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THE WAITING ROOM:

RE-MAKING ADULTHOOD AMONG AMERICA'S UNDEREMPLOYED

by

Susan E. Hill

A Dissertation Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Anthropology

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2019

ABSTRACT

THE WAITING ROOM
RE-MAKING ADULTHOOD AMONG AMERICA'S UNDEREMPLOYED

by

Susan E. Hill

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2019
Under the Supervision of Professor Kalman Applbaum

This dissertation takes as its starting point the problem of underemployment among young adults in the post-recession United States. Recent studies have shown that the number of college-educated Americans employed in positions not requiring a degree has reached historic highs. Such analyses are limited, however, in that they do not capture the lived effects of such trends—how underemployment insinuates itself into a person's worldview and identity. This ethnographic study delves into the intimate correlates of macroeconomic change by investigating the impact of underemployment on notions of adulthood among recent college graduates working in the Minneapolis-St. Paul restaurant industry. For the young people that I interviewed and worked alongside for a year, a central question in their lives appeared to be, how does one become an adult without the stable pay and prestige that has defined legitimate, middle class adulthood for prior generations?

My study found that, for many white collar hopefuls, the beginnings of their careers were defined by a period of precarious employment—a "waiting room," as some called it—for wealth, self-actualization, and adulthood itself. For those workers without means to subsidize their wages during this period, restaurant work provided an essential income stream and bulwark against economic instability. This period of underemployment ultimately fostered a "waiting room" subjectivity, a stultifying, yet creative state in which workers dealt with the practical problem of

becoming adults despite deficits in prestige and income. Their tactics were crystallized in the internet meme "adulting" and ranged from traditional consumer activities such as purchasing a bed frame to communalist householding arrangements. Overall, I argue that their waiting room world constitutes one refraction of an emerging generational subject, haunted by the norms of the twentieth century but birthed into an era where those norms have collapsed into a disordered state of adulthood, fertile with risk and possibility.

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Jason Hall for making everything about life better. Finally, thank you to the many underemployed workers who made this dissertation possible by showing me their worlds and sharing with me their "recession war stories," as one person put it. I hope I have done them justice.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Emily is cleaning glasses behind a bar on a frigid afternoon in Minneapolis. She is in one the most expensive downtown hotels, and the interior reflects it. In this sprawling warehouse space, distressed leather couches mingle with modernist furniture imported from Sweden. There's a brick-lined fireplace roaring in the corner. It is buttressed on both sides by shelving that displays a mixture of low-end country cabin-themed knick-knacks and high-end antiques—a miniature canoe made of birchbark, a metal thermos from the 1950's, a set of hand-carved wooden plates, a mound of maritime rope, a pair of geodes repurposed as bookends. Everywhere there are piles of throw pillows, faux fur blankets, or varnished tree stumps standing in as end tables. The room smells like wood, and the aesthetic achieves something between Scandinavian rustic and a scene from *The Great Gatsby.*

Juxtaposed with the traditional haircuts and crisp suits of the downtown professional set dining here this afternoon, Emily stands out with her nose piercing, half-shaved head, and bright bleached hair. In the midst of this tableau, she is bored. There are only a few people enjoying a wet lunch this morning, and business is slow. I am drinking a whiskey cocktail at the bar. A few awkward minutes pass, and she comes over.

"Do you like rum?"

"Uhh, sure," I say.

She nods and immediately sets about making what she tells me is an experimental drink that she has been developing in her free time. She pulls colored bottles with obscure French-sounding names from the bar shelves above and reaches into the small refrigerator under the bar, grabbing an egg. She cracks the egg and carefully allows only the white to drip into a metal cocktail shaker. Next, as if in rhythm, she grabs a jigger and precariously balances it in her

fingers as she pours out rum and a mysterious yellow liquid. She shakes the drink for about a minute and, with a smack, pours it into a coupe glass. Grabbing a bottle with a dropper, she carefully squeezes out tiny specks of bitters onto the foam, making a polka dot pattern. After a spritz of "house-made" essence, she slides the glass over to me. I thank her and drink, confused but grateful that I would not have to pay an additional $11 for this one. I say it tastes great, and she tells me it's something that she's been working on, one of her many creations "in development." It feels like she has done this many times before. It is part of her rapport-building ritual.

She proceeds to ask me the usual bartender line-up of questions—where am I from, what am I doing in Minneapolis. I tell her that I've just moved here to study underemployment; I'm an anthropologist. "So are you studying service industry people?" she asks, using the term "service industry," to mean food service industry. This shortened version is what most workers in restaurants and bars colloquially use to describe their corner of the economy.[1]

I am not quite prepared for her question, as people of all backgrounds typically respond to statements about my work by asking one of the following: 1) What is underemployment, and 2) why would an anthropologist study that, anyway? I tell her, that, yes, the service industry is an

[1] This colloquial use of the term service industry is distinct from other common usages. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics defines the "service sector" or "service-providing industries" much more broadly as any non-goods producing sector that earns most of its revenue from providing services rather than producing goods. Under this definition, the service industry encompasses nurses, architects, social workers, and teachers (2018, 1). Food and beverage work is sub-listed under "Accommodation and Food Services." Among people working in restaurants and bars in Minneapolis, I found that "service industry" referred much more specifically to people working in businesses that earned revenue through serving food and/or beverages, such as at a coffee shop, restaurant, bar, or brewery. It typically excluded people working in fast food establishments, although this was not always the case. Unless otherwise indicated, when I refer to service industry in this text, I am referring to my interlocutors' use of it to mean food service industry.

area of interest for me because so many restaurant industry workers I have met also have post-secondary degrees. She leaves momentarily to drop a bill for a customer. A few beats go by, and she returns, "So tell me about this thing you're writing. Are you doing this from a positive or a negative angle?" I explain to her that I am trying to capture the point-of-view of the underemployed for audiences who know very little about the experience of people living in those circumstances. She frowns, "Ok, I guess I see your point, but, well yah, some days in this industry, I'm just like, 'WHAT AM I DOING?' I mean, I think I was referred to as 'the help' twice last week."

Eventually, I learn more about Emily's story. She is from a northern suburb of Minneapolis, one of three children whose parents both went to college. She lives at home with her father and commutes into the city for work. At twenty-seven, she holds a degree in communications from a public university in the area but earns her money bartending and serving. She dreams of becoming a public relations guru, like the character Samantha on HBO's eponymous *Sex and the City.* She worked for a short period doing promotional gigs on contract for an events management firm but left because the pay was too low and unpredictable. As the drip of contract work slowed during the winter every year, she found herself pulled more and more into the relative stability of bartending. "This is just what happened," she tells me a few months later during an interview, "I did this for extra money in high school and college, but I didn't really expect to be doing this the rest of my life." Now, she is an accomplished "veteran" of the industry—someone who has cycled through several well-known restaurants in the city. Her unusual creations are regularly featured in the hotel's menu of craft, or meticulously hand-made, alcoholic drinks. Yet, she says that she's not a "real" person yet, that her peers in "the 9-

5'er world," with their weekends off, paid vacation, and benefits, are somehow more "grown-up" than she is.

Emily resents how the hotel's wealthy guests often treat her like she "doesn't exist" and bemoans the fact that she will likely have to look for another job because her tips have not been as high as she had hoped. She still cannot afford to buy her own home and, although not in deep debt like some of her friends, is still living paycheck to paycheck. Meanwhile, her family and boyfriend continue to complain about how she can never attend events or holidays because she is constantly working.

"Honestly, I love my service industry people, but this life is crazy," she tells me after describing her average sixty-hour work week. "I would not recommend it to anyone… That white collar job might be boring, but it's looking pretty good these days."

At a coffee shop a few miles north of downtown, Mark, 30, has given up on the white collar dream and is not looking back. When I arrive for our interview, he is bent over the laptop at his table, another young, bearded, black-shirt-wearing patron in the midst of this hipster study hall. I am not used to seeing him anywhere but on the other side of a bar; he has worked as a bartender for nearly a decade. He has a genuinely cheerful disposition, somewhat unusual in an industry where cynicism and sardonic humor is the norm. Lately, however, he's been out of the bartending scene and working relentlessly to start a new business, a brewery start-up. He had almost no investment income when he started but has slowly worked his way toward opening a taproom by partnering with a friend, borrowing on credit, and taking on a second job that he can barely stand.

"I'm getting out," he says, with a smile, referring to his secondary employment. Mark now makes enough income from his brewery to quit this job, which means that he is one of the

very few people I've known in the industry who has successfully fulfilled the elusive goal of becoming one's own boss.

"That's the only true way to move up in this business," another young bar owner told me, "You have to become the owner at some point." Mark's journey from bartender to business owner is a somewhat unlikely one. He was a political science major who hoped to work in a non-profit after graduation and perhaps pursue a career in public service. He graduated during the recession and, after two years in a government-funded volunteer program, could not find any paid work. After several false starts and leads that came to nothing, a part-time bartending gig that was never supposed to extend beyond college became his primary source of income. He considered law school, but the debt required to attend worried him, so he ended up underemployed in the service industry for nearly a decade.

Mark ultimately gave up on his dream "to save the world and work for the Red Cross," but, in the service industry, he found his path to career satisfaction and adulthood. "I guess I'm an adult now," Mark says when I ask him whether he feels like a grown-up. "I'm adulting pretty hard this year," he says with a smile, referring to the common neologism. Along with his business success has come an engagement and a house with his new fiancée, a social worker. He says he wants a relatively traditional home life with kids and a wife. He says that he expects to be "upper middle class" someday, a successful business owner. Finally out of the dredges of bartending and customer service work, Mark feels like the wait is over. He's finally there.

He imagines adulthood as a choice: "There are a lot of wanderers, lost souls in the industry… Ultimately, you have to choose to become an adult—it's something you choose to do every day, the annoying stuff, the stuff that other people always used to take care of for you." Yet, there are signs that adulthood may not be the "promised land" that so many of my other

study participants imagined it to be: “It’s stressful to own a business: the debt, the knowledge that it’s really just you that’s running the show, it’s hard. Adulthood means that there are serious dollars at stake in my life.” Mark expected adulthood to feel more secure. Instead, it feels less like a robust achievement and more “like a tightrope.” In the end, though, he feels lucky, and it shows with the big smile on his face as he remarks, “I guess I don’t work seven days a week anymore. In that sense, I’m there. I’m an adult. My life is finally in order.”

This study is a glimpse into the world of American college graduates who, in many ways, see themselves as “out of order” in the economy— “misfits who fell off the wagon” as one participant put it, detritus of the post-recession moment. They are early career journalists, academics, lawyers, and other white-collar hopefuls who earn most of their income in the high-end restaurant industry.

They are also, in the revealing language of labor researchers, *under*employed—workers employed in positions with education requirements below their degree level (Abel, Dietz, and Su 2014). Recent studies (Abel and Dietz 2016, 1) have estimated that as many as half of college graduates were underemployed in the aftermath of the 2008 recession. This statistic is particularly troubling when considered alongside research (Nunley et al. 2016; Strada Institute for Work 2018) suggesting that underemployment is a durable condition that can have dire long-term consequences for earnings and is even more damaging than periods of unemployment. As inequality grows to unprecedented levels in the United States, underemployment emerges as a potential trigger for downward mobility among the children of the middle classes. Yet, if we look beyond the statistics, what are the intimate, social consequences of underemployment? How does underemployment influence a person’s worldview and sense of self?

As I interviewed, observed, and worked alongside the underemployed over the course of a year in Minneapolis-St. Paul, "adulthood" and "order" were never far from conversation:

> "I'll be a real person, an adult, when I finally get my life in order."
> "I need to get my life in order, first. Then maybe I can get married and be an adult."
> "He's been doing the adult thing this year, just getting his shit in order."

Order—in their careers, in their personal lives—was elusive. As they tried to make sense of their derailed career trajectories, adulthood emerged as a locus of both insecurity and discovery, a generative starting point for understanding themselves and the world. "How do I even become an adult without a good job?" one person asked me. This question mirrored what would later emerge as the primary puzzle addressed in this dissertation: for the underemployed, how does one become an adult without the pay and prestige that has defined middle class adulthood for a generation?

As I discuss later in this chapter, defining the American middle class is a challenging task. In public policy literature, the middle class is often defined purely through income, as in the Pew Research (2015) study that demarcates the middle classes as "two-thirds to double the national median" of household income—$45,195–$135,585 for a three-person household (1). As Zaloom (2018) points out, this kind of definition is problematic firstly because it excludes cost-of-living differences and, secondly, because it neglects other drivers of social stratification, such as social prestige or what Bourdieu (1984) referred to as "cultural capital." In his theory of class distinction, Bourdieu (1984) famously defined educational credentials as the primary institutionalized form of cultural capital (147). He argued that credentials were an essential part of class reproduction, allowing families to pass along cultural capital to their children while disguising hereditary privileges as the result of individual merit (Bourdieu 1986, 49). While

perhaps not fully encompassing all the elements (income, habits, tastes, consumptive patterns) that make up the lived experience of class, post-secondary education remains a key correlate for future earnings[2] and a standard part of the biographies of affluent individuals and their children in the United States.[3] It is the institutional practice that has most clearly demarcated coming-of-age for the middle classes and, at least in theory, remains the primary pathway toward a high earning, high prestige career.

The rise of underemployment in the aftermath of the Great Recession, however, has signaled that this path from credential to career may be shifting. Among my participants, I found that the beginnings of their careers were defined by a liminal period of service industry work—a waiting room, as some called it—for wealth, self-actualization, and adulthood, itself. As a kind of subjectivity, the waiting room was a stultifying, yet creative state in which workers dealt practically with the problem of becoming adults despite deficits in prestige and income. Their tactics were linguistically crystallized in the noun-turned-verb "adulting" and ranged from traditional consumerist activities like purchasing a bed frame or designer purse to communalist householding arrangements. For these downwardly-mobile college graduates, reaching adulthood was anything but a linear journey with a guaranteed arrival time. Rather, my participants dealt practically with the problem of becoming adults, picking up various cultural detritus along the way—the IKEA headboard, the Fordist family dinner table, the 1960's commune, or the

[2] See the Association for Public and Land-Grant Universities study on annual median earnings for workers aged 22-27. http://www.aplu.org/projects-and-initiatives/college-costs-tuition-and-financial-aid/publicuvalues/employment-earnings.html

[3] Educational credentials are now so thoroughly tied up with class in public discourse that the term "first generation" (referring to students who are the first people in their family to get college degrees) is often used in place of terms like "working class" to indicate students from less affluent backgrounds. Most of my participants were not from first generation families. One or both parents usually had college degrees.

Instagram filter. This waiting room world constituted one refraction of an emerging generational subject, haunted by the norms of the twentieth century but birthed into an era where those norms have collapsed into a disordered adulthood, fertile with risk and possibility.

This study also provides a glimpse into the growing artisanal restaurant industry, a corner of the service sector that runs heavily on the labors of the highly educated but underemployed. What exactly do I mean by "artisanal"? I refer to food and beverage service businesses whose production processes emphasize "from scratch" work with the hands, usually with a special focus on local, organic, or high-end ingredients.[4] In both production and consumption, the artisanal restaurant vibrates with nostalgia for simple ingredients, folk work, and physical labor, itself, and heavily romanticizes working and peasant class livelihoods. From the renovated warehouses that many of these restaurants call home to the heritage vegetables that find their way to your plate or drink, what makes the artisanal restaurant unique is that it is a locus for bourgeois re-imaginings of working class lifeways.

