Just up the block in the St. Nicholas Houses, where the indicted group had been fighting for years, Harlem Children’s Zone had already broken ground on a $100 million project to build a K-12 charter school and community center on 129th Street between Seventh Avenue and Frederick Douglass Boulevard, cutting through a cul-de-sac and opening the cross street to traffic. The five-story, LEED-certified facility with more than fifty classrooms featuring “state-of-the-art technology” would open for the 2013–2014 school year, drawing on $60 million from the Department of Education, $20 million from Goldman Sachs, $6 million from Google, and other public or private monies. On the heels of the murders of two young alumni in 2010, the NYPD specialist opened a parent meeting with some of the same photos and the same call to get online with your kids by any means, even adopting a fake page. Harlem Children’s Zone CEO Geoffrey
Canada introduced a student-safety initiative called “Saving Our Own in the Zone” that placed staff in brightly colored shirts on the streets around programming locations during after-school hours and established a phone number for kids to text if they are in trouble.

Throughout Harlem and the Bronx, at parent and community events, the NYPD social media specialist brings a similar presentation based on the social media materials of the young people in the area. At a parents’ forum in the Bronx in 2013, he directs parents to see the rivalries and taunts online. The violence will revert to “the eighties” if we do not “get a hold of this now,” he warns. Yet the opposite is happening: the violence has declined. Homicides continue to fall citywide, going from 515 in 2011 to 419 in 2012 to 335 in 2013.

In 2011, a social media unit within NYPD’s Juvenile Justice Division was formalized, as social media had become standard in the investigation and prosecution of “youth crews.” Annotated photographs, video, and posts on social media are staple prosecuting tools of the Manhattan District Attorney, who repeatedly says in public appearances that “the internet is the crime scene of the twenty-first century.” Consequently, the local public defender’s office takes the social media names and login details of its teenage clients to screen for content that may be used against them (and to understand their street and home lives). Gang detectives in Harlem and citywide are trained on these same online materials.

Consider what qualifies a gang detective as an “expert” today. When a gang detective working for the last two-and-a-half years in Harlem’s 26th and 30th Precincts testifies as an expert witness for the prosecution, he is asked by the ADA to describe his “training and expertise as a gang detective.” He says, “I’ve gone to gang courses where they teach you . . . different types of social media to identify gang members.”

“Talk about it a little more,” directs the ADA.
“A lot of gang members like to express who they are using Facebook, YouTube, Instagram,” the detective responds.

“Do you actually have a police Facebook account?”

“Yes, I do,” says the detective.

“Have you monitored and interacted with people on Facebook who identify themselves as gang members?” asks the ADA.

“Yes, I have.”

The ADA then moves the line of questioning beyond social media. “Other than monitoring social network sites, what are other things you do to make determinations as to whether someone is in a gang and if so, what gang they are affiliated with?”

The detective describes “debriefings,” in which he questions “anybody [who] gets arrested,” not about what “they’re currently being arrested for” but “just general knowledge of what they know or basically what the streets are talking about.” With prompts from the ADA, he enumerates other forms of knowledge—interviewing colleagues and reviewing police paperwork.

“What about personal observations? By that I mean, are you actually out on the street, on a post to observe potential gang activity?” asks the ADA.

The detective indicates that he watches “the gang members” in person and on “surveillance video.” This trial pertains to a teenager charged with attempted murder for allegedly shooting at a rival gang member. The evidence turns on the interpretation of photographs on social media, YouTube videos, and surveillance camera footage. The points of debate are how to “characterize” a teenager’s “bent finger” in a photograph alleged to depict a gang sign and whether use of a particular nickname on Facebook is to “self-identify” as a gang member.
While we see the investigative and forensic turn onto the digital street, what about economic enfranchisement? The kids on the corner are leaders of mobile and social media. How does the city’s employment agenda match its human capital? Researchers named deindustrialization as a major problem in ghettos several decades ago. For what kind of work do we train the disenfranchised today? In his 2008 State of the City address, Mayor Bloomberg announced his intention to revamp the city’s 282 Career and Technical Education programs and schools towards “twenty-first-century competencies” (Mayoral Task Force on Career and Technical Education Innovation 2008). In Harlem, for sixteen-to-twenty-one-year-old students at Co-op Tech, a trade school on East 96th Street that is more than fifty years old, changes appear to be underway. We find Cisco networking, web design and social media, and application development, alongside traditional career strands like carpentry and automotive.