In the Twin Cities, this sub-industry constitutes a tight-knit community with a relatively well-formed identity, robust face-to-face relationships, and specific industry norms and rituals.

[4] There is a growing literature around this cluster of food trends positioned as alternative to industrial food production. Focus areas vary from "localvore" movements, to food activism, sustainability, organic farming, and many other topics. For a recent example in anthropology, see Paxson (2013). In practice, I found that individuals working in these restaurants used terms like "localvore, "organic," or "craft" interchangeably in marketing and everyday talk to define the boundaries of their sub-industry and describe what made them unique. I use "artisanal" rather than more common terms like "organic" or "localvore" because, among members of my sample and the places where they worked, I found that nostalgia for handcrafted, non-mechanized production processes was the closest thing to a clearly definable, uniting feature. Like Ocejo (2017), I found that the artisanal restaurants that my interlocutors worked for were positioned not so much as a politically-opposed counterpoints to industrial production, but as a higher quality, more authentic alternative. Like the broader "slow food" movement that emerged in Italy in the 1980's (see Wilk 2006), artisanal restaurants often positioned themselves as guardians of regional food cultures threatened by the popularity of fast food.

Workers circulate within a well-established network of restaurants, bars, and coffee shops and, when they are not working, they are dining or drinking at these same places. What I found is that for Emily, Mark, and many others in this community, artisanal restaurant work functioned as a kind of shadow career—a strand of stable employment that they did not always acknowledge as "real" but that nonetheless propped up other work in more precarious, white collar fields, often for five years or more. It is the largely unacknowledged backbone to entire white collar sectors populated by precarious forms of work. As a key circulation point for the underemployed in the Twin Cities, the artisanal restaurant industry was, therefore, an ideal site to study the experiences of this group.

It is tempting to trace the beginning of this project to that infamous day in September 2008, when the stock market dropped over 700 points after Congress rejected the first iteration of the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). I remember picking up one of the free *New York Times* newspapers in my college's student union and seeing the kind of all-caps, large font headlines that they only use when something really bad has happened: "DEFIANT HOUSE REJECTS HUGE BAILOUT. STOCKS PLUNGE. NEXT STEP IS UNCERTAIN." Yet, when I think back on my reaction to that event, it felt more like something to be expected, confirmation that the storm clouds long gathering on the horizon of my generation's collective future were now at critical mass. Indeed, my journey to this project began as a soon-to-be underemployed person myself, looking toward the future and sensing, like many of my participants, that I was on the edge of a downward detour.

In most of the ways that matter in the United States, I was privileged. My participants—with their college degrees and middle class upbringings— were too. In June of 2009, I might have been unemployed, but I had a college education and a modest familial safety net. I sheltered

in graduate school for periods of time and, like many, did stints in low-paid volunteer corps programs, hoping to wait out the worst of the post-recession hiring slump. After the end of yet another term-dependent gig, I nonetheless found myself working in retail, as a salesperson and bra-fitter at a major retailer in downtown Chicago. I was not the only college graduate working there at the time; there were early career writers, marketing professionals, business majors, and others, all selling luxury retail while waiting to break into their fields. Working alongside us were also many soon-to-be college graduates, eyeing the rest of us (and our temporarily de-railed careers) with trepidation. One day in early spring, a group of twenty-something girls requested bra-fittings. They were in town from Minnesota, on spring break vacation in the Windy City. As I brought them merchandise, I eventually discovered that they were current students at my alma mater. They asked when I graduated and what my major was. We shared some memories about the school and laughed. I could tell that my story, my extended adventure off the white-collar path, made them feel sorry for me. With newly strengthened career resources and the cautionary tale of those of us who came before, they were armed with internships and pre-professional tracks to face the job market leap ahead.

Meanwhile, the economy began to improve. The recession officially ended, and some people I knew from college began to get well-paying jobs in the fields they had studied. I still lingered, however, "stuck in service," as I would hear many times during my fieldwork. Underemployment, with its tendency to demoralize a person, monopolize their time, and poke years-long holes in their resume, can indeed feel like "a black hole," as one of my colleagues described it. For me, graduate school (with all its debt burdens and tenuous-at-best job outcomes) ultimately presented itself as the best chance to get out. But the experience of underemployment remained with me and inspired my work as I continued to meet many young people, in and out

of graduate school, who found themselves enduringly stuck in underemployment and struggling to re-order their worlds and identities around that fact. Many of those people found shelter and community in the world of artisanal restaurant service. This study is an attempt to capture their experiences and sketch the cultural correlates of their downward mobility as this cohort approaches their third decade. Although this case study is limited in its representativeness, its data speaks to problems that are generational in scope and touch households across the country.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This dissertation makes use of an interdisciplinary literature that spans sociology, anthropology, and American studies. I have embedded my discussion of the most directly relevant research in chapters 2–6 but will now provide an overview to set the stage for what follows.

Cultural Change Under Late Capitalism

This study of underemployment is situated within interdisciplinary debates regarding how cultural phenomena articulate with two political-economic transformations: the late-twentieth century explosion of global trade, labor flexibility, and finance markets sometimes referred to as "late" capitalism (Lash and Urry 1988; Harvey 1989) and the resurgence of *laissez-faire* liberalism, a political philosophy which posits that government should not interfere in the functioning of a free market (Dumont 1977). Neoliberalism, described by Harvey (2005) as a political-economic system characterized by privatization of public goods and the upward redistribution of wealth, is the concept most frequently used to describe this market-dominated context (159).

Recent authors (Rose and Miller 2008; Povinelli 2011; Welker 2014; Bear et al. 2015; Neiburg and Guyer 2018), have argued that this systemic view of neoliberal capitalism overstates the coherence of a fragmented and contested political project of governance, unevenly realized throughout the world. As Bear et al. (2015) write,

> We are concerned with the unstable, contingent networks of capitalism that surround us. These are more fragile and more intimate than accounts of inevitable core contradictions or determining economic logics would have us presume. They are generated from heterogeneity and difference, and from our varied pursuits of being and becoming particular kinds of people, families, or communities (para 6).

Such a self-proclaimed "weak-theory" approach to contemporary capitalism[5] is attentive to the incoherency, hybridity, and contingent outcomes of neoliberalism as it manifests in cultural contexts diverse as the silk industry in Italy (Yanagisako 2013) or the stock trading floors in Chicago and London (Zaloom 2006). They offer an alternative account of neoliberalism and the late-capitalist condition as a "set of uneven social struggles" emerging roughly around the time of the Washington Consensus in the 1980's and continuing into the present (Povinelli 2011, 17).[6]

In on-going studies, anthropologists of work have taken today's shifting labor markets as sites to understand how cultural processes mediate the normalization of neoliberal policies and contingent labor practices among employers and workers (Willis 1979; Sennett 1998; Newman 1999; Ho 2009; Muehlebach 2011; Millar 2014; Zaloom 2018). Subjectivity, defined by Ortner as "states of mind of real actors embedded in the social world and the cultural formations that express, shape, and constitute those states of mind," (2005, 41) has provided a conceptual tool

[5] For further discussion, see Gibson-Graham (2014).
[6] Povinelli (2011) has offered "late liberalism" as an alternative term to theorize techniques of governance that are emerging as modern liberal states face a widespread crisis of confidence.

for understanding how these transformations in labor practice become meaningful to social actors. Blending cultural Marxist theory on the importance of the symbolic in capitalist domination (Gramsci 1971; Williams 1977) with symbolic anthropology's attention to complex processes of human meaning-making (Geertz 1973), Ortner (2005) called for a renewed anthropological critique of the culture of neoliberalism through the lens of subjectivity.[7]

A locus of such theory has surfaced in the study of "precarity," described by Muehlebach (2013) as "shorthand for…the multiple forms of nightmarish dispossession and injury that our age entails" (297). Building from critical theory of Post-Fordist time and affect (Povinelli 2011; Berlant 2013), ethnographers of precarity examine the complex subjective experience of neoliberalism, focusing on how sense-of-self and affect drive cultural change. This subject-centered approach to studying neoliberalism's effects is apparent in Molé's (2010) study of Italian workers, in which she shows how the specter of neoliberal restructuring produces a collective state of anxiety and widespread fears of "mobbing," or harassment and sabotage from others in the workplace. In contrast, Millar (2014) shows in her study of poor Brazilian garbage scavengers how, despite having opportunities for regular work, garbage pickers return to precarious scavenging work in city dumps because the time flexibility of such employment allows workers to deal with the everyday chaos and instability of life in Rio's slums. For these workers, flexible dump work becomes a "refuge" as they struggle with "the everyday emergencies" that threaten the survival of family and loved ones (35). Both authors steer their ethnography toward questions of emotion, identity, and consciousness to examine the interplay between macro-economic change, subjective mental states, and cultural practice.

[7] More recently, Ortner (2016) has pointed to anthropological work on activism and resistance as a promising path forward toward not only critiquing neoliberalism (what she calls "dark anthropology") but imagining alternatives to it.

Gilded Age 2.0: Growing Inequality and its Effects in the United States

Amid record income inequality (Pew Research 2014) and the ascendance of America's most famous billionaire to the White House, it appears that a second "Gilded Age" is emerging in the United States. Preceded by groundbreaking ethnographies of deindustrialization by Newman (1994) and Dudley (1994), anthropologists of the United States are taking up the theme of precarity to explore the cultural effects of income inequality at home. In the aftermath of Occupy Wall Street and the global financial crisis of 2008, authors such as Kalb and Carrier (2015) and Durrenberger (2010) have made impassioned calls for renewed attention to class in anthropological study. Ethnographers of the United States have met these calls with an array of recent work on class and inequality (Collins 2011, 2012; Lane 2011; Khan 2012; Walley 2013; Cooper 2013; Goffman 2013; Broughton 2014; Ralph 2014; Heiman 2015; Holmes 2016 Gershon 2017).

One debate that animates this research is how the cultural life of the American middle class is shifting as the proportion of middle income American households continues to decrease (Cohen 2015). A key challenge that these authors grapple with is theorizing the nature of class itself. What is class? How is it related to culture? While some writers maintain a classic Marxist view of class as a relation of workers and owners that develops from a capitalistic mode of production (Durrenberger 2010), many others adopt (either implicitly or explicitly) a post-structuralist view of class that nonetheless preserves its critical edge for analyzing relations of inequality (Bourdieu 1977; 1984). Such a viewpoint is perhaps best crystallized in Kalb's (2015) assertion that class is, "a bundle of social relationships of inequality, power, and extraction and the mythologies associated with them" (4). Considered through this lens, class is a relation of

inequality that is mutually constitutive of other relations of inequality, including gender and race (Ortner 1998, 2005; Walley 2013, 11; Bear et al. 2015, para 5).

Defining the middle class in the American context is notoriously difficult, with many Americans of both high and low income nonetheless describing themselves as "middle class" (Pew Research 2015). Following Bourdieu (1977; 1984), many ethnographers of the middle classes therefore proceed by defining the class through patterns of habit, taste, and worldview that emerge from an individual or family's place in a field of social relations. Bourdieu (1989, 16) understood class as a similar positioning in a "social space" defined by the distribution of power. He posits this power as three different kinds of capital: 1) economic capital (monetary wealth or other resources easily convertible to money), 2) cultural capital (tastes, knowledge, habits and other learned, symbolic resources), and 3) social capital (one's network of social relationships) (Bourdieu 1986, 47). The distribution of these three kinds of capital define relations in a given social context or "field." Social class emerges out of similar positionings in the field, where individuals "have every chance of having similar dispositions and interests, and thus of producing similar practices and adopting similar stances" (Bourdieu 1991, 231). The "habitus" is the concept Bourdieu (1977) uses to theorize how individuals acquire these "durable, transposable" class dispositions through unspoken, everyday practice (72).

The unique, "betwixt and between" positioning of the middle classes, as privileged managerial workers that nonetheless depend on wages for their livelihoods, is a central area of interest in the ethnographic literature, with many researchers positing an affective structure of middle class "fear of falling" (Ehrenreich 1990, 4) to describe the individualist, democratically corrosive practices that have emerged in Post-Fordist America (Bellah et al. 1984; Newman 1994; Sennett 1998; Lane 2011; Cooper 2013; Heiman 2015). In recent work, ethnographers

explore how families cope with the new insecurities of post-Recession American life, with Heiman (2015) documenting the "rugged individualism" that arises in suburban New Jersey in the 1990's and Cooper (2013) analyzing the gendered "risk strategies" that emerge as families across the class spectrum cope with endemic insecurity (4). Both these works build from Lane's (2011) study of the valorization of individualism and risk among unemployed managerial professionals who no longer view themselves as "Organization Men" but rather, as "a company of one" (Whyte 1956). These authors share a central concern with the role that meaning and affect play in structuring middle class worldviews and social action in a time of record inequality, when many families find their ideals of security, consumption, and prosperity in jeopardy. This literature, however, tends to focus on mid-career, unemployed workers while leaving less-explored the increasingly perilous leap from school to the working world, as graduates enter the labor market at a historical moment distinct from that of their parents.

While unemployment has attracted significant attention in this literature, comparatively little is known about underemployment, defined as being overqualified for a job in either skills or education level (Abel and Dietz 2012, 2). Recent estimates put the underemployment rate for college graduates in the United States at nearly forty percent, capping an upward trend that peaked during the Great Recession and has been underway since at least 2001 (Abel, Dietz, and Su 2014; Nunley et al. 2016; Strada Institute for Work 2017). This finding is particularly concerning because the latest research suggests that, once underemployed, people tend to stay underemployed even ten years later (Strada Institute for Work 2017, 10). Nunley et al. (2016) have found that underemployment has a greater negative effect on job seeker outcomes than unemployment. In addition, recent graduates employed appropriately at their skill or education level earn, on average, $10,000 more per year compared to the underemployed (Strada Institute

for Work 2017, 8). Therefore, even a few years of underemployment can have serious effects on career outcomes and earnings. Overall, what these early studies indicate is that first jobs matter for college graduates and that underemployment can easily grow from a months-long phase to a decade's worth of working years. This project delves into the stories behind these statistics to document and analyze the impact of underemployment as it manifests in the everyday lives of workers. It extends the uniquely subject-oriented approach of the ethnography of precarity to a new, timely area of study.

Time, Adulthood, and the Revived Study of the Household

This dissertation also contributes to an emerging, but as yet, incomplete dialogue between the anthropology of work and the literature on youth and adulthood. In an American cultural context where work outcomes and understandings of social adulthood are closely intertwined (Silva 2013; Blatterer 2007; Berlin, Fustenberg, and Waters 2010), my study examines underemployment through the lens of the life course, an undertheorized but foundational component of human experience.

Youth cultural practice has long been a small but vibrant locus of study for anthropologists interested in cultural change under neoliberalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 1998; 2000). Building from Mannheim's (1922) theory of generation, Cole and Durham (2008) use the term "re-generation" to describe how social change under globalization is mediated through inter-generational relations of the family, as the young encounter their own culture within a historical moment different from that of their parents (5). For Cole and Durham, it is at these moments of historically-situated "fresh contact," that novel cultural forms emerge among youth (Cole and Durham 2008, 5). Researchers have used this generational perspective to understand

shifting courtship practices (Cole 2004), novel political subjectivities (Durham 2008), and patterns of conflict (Comaroff and Comaroff 1998; Durham 2004; Lukose 2008). [8]

One theme that develops out of recent work is the role of affect and conceptions of time in shaping the subjectivities of today's youth. Jeffrey (2010) explores the subjective elongation of time, termed "timepass," described by middle class men as they feel indefinitely stalled between youth and adulthood during a period of austerity in India. Mains (2007) has studied the slowing of time described by Ethiopian college graduates as austerity measures disrupt their aspirations for adulthood. Both studies challenge dominant conceptions of Post-Fordist time that emphasize its acceleration in an era of globalization (Harvey 1989). In a recent edited volume on the topic (Durham and Solway 2017), anthropologists explore cases across the world—from Sri Lanka to Botswana to Russia—of people struggling with the transition to adulthood. In the United States, Silva (2013) has documented shifting conceptions of adulthood among working class Americans, as they increasingly define maturity, not through twentieth century markers like owning a house or car, but, rather, through emotional fortitude amid everyday struggle. Her work mirrors earlier findings by quantitative sociologists (Arnett 1994; Côté 2000) suggesting psychologically-oriented criteria are replacing older definitions of adulthood that prioritized parenthood, marriage, wealth, and work in the United States.

Time, itself, is re-emerging in anthropology as a focus of inquiry, with Bear (2014) calling for a new "anthropology of modern time" that is sensitive to the heterogeneous temporal systems circulating in modernity. She synthesizes Marxist theories of the capitalist domination of

[8] This generational approach is apparent in Durham's (2003) study of Youth Empowerment programs in Botswana in which she describes how a distinct subjectivity of individualism and entrepreneurship forms among youth in Botswana as governmental programs encourage young adults to launch vinegar businesses. These novel subjectivities develop in dialogue and conflict with prevailing cultural norms of intergenerational, familial dependence. In a contribution characteristic of youth and generation research, Durham's study illuminates how processes of cultural change are mediated through intimate relations of kinship and age.

modern time (Marx 1846; Althusser 1970; Harvey 1989) with anthropological literature on the multiple techniques humans "use to act on and with time," (Gell 1992; Munn 1992; Riles 2004; Zaloom 2009) to argue for a revived field of inquiry that is sensitive to the historically-contingent, multiple temporal representations, practices, and technologies circulating in modernity itself (Bear 2014, 15). Bear departs from classic theoretical formations of neoliberalism that emphasize its structural features (Harvey 2005) by emphasizing the incoherency, hybridity, and fragility of neoliberalism as it manifests in actual human experience. In this new anthropology of modern time, the daily "labour in/of time" emerges as a site of anthropological inquiry, where the ethnographer can observe the ambivalent, conflictual work that goes into negotiating the personal, social, and non-human rhythms of contemporary life. This labor of time, fraught with conflict and doubt, can constitute a "core contradiction of life" that may fundamentally shape subjectivity (Bear 2014, 19).

What is less explored in this new anthropology of time is how the language of time and aging may be emerging as a discourse through which the young middle classes make sense of downward social mobility and critique their economic conditions. Durham's (2004) analysis of youth as a "social shifter," or indexical term that can only be understood in context, lays the groundwork for understanding how a language of downward mobility can emerge around the theme of adulthood and the life course.[9] The popular neologism "adulting" provides one of the

[9] In her recent introduction to *Elusive Adulthoods* (2017), Durham reiterates the usefulness of the "social shifter" in thinking about adulthood and sets forth three analytical opportunities that the idea offers to researchers of adulthood: 1) to foreground the "relational and contextual" aspects of adulthood, 2) to analyze the "pragmatic" aspects of claims to adulthood, and 3) to analyze the "metasocial elements being indicated in discourses of adulthood" (16). As a study of downward mobility, my study is especially engaged in the third track—how the underemployed talk about and critique downward mobility and the contemporary economy through the language of the life course.

most dramatic examples of an emerging language of adulthood in today's United States. With the noun-turned-verb-turned-gerund"[10] shortlisted for the *Oxford Dictionary* Word of the Year[11] in 2016 and mainstream media launching adulting-focused segments[12] in response to the rapid popularity of the neologism, it seems clear that cultural understandings of adulthood are at an inflection point in the United States. That the term has catapulted from the world of internet memes into the mainstream linguistic repertoire at a time of unprecedented inequality and underemployment in the United States is even more suggestive. This dissertation considers these emerging life course discourses and their accompanying adulting practices within the context of underemployment and generational downward mobility.

METHODS

Research Site, Sampling, and Recruitment

The site for this study was the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area in Minnesota, USA. Sometimes termed the "Twin Cities," the area consists of the state's largest city (Minneapolis), capitol city (St. Paul), and surrounding suburbs, reaching from the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers in the southeastern corner of Minnesota to the Wisconsin border. Approximately 3.3 million people live in this region, within an area of 8,000 square miles that is the sixteenth largest metropolitan area in the United States (U.S Census 2013). The

[10] Some examples of "adulting" used in its verb form: "I just bought my own car for the first time! I'm *adulting* so hard right now!" and gerund form: "I have to go to the DMV today. *Adulting* is the worst!" I analyze this term further in Chapter Five.
[11] See the press release: https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/press/news/2016/12/11/WOTY-16
[12] See the *Washington Post*'s "How to Adult" segment: https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/c/series/how-to-adult.

Twin Cities is a major economic, transportation, and cultural hub in the American Midwest, currently hosting sixteen *Fortune 500* companies and the second largest economy in the region.

Within the Twin Cities, I focused on a sub-industry that I refer to as the "artisanal" restaurant industry, a loose constellation of approximately fifty restaurants, bars, and coffee shops clustered across the metropolitan area whose production processes specifically emphasize "from scratch" work with the hands and local, organic, or high-end ingredients as essential parts of their branding and business model. Although differing in points of emphasis, I propose that what makes these businesses similar is a characteristic nostalgia in both production and consumption for peasant and working class lifeways and physical labor, itself—manual craft work in juxtaposition to automated production.[13] Through the filter of bourgeois nostalgia, restauranteurs, diners, and workers themselves[14] re-imagine production processes of the past. They elevate this sub-industry as an enclave of authentic, high cultural capital dining.

The artisanal restaurant sub-industry in Minneapolis-St. Paul is a relatively cohesive network of servers, bartenders, cooks, managers, and others who have often worked across multiple restaurants in the Cities. These are face-to-face relationships, often formed through long

[13] In his recent ethnography *Masters of Craft* (2017), Richard Ocejo explores related trends, namely, the explosion of "elite" manual labor occupations, such as bartending, distilling, barbering, and butchering as "cool" jobs in gentrifying neighborhoods. The food and beverage businesses that my interlocutors worked at were primarily service-providing businesses rather than small-time manufacturers. Therefore, they were not technically part of the "artisan economy" (Heying 2010) or "hipster manufacturing" (Moretti 2013) sectors as it has been framed by other authors who focus on emerging small-scale artisanal manufacturers in cities like Portland and New York. Nonetheless, these businesses share an interest in the hand-made, craft aspect of their work, whether in producing the cuisine itself (i.e. chefs, bartenders, baristas) or curating the meals and service experience of the guest (i.e. servers, bartenders). I discuss this further in Chapter Two.

[14] Although I do not foreground gender in this dissertation, Ocejo (2017) argues that men in these new "elite" manual labor professions are able to reclaim "a lost sense of middle class, heterosexual masculinity in their work" through a nostalgia-driven return to manual professions.

hours of service and late nights blowing off steam afterwards. “This is a small world,” as one participant once told me when discussing the community, “Everyone pretty much knows each other or has at least worked with someone who’s worked with someone.” While there were a few local franchise businesses in the industry, most were stand-alone, small operations with owners who often worked, whether as managers or chefs, in the restaurant every week.

Embedded in a thriving Twin Cities economy that *The Atlantic* dubbed a “miracle” for its “affordability, opportunity and wealth,” the artisanal restaurant industry is also a growing hub of underemployment, a close-knit community in which graduates struggle to find their footing amid a city of thriving *Fortune 500* companies (Thompson 2015, 1). With its own norms, rituals, and rich history, the Twin Cities artisanal sub-industry offered an exceptional site to study the problem of downward mobility in a region that had been lauded as a post-recession success story, the shining example for others to emulate. As one of my participants remarked to me, “If it can happen here, it really can happen anywhere.” This site offered me a unique chance to study the problem of downward mobility even amid a supposed “miracle” city and gather data of relevance to communities of varying economic health, not just the most stratified or economically depressed.

To recruit participants for this study, I engaged in purposive, snowball sampling, in which I sought out individuals fitting the following employment and educational characteristics: 1) possessed a four-year college degree, 2) currently employed or employed within last six months in an artisanal restaurant in a position that does not require their education level, and 3) aged 35 or under. For the purposes of this study, an “artisanal” restaurant was operationalized as a food and beverage service business that in its mission statement or primary marketing materials emphasizes hand-crafted labor-intensive processes and at least one of the following: local

ingredients, organic ingredients, or heritage ingredients, as essential elements of its identity and product. I met two of my initial participants through targeted canvassing of restaurants and bars in two neighborhoods that are well-known as clusters for artisanal industry business activity. I already knew a third key participant through a previous social connection. After recruiting these initial three individuals, I requested referrals for further names of potential qualified participants and began to interview underemployed workers from across the industry in the Twin Cities, continuing to use purposive sampling to create a sample covering a wide range of experiences and educational backgrounds.

I ultimately recruited forty-two individuals for interviews and, of those forty-two, I recruited four for case study, including secondary interviews, participant-observation, and home visits. I used purposive and convenience sampling to select the case study participants, relying on those who were willing to participate, but also those whose experiences would reflect the demographic, educational, and employment diversity of the entire sample. I interviewed service industry workers from a broad array of backgrounds, among them women, men, members of the LGBTQ community, people of color, and people with disabilities. While each had their own particular story, I found that, across these difference, they all struggled to make sense of this unexpected turn in their careers through the language and practice of the life course. Although my sample was not statistically representative, it allowed me to focus closely on my research question and collect rich, difficult-to-gather data with high internal validity. All participants gave verbal consent at each stage of participation per University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institutional Review Board waiver. Outside of this primary sample, this study occasionally features quotations from underemployed participants who I interviewed during preliminary research in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This data is used sparingly and indicated in the text.

Regarding specific roles that my participants held in the service industry, over half of the participants in this study (n=25) were employed as servers or dining room support staff (bussers or back waiters). An additional seven participants were employed behind the bar, as bartenders or bar backs. Five participants worked as baristas at cafés that served both coffee and food. Three participants were employed as hosts. Two participants were employed in multiple positions at the same time. My sample is composed entirely of "front-of-house" staff in the restaurant industry, meaning workers primarily involved with dining room service rather than cooking or washing dishes in the kitchen. This reflects the particular divisions of class and vocational trajectory in the restaurant industry, where so many of the college-educated, underemployed staff primarily work in the dining room rather than the distinctively structured world of the kitchen— where the chefs often had culinary degrees, considered cooking to be their primary vocation, and worked alongside line cooks from a much more diverse array of racial and educational backgrounds. For the average college-educated person looking for an entry-level job in the restaurant industry to "get by," the dining room was the easiest point of entry. This is the location in the restaurant where I found the largest cluster of underemployed workers, and that emphasis is reflected in my sample.

Research Design and Data Collection

This project used semi-structured interview, work history, and participant-observation to focus inquiry on concepts and practices of adulthood among the underemployed. Data collection and analysis proceeded over approximately eighteen months (November 2016–May 2018). During Phase One of data collection, I conducted interviews with forty-two underemployment artisanal restaurant industry workers. Semi-structured interview schedules were split into four

segments: work history (questions about past work, general attitudes about career and trajectory, parental occupations), adulthood (attitudes on social maturity, key adulthood markers, self-reported maturity level or life phase, and household structure and kinship relationships), service industry (questions about the daily experience of service work, the culture of the artisanal restaurant industry, and wage-related issues) and social class (questions about class identity, income, debt, career prestige, and attitudes related to money). Interview schedules were adjusted throughout the research process to improve the clarity of questions and focus more time on questions that prompted productive discussion on the subject of adulthood.

During Phase Two, I utilized home visits and "deep hanging out" (observing and socializing in their social network) to collect *in situ* data on participants in their households and, in some cases, among friends and at work, as they went about their daily lives (Geertz 1998). During these sessions, I used field notes to focus observation toward representations and practices of adulthood (especially performative adulthood gestures, including the neologism "adulting"). I conducted at least two half-day home visits with each Phase Two participant, conducted follow-up interviews during these visits, and occasionally was invited to observe participants at their workplaces and as they socialized among their friends after work. Through this extended case study phase, I was able supplement my interview data with ethnographic observation of cultural phenomena in formation and the daily work that goes on to create, shift, and contest what is normal, natural, and often unspoken among social actors (Bourdieu 1977; Burawoy 1998). This combination of "deep hanging out" time, home visits, work observation, and observation among friends within the extended-case study group allowed for richer data collection adulthood conceptions and practices that emerged among the Phase One group and as well as a deeper cultural analysis of the artisanal restaurant sub-industry more generally. The

overall dataset, therefore, consists of a richer core of extended-case study material (including interview and participant-observation) on a few individuals in this community, supplemented by a broader swath of interview data from across the sub-industry.

Analysis

Data analysis proceeded from a "grounded theory" approach in which findings and theory emerged inductively out of themes from field observations and texts (Bernard 2012, 429). To operationalize this grounded theory approach, I utilized a coding scheme that allowed me to organize interview and field notes data based on themes and deduce overall patterns in the texts. To begin data analysis, I first transcribed interview recordings into word processing documents. Then I reviewed each transcript and coded the data based on higher, medium, and lower order themes that emerged out of the data. This coding scheme especially flagged the following topics of discourse when they occurred in interviews: 1) representations of time, adulthood, and the life course, 2) reports of temporal disruption or continuity, 3) performative adulthood and adulting, and 4) household and kinship relationality. After reviewing and coding the transcriptions, I constructed broader narrative profiles of each interviewee based on their work history, employment status, attitudes toward adulthood, and overall careers goals and identity. Once I completed these profiles, I identified larger patterns present in worker biographies across the interview sample and used this information to select Phase Two participants.

To analyze data from Phase Two, I expanded upon initial Phase One profiles to develop in-depth case studies of the four participants. With these case studies, I tracked how participants' interviewed-reported conceptions and attitudes regarding adulthood emerged out of daily experience and practice. I transcribed field notes from participant-observation, secondary

interviews, and home visits and implemented a similar coding scheme to Phase Two that highlighted patterns around the following areas of data convergence: 1) representations of time, adulthood, and the life course, 2) reports of temporal disruption or continuity, 3) performative adulthood and adulting, and 4) household and kinship relationality. I then developed three ethnographic narratives for each participant that documented key events and data collection moments during Phase Two and combined these into an overall case study document for each participant. To conclude analysis, I re-gathered both phases of data and drew final conclusions based on patterns across the sample.