We might also consider marketing as a career field to develop. The ways that teens interpret and frame their experiences online; channel their messages “subliminally” and explicitly; draw and dodge attention; and play with language, typography, and photo and video narratives could be called daring, strategic, and brilliant. In the advertising world, these practices are associated with personal and corporate branding, strategies now at the center of the corporate firm and its activities. Careers are based on such command of media. People get paid for their campaigns on social media, the number of likes and followers these produce, and the ability to discern and generate “buzz on the street.”

We see in Harlem that the responses to the urban poor online shape criminal justice outcomes and the evolution of neighborhoods. We know from Chambliss’s research that the poor are punished more than the affluent because they appear in public more often (not because of greater deviance). The present research tells us this visibility is compounded online. Kamal
believes that his friends are in jail “because of the internet,” and police and prosecutors are perhaps the adults most involved in the digital lives of teenagers in Harlem. But this turn online has been accompanied by reductions in “stop, question, and frisk” and declines in homicides. The physical street is “softer” and less violent than when I arrived in 2009. It would seem that more eyes on the digital street from the parents, “old heads,” educators, service providers, and other concerned adults besides the cops would expand the capacities of do-it-yourself surveillance. After all, getting the parents online is the message police relay ad nauseum in their “youth summits.” Yet, we see from Pastor’s intergenerational bridgework that parents are not proficient in the same media as their kids. As previously noted, the Department of Education formalized a social media protocol in 2012 prohibiting teacher-student contact, implying that police but not teachers should look after public school students online. It appears the police are the first line of defense on the digital street, rather than the last.

Moving forward, who are the custodians of public spaces that are digital? Who defines the traces of street life online? What ends will this data serve?

Finally, coming of age means that young people change not just with the conditions of their on- and offline environment, but also through their own maturations. We briefly revisit Andre’s story as an illustration.

After getting off to a promising semester at Hostos, Andre was arrested and later sentenced on a drug felony charge for his part in selling crack in the Lincoln Houses. He served about four months in “the tombs” under the Manhattan courthouse and in Rikers Island. His only visitors in jail were his seventeen-year-old girlfriend, whom he had met before the arrest, his girlfriend’s mother, and me. When he got out in July 2013, he vowed not to return. He moved into his girlfriend’s mother’s apartment in the Bronx. Meanwhile, the beef between St. Lincoln
and the 129th Street group eventually subsided following the indictment, peace meetings between “the older guys” on either side involved in the drug trade, and ongoing outreach work. Andre, at age twenty, with new supports and the burden of neighborhood violence no longer pressing, continued his evolution. He applied his persistence to finding legal work—this time without campaigning for respect on the street. “JOB HUNTING THIS WEEK #TIMETOGETONMYGRIND !!” he wrote on his wall. He called Pastor, his contacts at Project KeepAlive and at Job Corps, and me throughout the day to inquire about jobs, get help with his resume, and give updates at every step of the process as he applied for numerous positions. He spoke to Hostos to indicate his intention to return. By September, he had a part-time job as a sales associate at Godiva Chocolatier in midtown Manhattan. He made flavored chocolate shakes, stocked the backroom and candy shelves, and cleaned. The next month he posted a photo of himself in his all-black work wear, smiling: “JUST GOT OFF WORK FOR TODAY IT FEEL SO GOOD !!” The post generated seventy-four likes. “WHAT JOBS ARE HIRING,” he wrote the next week, looking for another job to supplement his twenty hours a week at Godiva. “NOW I HAVE 2 JOBS,” he wrote in November, after taking a sales position in White Plains, New York, at the sneaker chain Finish Line.

Over the holidays, Andre gave me a scarf and a box of truffles from Godiva. Andre had changed, again, and will continue to, with Harlem.
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