Limitations, Alternative Forms of Ethnographic Engagement, and "Leaving" The Field

Gaining access to fieldwork sites is a common problem, especially for anthropologists who study businesses, corporations, and other institutions (see discussions in Gusterson 1997, 116-118; Ho 2009, 19; Ortner 2010, 2, Applbaum 2000, 261-263; 2009, appendix). For this project, access problems manifested primarily around the question of whether I could conduct intensive observational research from within a restaurant, embedded as a participant-observer with a service role. Some of my participants sought permission and invited me to observe them at work, and most managers allowed me to observe participants if I was sitting at a bar or table as their paying customer. An insider ethnography of a particular restaurant, however, was viewed as a large risk with little tangible benefit for the business. Therefore, while I was able to gather restaurant-centered observational data on participants, the data is ultimately skewed by my customer vantage-point, both spatially and within the social dynamic of the restaurant.

To deepen my engagement with the cultural world of the artisanal restaurant sub-industry, I decided to at least work in the industry during my research, even if I could not collect

data on my workplace or co-workers while employed there. In the end, I "staged" (or labored for free on a probationary basis) at one prominent casual dining restaurant and worked as a host for four months at a well-known top restaurant in the area. While I did not carry out data collection at these places, I nonetheless formally became part of the service industry community and learned the basic norms of the restaurant through my own work in the industry. I did not recruit co-workers while employed in the restaurant industry, but some did end up volunteering after I left my job. Ultimately, this alternative ethnographic engagement supplemented my analysis with a deeper understanding not only of the basic mechanics of restaurant work, but also the embodied knowledge that comes from working eight straight hours through a dinner service, "crashing" at a bar at 2 AM, and doing it all again the next day. It not only kept me fed during the lean months of dissertation fieldwork, but also enhanced key insights that I gained from study data. Alongside household visits and deep hanging out sessions, working in a restaurant, even for the sake of simply doing it, deepened my knowledge of the artisanal restaurant sub-culture and helped me to cobble together a viable alternative to the traditional fieldwork immersion experience.

As my fieldwork drew to a close, I did not "leave the field" in the traditional sense of physically leaving in a plane or train; I worked in the Twin Cities throughout writing this dissertation. Yet, there was a moment when I really started to *feel* like I "left" the field. It was not about physically leaving the neighborhood but, rather, when I accepted a white collar job outside of the service industry. When I told a restaurant co-worker that I was leaving for a "9-5" job, I remember her saying, like she almost felt bad for me, "Oh, you'll be in the office world now." What I realized in the coming weeks was something that she knew better than me: how profound the social separation between the "office" world and service industry world can be,

particularly from the vantage point of the tight-knit and somewhat stigmatized community that I studied. Once I crossed back over to the office world, it was difficult to see or interview any of my participants because they were always working when I was not. I suddenly had weekends off and spent my evenings at home. They worked late into the night, partied after bar close, and spent mornings catching up on errands before doing it all over again the next day. Leaving the field, in the sense of leaving service industry employment and returning to the office world, put the sequestering and outsider mentality that I observed throughout my research— this feeling of alterity, alienation, yet also intense sociality— in stark relief. Indeed, I talked to some former industry workers who, despite having much better quality of life and pay in their white collar professions, almost always expressed some sadness about "leaving the industry." I often wandered what the big deal was; it was not like they actually moved away. I understand now something of what they mean. Ultimately, my leaving the field experience was less about traditional anthropological journeys of space and more about journeys of sector, status, and time. This distance helped me to put my data in perspective and do the analysis necessary to complete this dissertation, but it also left me with a feeling of ambivalence and sense of separation that I did not expect from a project that I still often hear described as "non-traditional" or "ME-search" because of its location in North America. Perhaps what my leaving the field experience ultimately showed was how illusory such distinctions actually are.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

This dissertation describes and analyzes cultural correlates of underemployment among college graduates working in the artisanal restaurant sub-industry. While this analysis pays close attention to the lived conditions of restaurant work, its primary focus is not restaurant culture,

but, rather, the subjectivity of my participants—their sense of self and place in the world. In the following chapters, I track how these young people make sense of social maturity in the face of downward mobility, re-ordering their identities amid anomie and incoherence. I ultimately argue that their experiences of underemployment are re-shaping understandings of middle class adulthood and the life course in the United States.

In Chapter Two, I begin my analysis by introducing the cultural world where my participants worked and socialized—the artisanal restaurant industry. After taking the reader through one of the gentrifying neighborhoods at the heart of the artisanal restaurant boom, I recount an afternoon with a group of underemployed restaurant workers and use this ethnographic vignette to describe a typical work week for my participants, outlining some of the key cultural norms, rituals, and characters of the industry.

I then explore a central fault line I observed among underemployed people in the industry: 1) those who were working and/or actively seeking work in white collar fields and 2) those who had (at least momentarily) given up on finding other employment. I describe two cultural phenomena that emerged among these groups, respectively: "shadow careers" and "lifer anxiety." Among those workers still actively seeking white collar careers, I show how restaurant employment served as a long-term safeguard against precaritization in their "real" fields. I term this particular work configuration a shadow career and argue that it is the largely unacknowledged backbone to entire white collar sectors colonized by gig work. Among those workers who had given up on a career outside of service, I describe the archetype of the "lifer" in the service industry and her high-status twin, "the career server." I follow how the underemployed tried to rid themselves of the lifer stigma of service industry work through tactics of class distinction that elevated career servers in artisanal, farm-to-table restaurants above the

lifers toiling in fast food or chain restaurants. I conclude that these inter-class tensions hampered broad-based labor activism among my participants, but then highlight how some underemployed workers did, indeed, advocate for initiatives that benefitted workers across the service industry. Their labor activism was rooted in a desire to "professionalize" the restaurant industry as a whole by increasing wages, eliminating tips, and re-framing service industry employment as a legitimate, middle class profession deserving of prestige and respect.

In the third chapter, I turn to my participants' preoccupation with adulthood and the life course to document how they understood social maturity and its links to the experience of underemployment. Through an analysis of work history narratives, I introduce three overarching patterns that emerged in my participants' stories of their coming of age: 1) adulthood as wealth and career prestige, 2) adulthood as self-knowledge and growth, and 3) adulthood as opting out of all of the above. In particular, I focus on themes of stasis in my participants' stories as they describe how the social and material conditions of underemployment hampered their own adulthood, leaving them in a kind of suspended state of development. I analyze this temporal discourse as a novel language for speaking about and critiquing class in the American context. I argue that, considered together, these stories of life course interruption and stasis suggest a particular kind of waiting room subjectivity among the underemployed, a liminal state of creative, but precarious agency.

In Chapter Four, I analyze the deep cultural value of individualism underlying the narratives that I document in Chapter Three and juxtapose this with description of my participants' household economies to show how their avowed individualism sat in ambivalent tension with robust relationships with others. I focused on the social tie that most troubled the underemployed: financial dependency on parents, and drawing on this finding, I argue that

adulthood for the underemployed was not just a matter of clearly-articulated criteria such as prestige, self-knowledge, or wealth, but was fundamentally relational, defined especially by evolving relations of exchange between parent and child. I argue that, among the underemployed, reaching legitimate adulthood meant a symbolically-loaded shift in the parent-child relationship, from one characterized by what Ferguson (2013) has termed "hierarchical dependency" to a highly idealized egalitarianism. Ultimately, I conclude that the idea of being disentangled from one's natal household functioned as an elusive criterium for social maturity—the product of a self-defeating mythology of individualism that fomented feelings of ambivalence and shame among my participants.

To conclude the chapter, I highlight an alternative to parent-child dependency that I found among the underemployed: fictive kinship or, what my participants often termed their "chosen" family. Using the example of a participant in a polyamorous household, I show that although dependency on one's parents carried stigma among my sample, this ambivalence did not necessarily carry into relationships with their "chosen" family. Colored by the deep individualism that pervaded my participants' thinking, fictive kinship relationships elevated individual "choice" and served as the virtuous alternative to the laziness and moral turpitude associated with parent-child hierarchical dependency.

Chapter Five focuses on the actual practices of social maturity—how the underemployed improvised adulthood despite their perceived shortcomings. I analyze the activities clustering around the internet meme "adulting" and describe the digital contexts in which my participants used this newly popular term. I analyze these adulting activities, ranging from bureaucratic miscellanea to consumption to self-care and party hosting, as enactments of social maturity emerging as young people improvised ways to mark adulthood amid shifting and incoherent

understandings of the life course. I argue that adulting and its accompanying practices are a unique product of the present historical moment, capturing the partial, in-progress quality of social maturity that is possible among the young precariat in the United States.

In Chapter 6, I reflect on the larger implications of this study and consider whether phenomena like adulting or the waiting room foreshadow broader shifts in the way social maturity is understood and, not just among the underemployed, but by an entire cohort coming-of-age in the aftermath of the Recession. I argue that their waiting room world may constitute one refraction of an emerging generational subject, born at the tail-end of a remarkable (and perhaps short-lived) era of shared prosperity. My participants confront precarity with a heavily individualist cultural repertoire, accented with nostalgia for an idealized past. Yet, large-scale economic events are testing this deep individualism. The American middle class, as both a cultural ideal and a social-economic fact, appears on the cusp of transformation. I argue that the underemployed may be showing us some new, ambivalent paths for agency out of the disorderly present.

CHAPTER TWO: INTO THE WAITING ROOM - SHELTERED/TRAPPED IN THE WORLD OF THE ARTISANAL RESTAURANT

This chapter introduces the cultural world of the artisanal restaurant industry and explores a central tension that surfaced during my fieldwork: the industry's dual role as both an escape route from *un*employment and an obstacle keeping workers *under*employed—"both a shelter and a trap," as one participant put it. I describe some of the cultural effects of this double bind among two groups in my sample: 1) those who were already working or actively pursuing employment in white collar fields and 2) those who had (at least for the moment) given up on finding other employment. I describe and analyze two key cultural phenomena related to class identity and work that emerge among these groups, respectively: the shadow career and lifer anxiety.

First, I introduce the urban setting and cultural life of the artisanal restaurant industry by taking the reader through an afternoon out with service industry workers in a neighborhood at the center of the artisanal restaurant boom in the Twin Cities: the North Loop. Then I turn to these two groups to trace how, among the contractors, interns, and other precarious workers still actively seeking white collar careers, restaurant employment sustains what they view as their "real" careers and serves as a long-term, stable bulwark against precaritization in their real fields. I term this work configuration a "shadow career" and suggest that it is an understudied but consequential feature of the contemporary labor market that reveals some of the unexpected entanglements of post-Fordist[15] labor with more traditional forms of employment. I argue that it is the largely unacknowledged backbone to entire white collar sectors colonized by gig work.

[15] "Fordism" is a term coined by Harvey (1989) to describe the model of benevolent consumer capitalism that emerged in the post-war United States. This model supported well-paying, long-term employment and is summed up in Ford's famous dictum that his workers should be paid enough to afford to buy the products that they make. Post-Fordism is a term Harvey uses to describe the "flexible" system of production that emerged in the 1970's, as the Fordist model

Among the second group, I describe the tragic figure of the "lifer" in the service industry and her high-status twin, "the career server." I follow workers' attempts to wrest service industry employment from its low-status lifer stigma, through tactics of class distinction. I conclude that labor market gentrification and subsequent inter-class tension largely undercut broad-based worker solidarity in the artisanal restaurant industry. Nonetheless, a small group of the underemployed personally related to the lifer figure and engaged in activism around minimum-wage raising campaigns and no-tipping policies that benefitted workers across the Twin Cities service industry. This labor activism was rooted in a desire to professionalize the restaurant industry by both increasing wages, but also re-framing service industry employment, and especially artisanal restaurant work, as a legitimate, middle class profession deserving of middle class respect and pay.

A WALK IN THE NORTH LOOP: THE HUB OF THE ARTISANAL INDUSTRY IN MINNEAPOLIS

It is another frigid day in Minneapolis, and the sun is blinding. The sidewalks are caked with that typical spackle of ice, snow, and dirt capable of cracking the bumper of a car parked too hastily. There is salt sprinkled everywhere, but it is too cold to melt anything. A motley forest of skyscrapers stretches up to the sky, carving out long, rectangular shadows that stretch across downtown as people in hefty coats walk with chilled purpose from building to building, faces barely discernible under scarves and hats. Not that I'm particularly interested in their faces.

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collapsed. Post-Fordism replaced stable, long-term employment with various forms of "flexible" labor, such as contract labor, outsourcing, and, most recently, gig work. These labor forms often entail lower pay and fewer benefits.

When it is this cold, a tunnel-vision like purpose can overtake you, and most everything else fades as you zero-in on that next destination that will get you back inside.

Major corporations like Target may call downtown Minneapolis their home, but it is not the kind of striking epicenter, full of grand boulevards, parks, water fronts, and tourists that you will find in other major cities like Chicago. The attractive, but modest downtown's most distinctive feature is a system of indoor pedestrian footbridges called the SkyWay that connects skyscrapers across the neighborhoods of Downtown West and Downtown East. Like other Midwestern city centers, many of the buildings look like they saw their best days in the 1970's. On the weekends, one can drive through downtown with ease, as workers vacate the city center to recreate elsewhere. Tax-payer subsidized sports arenas and public works projects around events like the Super Bowl have done little to attract business back into the core.[16]

Nonetheless, accelerating development in a few central neighborhoods has drawn activity and capital into parts of downtown that for most of the twentieth century were used for industrial warehouse storage and railyards. I am heading to one such neighborhood now known as the North Loop or "NOLO."[17] Prior to a re-branding in the last ten years, the neighborhood, bounded by Plymouth Avenue to the southwest, Hennepin Avenue to the northwest, and the Mississippi River to the northeast, was known simply as part of the Warehouse District, a grid of red brick warehouses and aging railroads that had fallen into disrepair in the 1960's and 1970's. The area had seen some resurgence as a center of the Minneapolis arts scene in the 1990's, accompanied by historical designations from the City of Minneapolis and the National Register of Historic

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[16]See news coverage in the *Star Tribune*: http://www.startribune.com/downtown-minneapolis-once-was-a-great-place-to-live-no-more/446939973/

[17] For more history of the North Loop neighborhood, see the neighborhood association's website: https://northloop.org/

Places that recognized the significance of its industrial-era architecture. In the early 2010's, a neighborhood association hired a local company to firm up the identity of this segment of the neighborhood, and soon the "North Loop" emerged, complete with a website, slick logo, and a sketchy origin story related to a name on an old streetcar map.[18]

North Loop is now the fastest growing neighborhood in Minneapolis, termed "the next Brooklyn" by *Minneapolis-St. Paul Magazine* in 2014.[19] Drawing affluent, mostly white, middle-aged professionals into the city core, it is part of a larger trend of gentrification in Minneapolis that continues to price low-income communities of color out of downtown[20]. The outer-rim of the neighborhood is buttressed by new construction simulacra of nineteenth century warehouses—five or six story red brick buildings with names like "Heritage Penthouses" or "The Foundry." As you walk to the center of the neighborhood, original architecture has seen expensive renovations with refurbished wood doors, facades scrubbed to reveal old painted advertisements, and wrought iron detailing. These buildings house lofts, boutique marketing firms, letterpresses, wedding and event venues, and of course, restaurants and coffee shops that specialize in everything that is hand-crafted, artisanal, and "local."

A quick walk down one of North Loop's warehouse-lined thoroughfares gives a sense of the artisanal business clusters that have come into the neighborhood along with the high-end apartments. There's Shinola, a high-end leather goods company (known for their $500+ watches)

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[18] See reporting in the *Minneapolis Magazine:* http://mspmag.com/arts-and-culture/general-interest/insider-s-guide-to-the-north-loop/

[19] See: http://mspmag.com/arts-and-culture/general-interest/insider-s-guide-to-the-north-loop/

[20] Gentrification is the term used to describe the process of capital moving into and sometimes displacing residents in low income, city center neighborhoods. See Brown-Sarcino (2010) for an overview of the vast sociological literature on the topic. For news coverage on Minneapolis gentrification, see: http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-is-a-leader-in-trend-toward-gentrification/268974471/

that has become the face of gentrifying Detroit, and Filson, an outdoor apparel company specializing in leather, twill, and wool products steeped in the heritage aesthetic currently popular among the upscale hipster set.[21] The men's store Askov Finlayson perhaps best embodies the aesthetic, regional, and class politics that pervade the neighborhood's revitalization. Specializing in high-end menswear themed around "The North," the store is owned by Andrew and Eric Dayton, sons of Democratic Governor Mark Dayton and heirs to the multi-million dollar Dayton fortune.[22] During the lead up to the 2016 Super Bowl hosted in Minneapolis, Eric Dayton emerged as the one of the most prominent voices around the re-branding of Minnesota as "The Bold North," a theme with an aesthetic that is tied both explicitly and implicitly to the Scandinavian ancestry prevalent in the region.[23] This theme is crystallized in the store's statement on The North:

> You're damn right it gets cold. And we wouldn't have it any other way. We don't endure it. We embrace it. Sure this place can be hard. It requires work ethic. And optimism. We're resourceful and we persevere. It's no wonder explorers are made here.
>
> We believe in teamwork, a collective spirit that binds us. Together, we overcome challenges. And we're better for it. From constraint is born creativity, which is the secret to our success. That, and good gear. Because there's no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing.[24]

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[21] As of writing, some of these businesses have given up on the high rents in the downtown and moved to the suburbs.
[22] Dayton's was the Minnesota-based department store that later became Target.
[23] Eric Dayton was interviewed in a 2016 *Wall Street Journal* article on the re-branding: https://www.wsj.com/articles/minnesota-embraces-its-terrible-weather-wont-you-too-1516582494
[24] https://askovfinlayson.com/collections/the-north

His story inventory plays this "by-the-bootstraps" theme in a distinctly luxe key with $190 decorative canoe paddles, $300 leather boots made in Red Wing, MN, $50 leather compasses, a $130 solid brass match striker, and $12 Swedish soap, among many other handmade products. Populated by high-end objects that evoke "glamping" fantasies[25] in the unspoiled outdoors, it is an imaginary of Minnesota rural life rooted in a bourgeois, Protestant whiteness particular to the upper Midwest.

Ultimately, however, the artisanal scene in North Loop is anchored not in luxury goods or outdoor apparel but in cuisine—in particular, cuisine that evokes the local, authentic, and hand-crafted. The Daytons own their own restaurant called *Bachelor Farmer*, which "serves fresh and simple food that honors Minnesota and the surrounding Northern region" relying primarily on local and organic ingredients. In 2014, award-winning chef Gavin Kaysen opened *Spoon and Stable*, a restaurant focused "on the seasonality of the Midwest" and "the roots of the local culture," to national acclaim. Local cafés specializing in fair-trade espresso peek around most corners. A boutique hotel in a newly renovated warehouse houses a restaurant that specializes in "hyper-local" sourcing and "is inspired by the bounty of Minnesota's lakes & woods." Menus offer items like heritage pork chop, boar sausage, heirloom beet salad, grass-fed burgers, pickled local ramps, morels picked in staff backyards, duck fat potatoes, and cocktails mixed with local aquavit. A full meal with drinks might cost $100 per plate.

So, who actually lives in this neighborhood? Neighborhood association statistics suggest that the typical resident of the North Loop is a wealthy, white, middle-aged professional.[26] A

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[25] "Glamping" is a neologism that companies the words "glamour" and "camping" and has been taken up by businesses that offer high-end camping experiences with fully furnished tents, cabins, huts, and other structures in a rugged environment. See: https://www.glamping.com/ for an overview.

[26] See: https://northloop.org/about/nl-families/

quick review of apartment listings show the average rent for a two-bedroom in the neighborhood is in the range of $2,500 per month, substantially higher than the city-wide average of $1,600 and much higher than the rents my study participants reported paying each month.[27] Although his labors may drive the aesthetic of the neighborhood, it is not the tattooed, bearded mixologist that lives in the North Loop, but the well-suited marketing executive or work-from-home entrepreneur with the expensive haircut. These two groups—the service industry workers and their white collar customers—define the sidewalk life of the neighborhood, as twenty-something servers with edgy haircuts and fitted black clothing intermingle with the neighborhood's business casual denizens and get to know their tastes intimately.

From the "farm fresh" produce that they feature in their menus to the "made-in-house" bitters that are sprinkled over their cocktails, what these artisanal restaurants have in common is that they cater to the bourgeois vision of rural, "northwoods" life popular among the affluent residents of the neighborhood. Marketing and menus evoke an idealized past of with-the-hands, manual labor. Yet this craft aesthetic is incorporated into warehouse neighborhoods that, ironically, date from the beginnings of mechanized, industrial production. "Elevated rustic," as one marketer put it to me, "that's what the neighborhood is going for, in terms of food, clothes, whatever. Hand-made processes, farm food done better. Mixing in a bit of the rural with the industrial urban." The predominant North Loop aesthetic is a haphazard collage of bourgeois fantasies about peasant and working class livelihoods. The artisanal restaurant cluster here is one manifestation of an emerging sub-industry whose reach is not isolated to the neighborhood or

[27] For Minneapolis rent data, see: https://www.rentcafe.com/average-rent-market-trends/us/mn/minneapolis/

even the region but can be found in nearly every major and mid-sized American city and increasingly in smallish ones.[28]

DAYS OFF AND ON IN THE SERVICE INDUSTRY

I have come to this neighborhood today to meet up with a group of servers who are bar crawling and dining around the North Loop on their day off. When I first started working in this industry, it seemed strange to me that workers would want to spend any of their few vacation days in the same stressful settings where they worked. But I have come to realize that a day off at an artisanal restaurant, dining and drinking at the bar while their friends are working, is a well-established ritual of service industry life. It is the primary place where workers gather and socialize. One participant described the process to me while grabbing a 1 AM beer after dinner service on a Saturday night:

> Sometimes I'm dropping in around bar close after getting cut [allowed to go home]. I wait around for other people to get cut and join in. Other times, I'm actually taking my Sunday morning to have an epic brunch when I know a good kitchen crew is on, and my friend is bartending.

Indeed, if one lingers late at certain bars and restaurants on a Sunday or Monday night, a rowdy, late night crowd of service industry people typically arrives, usually wired from the constant

[28] Ocejo (2017) describes a similar process in Brooklyn whereby an artisanal-focused economy accompanies gentrification. He argues that this process is partly driven by the new "omnivoric"—or high- and low-end tastes—now common among the middle classes who gentrify these neighborhoods. Unlike the elites of the past, these omnivores conspicuously consume ostensibly common place services and products—beer, barbering, whiskey, camping equipment—but, in the process, these products and services are elevated into "a rarefied cultural realm" (8). These trends have now extended far beyond trendy neighborhoods like Brooklyn and the North Loop, however. Artisanal restaurants, high end barbers, and craft cocktail bars can now even be found in mid-sized highway towns, like my own hometown in Illinois.

multi-tasking and heavy emotional labor that a busy dinner service uniquely requires. “I’ve got a shot waiting for you,” one participant texted while waiting for me to leave my own shift late on a Friday night. A typical post-dinner service Saturday night might start with shots, then a barrage of griping about co-workers and guests, and finally late-night stress eating. It would often end with wads of tip cash being thrown down to pay the bill (usually with an overgenerous tip), and multiple people driving home very drunk. For most, the next day would bring a hangover and some squeezed-in errands before heading to work again around 3PM. If you were lucky enough to have a day off, you might end up dining out somewhere later that night. To have two nights off in a row, the constantly sought after “holy grail” of service industry scheduling, was a luxury typically reserved for the most senior staff or people who were favored by the manager. Throughout this rhythm of leisure and work, alcohol and drugs were a constant leitmotif as workers numbed their lingering stress and amplified their relief after making it through another challenging shift. One bartender-turned-business-owner went as far as to describe service industry work as “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” without the money.[29]

An informal system of reciprocity undergirds this practice of dining out for service industry workers and sustains the collective life of the industry. As one participant remarked,

> It’s just nice to chill out, eat, and get drunk without being nagged for something. I get to actually try the food. I usually get a free drink because I know the person taking care of me. I do the same for them when they come in to see me.

A long-time server elaborated, “It’s pretty much standard to do it [give free food and drinks to fellow service industry workers]. That’s really your currency in this industry. It’s a good way to

[29] The *New York Times* recently featured an opinion on piece on alcohol abuse in the service industry: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/opinion/why-waiters-drink-and-why-it-matters.html

make friends and network." Many times, this practice was frowned upon but tolerated by management. Occasionally, people got fired for it. My interviewees, nonetheless, often cited this largely informal system of reciprocity as a key benefit of working in the industry and an essential part of building a sense of collective solidarity in the group. It was considered crucial in this reciprocal arrangement that service industry diners tipped well and were the best-behaved guests of all. "If a service industry person treats me like shit when I'm working, I literally talk shit about them to everyone," one bartender remarked. From another person, "I've honestly seen it jeopardize multiple hires. This industry is a small world." Perhaps the biggest taboo of all in this tight knit world of customer service veterans was to be a bad customer, yourself.

Among high-end service industry employees, dining, is not, however, just about socializing with friends, networking, or coping with the stresses of service work. It is also a crucial part of the job itself. Top servers in artisanal restaurants can explain in ways that are both technically excellent and deeply personal the differences in taste and composition between, for example, rye and bourbon whiskeys or Austrian and French wine varietals. They can comment on the seasonality of morels this time of year or weigh in on how the chef's bison tartare measures up to a similar option that their top competitor is now serving. They can tell you the origins of your organic, locally-grown heirloom tomato down to the farmer's name and sometimes even the plot of ground. They can tell you a crazy story about how they once got drunk with the owner of that brewery that you are interested in sampling from and got to meet the master brewer. With only a small amount of information from a guest, they can plan your multi-course meal down to the late harvest wine you'll be enjoying with your *pots de crème*. A person can best gain these skills through dining and drinking out, and the top servers that I knew were doing it constantly.

In this respect, service industry work, like many industries, also monopolized workers' leisure time. For many recent graduates, it was a way to avoid the social isolation that had come with leaving college and finding themselves single and unmoored from any robust social institution. Compared to the sterile, cubicle-lined worlds of their white collar peers, the rowdy, free-wheeling world of restaurant work was hyper-social. As one former server explained:

> Honestly, I love not working all the damn time, but I really miss that community. It's like how many places can you work in your 20's and 30's where there's a bunch of single, attractive, weird, outgoing people just having fun.

And from another industry veteran:

> Well, the people are usually hot. There's a lot of partying on and off the job. And it's basically, like [Anthony]Bourdain said—like being on a pirate ship. Honestly, why would you want to be in a boring office with Susan from Coon Rapids when you could be eating well, drinking well, getting big tips, and having fun with your friends.

This participant's pirate ship comment is revealing in that it pithily explains the particular social bonding that happens in the high-paced, high-stress environment of a dinner service. As one manager said to me, "Once you've been through the stress of handling 300 covers [individual guests] in the course of five hours on a Saturday night, then you become family, even if you kind of hate that person." Resembling more the time-compacted, high-wire stress of producing a play than the relatively predictable flow of office labors, service industry work is team-oriented work carried out under acutely stressful conditions that requires coordination between many people. In a "Steps of Service" manual that I received when I trained into my own service industry job, there were no less than forty steps of service in a full dinner, and that did not even include what happens in the kitchen. From start to finish, your dinner experience may pass through a host,

bartender, back waiter,[30] expediter, line cook, chef, manager, and server, all more-or-less working in concert. As in a pirate ship, this kind of stress often relaxes typical norms of politeness and the politically correct. Behind the scenes, there's cursing, criticism, and plenty of crying, especially if you are new. Yet, the intensity of these experiences, as in hazing rituals, tends to produce strong social bonds. In a world of antiseptic, structured working environments, the service industry was colorful, loud, and free from the constraints of most human resource-style rules and regulations. In such an environment, it is unsurprising that the boundaries between home and work bled together as workers increasingly spent most of their time with people in the industry.[31]

I walk into the lounge of one of the trendier restaurants in Minneapolis. It is a Monday afternoon, and at the bar, a few smartly-dressed business people are enjoying a "wet" lunch, but the crowd is mostly service industry workers eating and drinking on their day off. There are about eight or nine young people clustered around the chrome bar, chatting with the bartender as she samples out some of the new cocktails that she is working on. This is a typical scene, service industry people on their day off acting as a kind of focus group for bartenders and chefs trying out new recipes. Everyone passes around a small glass filled with an orange liquid—some variation on an Aperol Spritzer. They are all in their mid-twenties and thirties, most dressed in

[30] A "back waiter" is the more formal term for the position that most diners refer to as the "bus boy." It is usually the entry level way into dining room work and involves table setting, clearing, bringing out dishes, and assisting the server in other miscellaneous tasks.

[31] The loosely structured work environment of the restaurant is also a well-known incubator for serial sexual harassers. See the coverage of #metoo in the restaurant industry in *The Washington Post*: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/in-the-midst-of-restaurants-me-too-reckoning-female-chefs-grapple-with-what-comes-next/2018/06/11/110789fe-5304-11e8-abd8-265bd07a9859_story.html?utm_term=.f69ccb2cd0ad

various shades of black. Tattoos peak out from sleeves and low back shirts. This group is composed almost entirely of servers, with a few back waiters hoping to eventually get promoted.

Most of the individuals I spoke with in this study were very similar to this group—servers, back waiters, and other workers who were considered "front-of-house," (i.e. not primarily kitchen staff). The front-of-house focus of the sample reflects the particular boundaries of class and race that are prevalent in the artisanal restaurant world, where such workers were more commonly college-educated and white, compared to the working class, multi-ethnic diversity of the kitchen.[32] In both the Twin Cities context and the environment of the restaurant more generally, the mostly white, college-educated young adults that I studied were in a position of relative privilege. Few thought they would be working at restaurant at this point their lives. Yet, in the aftermath of the recession, they were finding their advantages fast eroding.

Kim, one of the lead servers at another top restaurant in Minneapolis, orders me over. "Here. Try this," she says, passing the orange beverage to me after it has passed through about seven or eight other mouths. Kim is a blond, thirty-something with a deep voice and bearing the dry, abrasive demeanor common in the industry. I once watched her make a host cry on her first day as she berated her in low, devastatingly flat tones for not waiting for the bread plates to get set before seating guests at her table. She is not somebody that, as a new person in this circle, I can easily say no to. I try the drink she has given me, tasting the characteristic botanical fizziness of the Aperol spritz, but with something else. It is noon, and people are already getting pretty drunk.

Karl, a lawyer-turned-server at another top restaurant, is sipping from a $30 glass of scotch. They are passing around plates filled with greens, tartare, and cheese. Another server is

[32] See Jayaraman (2013) and Ocejo (2017, 155).

passing around glasses from a bottle of bone-dry, Provençal rosé. Kim grabs a glass delicately from the bottom. She expertly swirls the wine around the bottom and sticks her nose deep in the glass to take a sniff. Other people are commenting on the smell. “Moleskin,” somebody says, and everyone laughs. Finally, we all take a sip. “Weird, but good,” Claire, another lead server and wine expert remarks. “This would actually be ‘bomb’ with the veal,” she says, referring to a new dish at her restaurant. There is a chorus of replies with other suggestions. Somebody does not really like it. I take her glass because it tastes fine to me, and this is how the afternoon proceeds. Two hours goes by, and we’ve tasted the entire bar menu.

Claire has wandered off to talk to some of the other staff back in the kitchen. She is well-known in this group for being something of a “social climber,” always “kissing the asses of the chefs,” as someone she worked with described her. Social, well-connected servers like Claire were adept at exploiting the prestige that came from working in the artisanal industry to gain status and connections, not only among chefs and owners, but also wealthy guests. Well-known for insisting on serving the most difficult, highest status guests in her restaurant, Claire knew intimate information about some of the wealthiest people in the Twin Cities, including drink preferences, paramours, addictions, and food allergies. Like many top servers, she kept some of this information stored away in a book with past meals, likes, dislikes, and ideas for future service. “For someone like Claire, it’s a big opportunity. While other people are afraid, she wants to get in front of these people and show them why they should know her,” one of her co-workers remarked.

I rarely observed these connections amount to anything more than a party invitation or an especially large tip. However, among the most ambitious servers, there seemed to be at least a hope that this job could help you “rub elbows” with elites, even if mostly in a subordinate

position. “They don’t really treat you like a real person,” one skeptic, a long-time server-turned-real-estate-agent in Milwaukee, told me. She continued:

> I served these people for years, and we acted like old friends. But if you see them outside of the restaurant, it’s awkward. It’s like they don’t expect you to exist outside of a service role. When I started in my real estate job, suddenly I would go to some of these parties that my former guests were at, and I was actually seen...but they honestly thought I was different person and treated me that way.

In her view, whatever hopes a server may have, they would rarely be able to break through the class divisions enacted every day in their work. For many guests, outside of the boundaries of the restaurant, their servers’ lives and goals were irrelevant.

Claire, with her upbeat personality and relative youth, did not agree with these kinds of class-laced critiques. She was a sales representative with a degree in business, who had temporarily given up her white collar job to work her way up as a top server. She saw service as a better path to meet colleagues and chefs who might eventually help her to start her own restaurant. As I watch her make the rounds among the kitchen staff in the back, I am reminded of how still and poised she is at work. A calm smile, hands typically behind her back, straight posture, a walk that is never too rushed, and a voice never too raised. I once watched her show a new host how to properly point out people in a restaurant without actually pointing with the fingers. Instead, you bend your elbow subtly, directing your arm toward the direction of the person but never raising your arm higher than waist, so as not to be seen. At another time, she showed a new back waiter how to carry multiple dirty dishes at once by pinning the edges tightly between the fingers. There might be twenty people waiting to sit down, five tables late on their next course, and a shortage on clean silverware, but you would never see that in Claire’s expression. She always projects calm, control, and confidence. I’ve watched her subdue even the

most opinionated diner into submission as she maps out a meal for them based on her expertise. In addition to her encyclopedic knowledge of food and wine, this tightly honed emotional and physical self-control is what distinguishes her, and other "veterans," from the less-experienced workers.

In our wine-induced haze, someone finally realizes that it's nearly 4 PM, and if we are going to hit another restaurant before heading to our dinner, we need to leave. "It's time to go," someone announces, and we start to gather our checks. Everyone pays in cash expect for me. They have spent nearly $600 just on this stop. For the workers that I studied, food was both the primary way to earn money and also the primary way to spend it. "This is almost a universal thing," an experienced manager once told me, "Service industry people, especially young ones, blow at least half their paycheck on food and drinking. It just goes right back into the restaurant industry." Their money also goes into large tips that are far above twenty percent, part of the rituals of reciprocity that I described above. While workers may get a few free drinks as part of this reciprocal system, much of those gains go into large tips that are viewed as not quite obligatory but expected.

Having now spent three times what I planned to on this trip, I sign my check and half-stumble out of the door with the group. Downtown office professionals walk by with briefcases and wool coats. It *is* a Monday, after all. As we wander forward, a drunken clump in a sea of coats, I am reminded of that constant feeling in the service industry that the rhythm of your life runs counter to the majority of people in the city. Your "Saturday" is their Monday. Their Friday is your "Wednesday." Your dinner shift is their big night out. Family weekends? That trip home for the holidays? Your friend's wedding? Forget it. Even if you wanted to take that time off (which you do not, because you would miss out on the busiest shifts and best tips), paid time off

in in the industry is very uncommon. Even if you are technically able to take a shift off, usually after weeks of lobbying management and searching for a replacement, you risk losing that shift permanently to someone willing to forgo holidays and weekends to earn extra money. Whether silent or explicit, the pressure to adhere to the manager's schedule is palpable. Holidays and weekends become flashpoints of ambivalence as workers are forced to choose between their paycheck size and quality time with their loved ones. In my experience, when you work in the industry every weekend event invite feels like a slight. As one underemployed participant remarked, "Of course I can't fucking show up on a Friday night to your stupid party. I'm at work, and none of my friends with so-called 'real' jobs ever get that." This disjuncture from the rhythms of the non-service industry world is what people complained the most about in my interviews and what some cited as their primary reason for wanting to leave restaurant work.

We meander forward through the cold toward the next stop. This day out started at noon for most of them and will last until at least midnight—a long binge of fine drinking and dining in preparation for the hard week of service ahead. "It's a cycle," one bartender and former colleague based in Milwaukee once remarked to me,

> …the drinking is a big part of it. You spend way too much money. You go out all the time. You wake up in at noon very hung over, go to work, and then start it all over again. The hard thing is it's honestly really fun, but very quickly you can find yourself thirty-five and still in service…I could have gotten out by now, if I had been able to work for free for a while. But I couldn't afford it and didn't want to be back with my parents. It helped me a lot to work in this industry, but I guess it's true what [another participant] said…that it can be a trap.

For many of my participants, the food and restaurant business saved them from unemployment. In a time when the "entry level" job for many fields had been all-but-been replaced by periods of low-wage, contract, or unremunerated labor in the form of "internships," the artisanal industry

offered them steady employment right out of school. It also gave them a new group of friends and an array of skills and knowledge areas.

Yet, it also trapped them. The difficult schedule and the obligatory participation in hard-partying culture distracted them from looking for other forms of work. Service work also meant long gaps in their work history because few people applying for work in other fields felt comfortable putting service industry experience on their resume unless required. Despite earning surprisingly competitive (though on average twenty percent lower) wages[33] compared to people who were employed in fields requiring their degree level, my participants reported rarely being able to save money and having, in some cases, no savings whatsoever. Where did the money go? According to one interviewee, "Student loans, car insurance, cell phone, rent, doctor bills, the usual stuff…and yes, drinking and going out to eat. Way too much on food." According to recent studies (Strada Institute for Work 2017, 2), each year of underemployment makes it more unlikely that a person will ever be employed in a position requiring their degree level. I found that time did indeed weigh on my participants, as they complained about being physically and developmentally "stuck" in service while also acknowledging the vibrant community of "misfit toys," as one person remarked, that they became a part of when they started that work.

Underemployment left my participants in a double-bind, caught between two seemingly bad courses of action: staying unemployed (and especially for those without family support, facing the challenges of abject poverty) or working in the service industry and risking being distracted from pursuing the careers that they trained for and usually still wanted. I found that my interviewees coped with this double bind in two distinct ways: working on contract or for free in

[33] See Strada Institute for Work (2017, 1)

their desired fields while continuing to support themselves through service or giving up on their white collar career altogether.

LIFER ANXIETY AND THE CAREER SERVER

Over half of the workers in my sample had, at least for the short-term, given up on finding work outside of the service industry. Among them were political science majors, failed English Ph.D.'s, aspiring journalists, and even a few general business majors who had attempted to find work outside of the industry but had given up for now.

Dan was an art major from the suburbs who had attended a major university in the region. He graduated in 2007 and hoped to get an entry-level job in graphic design in the Twin Cities. "I quickly learned," he told me one day during an interview at a coffee shop, "that the entry-level job is kind of an endangered species." Dan admitted to me that he had not done all the things that he "now knows I was supposed to do," like internships, networking events, and carefully crafted *Linked In* accounts.[34] "Our career center was literally in a trailer," he laughs, "You went there and flipped through phonebooks of internships." He goes on, "We were pretty clueless at the time. I think this was before it really hit our generation that you can't just get a job anymore…not with an art major." After a year of rejections and a few interviews that went nowhere, he grew tired of living with his parents one hour north of Minneapolis and decided to get a job to at least get himself out of the house, "At that point, it was between $12/hour at Enterprise [a car rental company] and potentially much more serving." He took a job as a back waiter at a new localvore restaurant opening in south Minneapolis where his friend bartended.

[34] See Gershon (2017) for an analysis of the changing ways that people get jobs in today's economy, including the expectation to market yourself like a business.

He applied for income-based repayments for his student loan debt that brought his payment close to zero and moved into an aging duplex with two friends from college.

"At first, it was tough getting used to service," he admits as he recalls picking up dishes, working eight hours shifts without breaks, and late nights biking home exhausted. Like many of the underemployed, he was uncomfortable with the asymmetrical hierarchies of service industry work. "Sure, in my restaurant you might be required to know fancy things like how to serve wine or where this meat came from, but when it comes down to it, you're just cleaning up other people's food scraps," he once remarked. The hierarchies inherent in service work, where phrases like "the guest is always right," are generally axiomatic, conflicted with the egalitarian, liberal ethos that middle class workers like Dan had grown up with, among the public servants, teachers, and middle managers that raised them. Like others, he often remarked about the "dirty" aspects of the job when describing this class-driven dissonance—cleaning the toilets, clearing scraps, slipping on food detritus in the kitchen, the mixture of human odor, dish soap, and cooking that mingled in the kitchen and lingered in your clothes.

Complaints about service work among the underemployed also coalesced around a central term: "being shit on." This term was used to describe moments when workers were treated poorly by customers during their work. As a piece of cultural discourse, such a term reflects a couched middle class critique of the entrenched inegalitarian relations between customers and staff that structure service industry working environment. Service workers mobilized the colorful language of human excrement to describe the experience of being shamed at work. Experiences like when they might be yelled at or poorly reviewed on Yelp created moments of class dissonance, when their own reduced positionings were felt most strongly. As one Milwaukee-based participant once told me, "Restaurant workers tend to have a more cynical

outlook on American culture. I mean, why not? You have to perform and beg for money from people, and they just squash you on the Internet, if they really want." Among the underemployed, this particular "structure of feeling," as Williams (1971) called it, emerged from the specific positioning of downwardly mobile service workers and the collision of their meritocratic ideologies with the realities of service work.

During his first year in service, Dan considered law school, even signing up for the LSAT, but he told me that he was too tired after work to study very hard. When the test date came along, he didn't show up. Since then, he's stopped actively seeking other kinds of work. Instead, Dan says that he is "embracing" the industry and learning "all he can" about food and wine.

> I want to try to take this seriously…try to make this like a "real" job for now. I'm going out and trying things. I'm meeting chefs and sometimes staging in the back [working for free in the kitchen]. I mean, [the restaurant that he works for] isn't like *TGIFriday's* or something. It's legit… I'm happy enough with what I'm doing now. Do I smoke too much [marijuana]? Maybe…It is depressing to not have a clear plan about how to get out, but I'm just being honest with myself... I'll get there. I don't think I'm quite ready to be a lifer yet.

Lifer. The word often came up often in my conversations with service workers, usually in reference to some person who they said had worked "forever" in the industry. When I tried to figure out exactly who a lifer was, people took real pleasure in sketching this restaurant archetype: she (usually, though not always, a woman) was typically an older person (sometimes haggard, often a smoker) who was over 40, had waited tables for years, had several kids, and did this as "her real job," or as one person said, "did this job to feed her family" and would probably be doing it for the rest of her life

In contrast to talk of "getting back to the land" or "doing work with the hands," this cultural archetype reflected a less-than-rosy vision of the working class than what I typically observed in the artisanal restaurant industry. Here was a figure whose biography, in many ways, was incomparable to the underemployed in my study. She was older, from a different generational cohort and entering the job market in a different era. She was born into the working class and had likely never attended college. Her tale was not one of downward mobility, of being "sucked" into service, as my participants feared would happen to them. Hers was a story of being *born* into service. Yet, she was also the projection of their greatest fear: underemployment so permanent and disastrous that the differences between the lives of the working poor and their own lives would be undetectable or irrelevant, all those fancy credentials rendered worthless.

Indeed, whenever the lifer topic came up, it was often quickly followed by an explanation of plans for how the worker would avoid her fate and "get out" of the industry. When I asked one person why everyone in the industry was so obsessed with "getting out," she replied: "Because this is, by definition, not a job you stay in forever. You DO NOT want to be the lifer." Other people described the industry as it if was some kind of dangerous force that could "suck you in." One person stated: "The lifer is the person that got sucked in and is now living in the bottom of the restaurant industry black hole… I wake up every day worried about this." Service industry careers were seductive, powerful, even cosmic forces with a gravity all their own. The often-brutal labor conditions and prestige gap that dogged restaurant workers reinforced the sense that workers were a few bad decisions away from being "sucked" in—or perhaps more appropriately—out, of the middle class.

The flip side of the lifer is someone often referred to as the "career server" among my participants. The "career server" is the attractive, educated, and entrepreneurial counterpart to the

lifer. She (also often a woman) is of a generation more similar to my participants—typically younger than the lifer or "at least looks good," as one of my participants described. Unlike the lifer, who has little actual interest or knowledge of cuisine, the career server is an expert. She would never work in the *Applebee's* or *IHOP* restaurants where the lifer is often found. Often, she has some kind of college education. She "knows a lot of people in the industry and probably wants to own her own business someday," the same person described. Chefs depend on her to sell their newest dishes. She "makes a killing in tips and doesn't give a shit that she doesn't have a normal person job," adds a bartender, "I've known many of these people here in the Cities. They make good money. Don't feel bad for them." The top career servers (or bartender) might end up on a local "best of" list, enjoying real local celebrity.

These two sides of the same archetypal coin reflect the class dynamics at play in the artisanal restaurant industry, where the histories of both the working and the downwardly – mobile middle class are colliding in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Dan hangs out with a clique of well-educated "foodie" servers that to some extent fit the archetype of the "career" server. Among the older, often non-college educated servers in their restaurant, he and his friends are considered snobs. Cheryl, a middle aged server and mother of three who commutes into the city a couple shifts a week to work at an artisanal restaurant, recounted to me a typical encounter in the industry: "We were training on some new wines that [the wine director] had ordered for the spring, and when I was doing a mock wine service for the manager, I happened to mispronounce some of the French words…I knew that they were making fun of me." Other workers described feeling left out or "looked down on" because they saw the job as chiefly a vehicle for money rather than a vocation. As one server wrote me shortly after quitting a job at a well-known artisanal restaurant:

> I'm here to make money. That's it. I'll learn what I have to learn, but I don't care about the difference between, like, west and east coast oysters. I'm not here to kiss the chef's ass…These hipsters are coming in here and ruining the industry.

This quotation reflects the tension that is emerging as the downwardly-mobile middle classes move into sectors that for many years were dominated by the non-college educated working classes. There is a kind of labor market gentrification that takes place as people like Dan move into the sector and bring their middle class privileges and ethos with them, reconfiguring norms in the industry and sometimes displacing working class people from tipped front-of-house jobs, like serving, that are relatively lucrative.

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) describes the unspoken dramas of taste and classification that play out as individuals jockey for power in a given social context. Taste emerges in his account as an embodied mechanism for signaling and reproducing one's place within a class hierarchy. Bourdieu writes that, "Taste is an acquired disposition to 'differentiate' and 'appreciate', as Kant says — in other words, to establish and mark differences by a process of distinction" (467). He goes on to say that, "The social agents whom the sociologist classifies are producers not only of classifiable acts but also of acts of classification which are themselves classified" (469). In other words, having an appreciation for French wines reveals more about the drinker than simply his taste in wine. It also silently signals and reinforces his cultural capital and, therefore, place in a class structure. Put another way, taste "functions as a sort of social orientation," Bourdieu (1984, 469) remarks, that locates individuals within a field of power based on the particular blend of cultural, economic, and social resources at their disposal.

Language proficiency and other forms of symbolic knowledge also function as vectors of cultural capital and class positioning, according to Bourdieu. As in Cheryl's complaints above,

being unable to pronounce French communicated something more to her colleagues than her face-value linguistic abilities. She described feeling demeaned, made lower in the eyes of better-educated "snobs". Her lack of knowledge showcased her impoverished position, relative to her more affluent co-workers, within a class structure that transcends the service industry. Although Bourdieu argues that much of these classification dramas play out below the level of consciousness, in her quotation above, it is clear that Cheryl understood she was on the losing end of this classification drama. And in a front-of-house position where linguistic delivery matters, she was disadvantaged by her lack of knowledge of French diction. Something that was effortless to an underemployed server simply because of her class habitus required serious preparation and work for Cheryl. Cheryl understood that these kinds of advantages made the difference between being scheduled for high volume, lucrative dinner service shifts or being relegated to silent, back waiter work on Wednesday nights.

For underemployed servers like Karl, Claire, and Kim, however, this labor market gentrification offers an opportunity to salvage some prestige from their failing careers. They spend their days and nights cultivating knowledge of expensive food and drink and building cultural capital through their expertise. They take on the aesthetics of the artisanal industry through embodied practices like getting tattoos and wearing expensive clothes and edgy haircuts. They develop a taste not only for $15 craft cocktails, but cheap beer like PBR. This high-low form of consumption signals that famed figure of privilege and downward-mobility that Cheryl evoked in her complaints: the "hipster."

In his article for the *New Yorker* (2010), Greif traces the rise of the hipster to the collision of 90's indie youth culture bohemians and "a new class of rich young people" in gentrifying

neighborhoods like Williamsburg, New York and Inner Mission in San Francisco (1). He argues that:

> fundamentally, however, the hipster continues to be defined by the same tension faced by those early colonizers of Wicker Park. The hipster is that person, overlapping with the intentional dropout or the unintentionally declassed individual—the neo-bohemian, the vegan or bicyclist or skatepunk, the would-be blue-collar or postracial twentysomething, the starving artist or graduate student—who in fact aligns himself both with rebel subculture and with the dominant class, and thus opens up a poisonous conduit between the two (1).

Among my participants, the hipster was generally understood in a similar way as above— a "hipper than thou" young person who, as Ocejo (2017) remarks, plays "intragroup status games" by cultivating both a taste for elite cultural phenomena as well as an ironic love of "low culture" (133). In the service industry, the term sometimes took on more specificity; hipsters were the affluent young people like my study participants who were trying to make an elite career out of traditional working class jobs like bartending or serving. For such workers, service offered the chance to piece together a sense of meaning, vocation, and skill by becoming an expert in haute drink and cuisine. After all, they weren't working at *TGIFriday's,* as Dan tells me. They were "legit."

The attitudes and class politics that developed among these aspiring career servers mirror some of the dynamics at play in Ocejo's (2017) study of bartenders, distillers, barbers, and butchers in New York as they crafted new kinds of prestigious careers from jobs that had generally been viewed as "bad" for most of the past fifty years (18). In his study, Ocejo describes paths that bring middle class workers into these jobs: 1) "the drifter," 2) the "career changers," 3) the "striver and culture seekers," and 4) "short stops on longer paths" (135-158). Drifters try out various jobs before committing to a long-term career in one of these trades (135), whereas career changers voluntarily come to the trades from established careers in other professions (147).

Strivers and culture seekers actively seek out these jobs because of an interest in the sub-culture of these trades (150), while short stops on longer paths individuals enter these fields often in lower status support positions (cocktail server or barback, rather than bartender) without any original intention of staying in a service career (155).

For Ocejo, what seems to bring at least the first three of these middle class characters together is that they come to these trades seeking meaning in their work and have the privilege to pick and choose (134). At first glance, my study participants largely conform to the fourth category, short stops on longer paths. Within the context of the artisanal restaurant, many are front-of-house support staff—servers and back waiters. They came to these jobs with no clear intention of staying long; many continued to work in other industries. Yet, Ocejo's terminology betrays a certain optimism about these detours that did not bear out in my study. While, for some, these stops might indeed be short, research on underemployment (Strada Institute for Work 2018, 8) has shown that with each passing year the chance of a longer detour increases. In addition, even among participants who had elements of drifter or career changer biographies (i.e. they came from more established careers or, like some of the aspiring career servers I described above, had a sense of cultural affinity with the industry that led them to make a conscious, long-term commitment in service), I found they were quite ambivalent about these paths. They likely would not describe their career change as "voluntarily" chosen. Some of my participants did end up committing to long-term service careers, but often after trying and failing for years to secure stable work in their desired fields. The line between an artisanal service career as a meaningful vocation and an undesirable diversion from their original plans was blurry. They committed to their emerging vocation with no small amount of disappointment and resentment.

For restaurant owners, this glut of highly-educated, underemployed talent was, unsurprisingly, a welcome surprise. Many told me that customers like to have their front of staff people seem "like them in education level." As another bar owner quipped when I mentioned the complaints of some of my working class participants, "Well, that 'hipster' is working his ass off. He knows his shit." What this owner does not mention is the insulation of familial support, cultural capital, and often racial privilege that these "hipsters" rely upon to know their "shit." Underemployed workers come to his restaurant already equipped with a valuable repertoire of class-derived knowledge and taste that help them to quickly become some of the most high-volume servers on staff. This owner attributed the success of his business, in part, to the quality of his front-of-house staff; a steady stream of college-educated applicants fit "pretty seamlessly" into his operation, he remarked. With little to no investment required from him, the economy in a sense subsidized his profits and growth. Ultimately, while the location, imagery, and philosophy of his artisanal restaurant co-opted working class livelihoods, it attracted the downwardly-mobile middle classes and offered them some of its best-paying gigs. Within this context of multi-layered gentrification, the career server emerged as the mirror image of the lifer, a reflection of workers' aspirations alongside their fears—downward mobility, aging, destitution, and addiction.

Nonetheless, a key subset of participants who had transitioned to service did grudgingly embrace the lifer term. In their responses to labor market gentrification, a class consciousness developed that was much more open to strategic alliances with other groups in the service industry work force. One server-turned-restaurant-owner responded when I asked who a lifer was: "It's me. I guess I'm a lifer now." Another server said she preferred the term "career server" not because it meant "that I'm better than anyone else, but because "it expresses how this is a real job for some of us…it is a career."

This group was part of a larger movement in the artisanal service industry to reframe their work as just as "professional" as the "9-5'ers" they so often served. Activists in the industry sometimes linked this prestige push to the successful minimum wage raising campaign in the Minneapolis area during 2016.[35] In the fall of 2017, signs started appearing all over the city's artisanal coffee shops and bars that price raises were underway to pay for employee healthcare. Other shops instituted no-tipping policies in favor of concrete wage raises for all staff, including untipped kitchen workers who were more likely to be immigrants without college degrees. One of my participants' workplaces taped a sheet of paper on the door after they instituted a no-tipping policy and subsequent price raise. The sign had a curt message: "Professional pay for professional work."

This cultural provocation was a clear attempt to alter the terms of what "professional" meant in the Twin Cities, driven in part by the middle class aspirations of the underemployed and their attempts to distinguish artisanal restaurant work from the rest of the industry. It represented one attempt to carve out a legitimate cultural space for themselves as respectable, middle class professionals in a city where white collar juggernauts like 3M, Best Buy, and Target dominated the landscape. Yet, these attempts to "professionalize" pay in the industry through wage increases, benefits, and movement away from the tipping systems that chiefly benefitted front-of-house workers also aligned with broader labor movements that transcended class and addressed the welfare of workers across the service industry. Among the plethora of groups involved in that campaign were many college-educated, relatively privileged artisanal industry workers that had, however ambivalently, embraced service as a full career and were building

[35] See *Star Tribune* coverage of the minimum wage raising campaign and its effect on tipping cultures in restaurants in the Twin Cities: http://www.startribune.com/for-chefs-and-servers-minimum-wage-hike-changes-tipping/483829541/`

alliances through the Fight for Fifteen and the SEIU against widespread reluctance (and often outright hostility) from restaurant owners.[36]

These labor-engaged, long-term underemployed embraced the "lifer" term with all its pejorative undertones and reported a kind of hybrid working/middle class identity accented with privilege guilt (both racial and class-derived). Sometimes they became involved in other progressive causes like the Black Lives Matter movement in Minneapolis or the Bernie Sanders campaign. Among the underemployed, this small subset, with their hybrid class consciousness and openness to broad-based engagement, represented a small corner of political engagement among an otherwise unengaged sample.

SHADOW CAREERS AND THE SERVICE INDUSTRY BACKBONE OF THE GIG ECONOMY

Living just a few miles away from Dan's restaurant, Sarah, 28, has not given up on her white collar dreams. In addition to having a degree from a prestigious Twin Cities liberal arts college, she is good—very good— at making margaritas. And they aren't your plebian variety. They come with juice from organic limes, some obscure salt that her boss tried one day at Whole Foods, and a healthy dose of bitters. As I watch her work during her shift at a trendy taco bar, she holds a jigger—an hourglass-shaped measuring tool—precariously between her fingers while dosing out liquor into a metal cocktail shaker. Next is the sound of ice poured and shaken while she looks at the tickets that have come up in the intervening twenty seconds since she started

[36] See this *City Pages* (2017) article on restaurant owner and server opposition to the minimum-wage raise: http://www.citypages.com/restaurants/servers-restaurant-owners-might-sue-minneapolis-over-minimum-wage-plan/429659643. Whether or not to institute a "tip credit," so that a worker's tips could count toward their minimum wage pay, has been one of the primary issues of debate.

making the drink. An older couple wants to know what mescal is, *anyway*. Somebody wants a bill. A server comes by and tells her that "some asshole" wants their drink re-made. She nods, then with a smack, a gentle pour, the help of a fine mesh strainer, and an herbal garnish that she lights on fire, blows out, and rubs on the sides of my glass, the drink is done, and she is onto the next. It has been about ninety seconds, which probably would be considered overlong in the "mainstream" cocktail world of bright green, straight-from-the-mix margaritas. But for the kind of "craft" beverages that Sarah traffics in, with their elaborate, labor intensive, one-at-a-time recipes, that prep time is good.

It is Taco Tuesday, and Sarah will probably be at the bar until at least midnight. Someone has called in, and for most of the shift she expects to be "in the weeds," a service industry phrase that evokes the explorer bushwhacking their way through the Amazonian rainforest, or in this case, the barely controlled chaos of a busy restaurant. Before she goes home, she will have her shift drink—usually a shot of *Fernet Branca*—to save herself the trouble of making yet another cocktail tonight, and then she'll de-brief with the servers and kitchen crew. Some nights they will all head over to a bar that serves food this late and burn off the stress of the past eight hours by getting roaring drunk. Not tonight, though. Tonight, she'll walk home to the 1890's house that she shares with three roommates and wake up at nine so she can get to her contract gig at a local art gallery. So begins her "real job," she tells me on a rare afternoon when she isn't either at the restaurant juicing limes or digging through the gallery archives.

Like other aspiring curators I had interviewed, Sarah was determined to hold onto the dream of a full career in a museum or gallery, even if it meant long years of service industry work on the side. She had spent the past three years working for free or nearly free as an unpaid intern at several institutions around the country. Now, she had secured a paid contract gig at a

smaller place in Minneapolis for about twenty hours a week. It had no benefits, low pay, and would probably only last until the summer, but it was something. She loved contextualizing the artifacts in the city's museums or coming up with ideas for exhibits that might say something subversive. She insisted that gallery work was her "real" job, something she could be proud of, something that was meaningful. But when I prodded her about what it meant that, of her two jobs, the non –"real" one was the only one that paid her bills, she laughed and said, "Yep," trailing off into silence and a shrug.

Sarah's story is just one glimpse into the so-called "gig economy,"[37] as it plays out not only in the well-documented app platforms like Uber, but also in the contract gigs that have colonized fields such as museum studies, law, journalism, and public service. Policy debates regarding the gig economy have often diagnosed its rapid growth as a consequence of stagnant wages, with the full-time employed turning to sporadic contract work—colloquially termed "side hustles"—to supplement dwindling incomes.[38] In this narrative, gig work serves as a secondary support for income coming from more traditional, long-term employment arrangements—for example, the elementary school teacher who Uber drives on the weekends or the young office worker who rents her condo to tourists. With contingent work now well-established as a structural feature of the American labor market, what are the limitations of this account? How can we more precisely theorize entanglements between the gig economy and other segments of the labor market?

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[37] See the "Gig Economy Datahub," a partnership between Cornell University and the Aspen Institute Future of Work Initiative: https://www.gigeconomydata.org/

[38] See Bhattarai (2018) in the *Washington Post:* https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/now-hiring-for-a-one-day-job-the-gig-economy-hits-retail/2018/05/04/2bebdd3c-4257-11e8-ad8f-27a8c409298b_story.html?utm_term=.03d26009f1da

For many young adults entering the job market with aspirations to become a reporter, curator, policy analyst, or even a lawyer at a solid firm, the beginning of their careers is defined by a lengthy period of precarious, contract employment—a "waiting room," as some of my participants have called it— for the "rest of their lives." For those workers who do not have financial means or family support to subsidize their wages while in the waiting room, more stable employment is necessary. Enter restaurant work.

Sarah's story also shows how the artisanal restaurant sub-industry has grown parallel to the gig economy. For Sarah and many others in this community, artisanal restaurant work functions as a kind of "shadow" career—a strand of stable employment that they typically do not acknowledge as "real" but that nonetheless props up other work in more precarious, white collar fields, often for five years or more. I call this activity a shadow *career*, rather than simply a second job for three reasons: First, this restaurant work is almost always the primary source of both income and any fringe benefits for these participants. Second, participants often spend significant time in the industry, with some working in service for five years or more. Third, this restaurant work comes with a trajectory of advancement compelling enough to sometime entice workers away from their "real" plans.[39] It is the largely unacknowledged backbone to entire white collar sectors colonized by gig work.

Workers employed in the service industry as a shadow career often reported living a "double life," between the "9-5" world that they still aspired to join and the service industry community that they saw as both sustaining their dreams, yet increasingly threatening their

[39] See Ocejo's (2017) "drifter" and "career changers" worker trajectories discussed earlier in this chapter.

ability to acquire that coveted "FTE."[40] Problems related to time—controlling it, segmenting it, finding more of it—loomed large for these workers. One political campaign contractor reported constantly having to battle with his restaurant manager over scheduling when election time approached. Another resorted to "a series of constant lies about my health" to navigate between his internship coordinator and his service industry boss. Others quit their restaurant industry jobs during busy periods only to come back again once a renewed contract or gig had fallen through. They relied on the relatively constant demand for experienced servers in the restaurant industry to insulate them from their capricious white collar sectors.

Shadow career workers had political subjectivities that tended to be more ambivalent and aloof from the struggles of service industry workers. Among the younger workers (one to three years out of college), they often reported feeling that they were "on their way out" anyway. One more internship, one more night course, one more contract, and they would move on. Among the longer-term underemployed, this attitude shifted toward frustration, self-loathing, and despair. When I met Jeffrey, a 30-year old barista at an up-and-coming local coffee roastery, he was adjuncting in English departments at a few colleges in the area while hoping to get a longer-term contract. Open adjunct jobs in Minneapolis were competitive and hard-to-come-by. A first-generation college graduate in his family, Jeff felt lucky to have three, but, as he said to me once, "I have a degree from [a top international university], after all." But as the years went on and the longer-term contracts never came, Jeff had grown disillusioned with academia. He had stopped work on a book, and his sixty-hour work weeks were beginning to give him premature gray hairs, he claimed. He despaired that he would never meet a partner. He simply did not have the

[40] FTE is an acronym for full-time employee. This was especially used among individuals working in public service or the non-profit sector, who struggled to find non-terminal, full-time employment.

money to go out on a date, he said. “Honestly, academia is a fucking disaster,” he said to me one day as we talked at his coffee shop. He complained about how the “customer service mentality” from barista work was “infecting” his brain, affecting his interactions with people outside of the industry:

> Basically, you just have to be a blank slate for the customer. Like I have customers that I see from time to time outside of work, and I find myself in service industry mode. I’m this docile, overly nice person who’s opening doors and letting people cut in front of me and stuff. I’ve started consciously trying not to do this now. The customer is NOT always right, as everyone in the industry knows.

A few months later I tried to reach out to Jeff again and heard nothing. I later heard that Jeff had just stopped showing up to work one day. A mutual acquaintance heard that he had cut ties from his classes mid-semester and moved with a woman he had known for only two months to Alaska in his car. A few months into the trip the relationship soured, and she had returned to the Twin Cities and had no idea what he was doing to earn money. He did not return, and no one that I know has heard from him since.

During my fieldwork, most of my participants continued to work in dual careers like Sarah’s, holding out for that full-time position “that miraculously doesn’t have an end date,” as one participant once said. Jeff’s path, however, reflects another outcome that I occasionally observed during my year: despair, giving up, and sometimes disappearing altogether. Leaving behind their leases and occasionally even their possessions, some of these participants literally fled from their double lives. Only two people in my sample ended up securing stable enough work in their white collar fields to leave service during my research. Tellingly, neither of these individuals actually got that coveted FTE. They just got better contracts that paid more. One married a teacher who enjoyed a more stable career with benefits that allowed him to leave

service.[41] Despite finally "getting out," they both continued to worry about being forced to go back. "Honestly, I'm basically one failed grant from getting sucked back into the industry," one said. For many, it was unclear whether their shadow careers were truly over. As one manager said to me when explaining why she never got sad about employees leaving so often, "Once they're in, they tend to come back." Her comment begs some questions: will shadow careers become a long-term, structural part of the labor market? Or are they just a post-recession anomaly? With contract work now a major part of the American labor market across many sectors (Katz and Krueger 2019) and wages stagnant despite strong economic growth (Desilver 2018), this manager's prediction may not be so far-fetched.

While it might be easy to dismiss the restaurant industry as only peripherally relevant to college-educated workers and white collar sectors, my study points to a closer symbiosis. No longer is the highly educated server just another actress, poet, or artist waiting tables until they "make it big." I found journalists, lawyers, non-profit managers, academics, graphic designers, and public servants sheltering within restaurant work that, in an ironic twist, was much more stable and offered better pay for younger workers than opportunities in the "middle class" fields they trained for. In reaction to this finding, one of my participants exclaimed, "When the restaurant industry is a safe haven…the only entry-level job for someone with a college education…you know we're living in an upside-down world."

It is important to note that the most recent major study of underemployment found that most post-Recession college graduates obtained employment matching their education level within five years (Strada Institute 2018, 11) Yet, these outcomes differed markedly depending on major, with STEM majors consistently outperforming non-STEM majors, especially within the

[41] For an account of the spousal dynamics of precarious work, see Lane (2011).

fields of engineering and computer science (20). Underemployment rates for majors within fields like biology, education, health and human sciences, liberal arts, public administration, humanities, and psychology were over fifty percent in the first year and over thirty percent five years later (21). These numbers suggest that the idea that the restaurant industry is the new entry-level employer for college-educated workers —and the source of income streams holding up entire sectors of white collar work—is not merely paranoia.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have explored the dilemma that faces the underemployed as they choose between two seemingly bad options: 1) unemployment and/or unstable contract work in the fields that they trained for or 2) underemployment and job stability in the restaurant industry. I compared the experiences of two sub-groups within my sample: those restaurant workers who have given up on finding employment in their desired fields for the foreseeable future and those who continue to work precariously, for free, or on contract in their chosen fields while they primarily support themselves through restaurant work.

I traced some of the differential cultural effects of this double bind, focusing on two primary phenomena: “lifer anxiety” and “shadow careers.” Among workers who continued to pursue their white collar careers, I observed a surprising symbiosis between the restaurant industry and other sectors by way of gig and contract workers who primarily supported themselves through service industry employment. Workers who straddled these different sectors through “shadow” service industry careers reported the feeling of living a double life between the world of “real, 9-5” jobs and the service industry. None of my participants secured full-time, non-terminal work within their chosen white collar sector by the end of this study. Those who

made enough money to leave the service industry feared that the chronic instability of their white collar fields would pull them back in.

On the other side of this dilemma, those workers who had given up on their white collar dreams coped with the looming threat of downwardly class mobility, personified in the archetype of the "lifer," a haggard, old, and drug-addicted distortion of the life-long service worker. Out of these fears emerged various tactics for elevating artisanal restaurant work above the dreaded fate of the lifer, in part, through emphasis on her entrepreneurial, middle class twin: "the career server." In conjunction with these subtle forms of class distinction within the artisanal industry, I observed a kind of labor market gentrification, in which the underemployed displaced non-college-educated workers from higher-paying, tipped jobs in the front of the restaurant. Subsequent inter-class tensions often undercut any potential solidarities that might emerge between the college-educated and non-college educated within the industry. Nonetheless, a small subset of underemployed workers identified with the "lifer" figure and collaborated with a broader coalition of industry workers through the Fight of Fifteen campaign in Minneapolis and the push for non-tipping policies that emerged in 2016. This labor activism was undergirded by an overall drive to recraft the image of restaurant work, and in particular artisanal industry work, as a career, deserving in middle class wages, benefits, and prestige.

Beyond these effects on career structure and class identity, the double bind of underemployment was also associated with more fundamental shifts in worker identity—particularly around social adulthood and the life course. For my participants, social maturity was inextricably intertwined with career outcome. As underemployed people, were they children, adults, or something else? Ultimately, the shelter/trap of the service industry produced a

subjectivity of stasis in these college-educated workers, undergirded by a sense of developmental and temporal disruption. This is the topic I will explore in the following chapters.

CHAPTER THREE: ORDERING DISORDERED CAREERS - NARRATIVES OF ADULTHOOD AND DOWNWARD MOBILITY

This chapter explores how the underemployed made sense of themselves within a life course. As my participants approached the age of thirty, that approximate gateway to "middle age" within contemporary American culture, how did they understand their own social maturity (or lack thereof)? As I asked in my interviews, were they adults? What did that mean anyway? Through an analysis of work history narratives, I explore how these understandings of their own social maturity may be linked to career outcomes and, in particular, the social and material consequences of underemployment. How did the underemployed order the disorder of their college-to-career transitions through narrative, and how did these narratives intersect with their understandings of the life course and its rhythms?

Ultimately, my participants work/adulthood stories touched on a broad array of subject matter ranging from planetary movements to pop psychology to classic neoliberal themes of choice. What these narratives had in common is that they all struggled with linear models of progress, especially as applied to work and aging. In my participants' stories of career and adulthood, there was recursiveness, stasis, and circularity alongside gradual, stage-driven change. Time as narrated by the underemployed could leap, freeze, race, slow, turn around, and fast forward. I analyze this mixed temporality as a novel language for speaking about class in the American context and trace how these narratives only partially penetrated the structural factors that contributed to my participants' struggles, quickly folding into assertions about choice and individual fault. I then sketch the particular subjectivity that emerged out of these narratives: the waiting room.

WHO IS AN ADULT, ANYWAY?: THE DISORDERED STATE OF SOCIAL MATURITY IN THE U.S

The noun "adult" is of recent origin and, until the twentieth century only existed in a few languages in the world. It first appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1656, with the word "adulthood" following much later in 1870 (Côté 2000, 13). According to *Oxford*, the word derives from the Latin *adultus*, meaning "grown up, mature, adult, ripe" and was not commonly used until the mid-seventeenth century. Cheryl Merser (1987) remarks about this recency in her landmark study of the subject:

> In preindustrial Western culture, there was no such thing as adulthood. Strange as that may seem, there were no adults…You were a man or a woman if you weren't a child, that's all, and the difference for men was one of size, age, and physical capacity; girls became women when they became fertile (52).

As Côté (2000, 14) later notes, it appears that, at least in the Anglophone world, such differentiations in the life course emerged in tandem with social, technological, and institutional shifts that accompanied modernity, including rationalization, the industrial revolution, and the lengthening of the human lifespan. For other authors (Brewer 2005), adulthood was especially linked to classical liberalism and its ideals of citizenship that differentiated fully "reasoning" citizens from those excluded from full political participation in a society, including women, people of color, and children.[42] Unlike older models, classical liberalism situated the criteria for childhood, as compared to full adulthood, in the inability to reason rather than through a principle of obedience to authority (monarchical or otherwise). In that sense, it can be argued

[42] Though as Durham (2017) notes, outside of the political sphere, women may have had higher claims to adulthood than men, primarily defined in the domestic sphere and in terms of an idealized morality (9).

that adulthood was predicated on an exclusionary principle from its onset, and, as recent authors (Durham 2017, 9) have stated, this exclusionary principle also endowed adulthood with a privileged status and desirability to those it excluded.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, adulthood and other differentiations of the life course also emerged alongside stadial[43] models of change that dominated theory across many different disciplines. Stadial temporalities modeled change as a progressive, linear journey through stages. This evolutionist thinking, with its emphasis on non-reversible, forward progress, continues to undergird much of how contemporary Americans understand the life course. Yet, as anthropologists have shown through a range of case studies in non-Western contexts, (Johnson-Hanks 2002; Gottlieb 2004; Durham 2004; Solway 2017), the linear, stage-based model of the life course is but one possibility among a range of others found among human societies.[44]

While anthropology is only just beginning to tackle adulthood as a cultural phenomenon worthy of study in and of itself (Durham 2017, 6), sociologists have been concerned with adulthood, and especially the idea that somehow it has become unattainable or "delayed," since at least the mid-1960's. Social historians situate the apotheosis of the adulthood idea in the mid-twentieth century, alongside post-war government programs that supported the nuclear household, higher education, and homeownership (Côté 2000; Furstenberg Jr. et al. 2005). The

[43] Stadial schemas are stage-based models of change. Hegel (1807) is often cited as the father of stadial theories of history. Such theories became more widespread during the Enlightenment and underpinned the work of Marx (1867) and social evolutionists like Tylor (1871) and Morgan (1877), who adapted Darwin's (1859) theory of human evolution to the study of human cultural development across time. They conceived of culture as a progressive, uniform process from simpler to more complex stages.

[44] See Durham and Solloway (2017) for case studies of non-Western models of the human life course and adulthood. In her "anthropology of modern time" research program, Bear (2014) addresses related issues by proposing a revived study of the different models of time circulating in modernity.

traditional markers of American adulthood that my participants often referenced (completed education, household, and career) emerged in the post-war era and were probably only achievable by large groups of Americans during that time. Backed by the power of the welfare state, these criteria went on to define the parameters of adulthood for a generation of Americans, although, as Durham (2017, 2) remarks, adulthood appears to have been a relatively unmarked cultural category at the time. As such criteria have become elusive again for many Americans, however, we have seen growing debate around adulthood and concerns about whether it is, in fact, possible for many young people to reach these milestones.[45] Such anxieties are rampant not just in Euro-American contexts, but in various contexts throughout the world.[46] As I will argue in this chapter, these debates do not just reflect concerns about the life course and its stages. They also index concerns about class mobility and diminished democracy in an increasingly unequal society.[47]

Today, though the concept continues to generate daily headlines, adulthood is a vaguely-understood idea with many Americans unable to define it though they admit using the term often (Arnett 1994; Côté 2000, 48; Durham 2017, 8). Such an incoherent yet controversial cultural concept is ripe for anthropological inquiry, and in the United States, that call has largely been addressed by qualitative sociologists. Jennifer Silva's study *Coming Up Short* (2013) is one of the most recent examples of qualitative study of adulthood in the United States; through

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[45] See a discussion from the U.S. Census Bureau (2017): https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/young-adult-video.html. See also an article from *Forbes* (2014) titled, "Where Have All the Grownups Gone? Why Adulthood as We Know It Is Dead?: https://www.forbes.com/sites/jmaureenhenderson/2014/09/22/where-have-all-the-grownups-gone-why-adulthood-as-we-know-it-is-dead/#2f6d6dbe7525

[46] See Durham (2004); Durham and Cole (2006); Jeffrey (2010); Mains (2013). These authors largely discuss these changes within the broader context of globalization.

[47] Here I draw from Durham's (2004) foundational theory of youth as a "social shifter" in Botswana.

interviews with working class adults in Virginia and Massachusetts, she finds that, in an age of economic insecurity, adulthood is increasingly being framed in terms of psychological strength and self-management rather than through the mid-century markers of the past. In short, "grit" has replaced education, marriage, and career. Her work aligns with earlier findings from Arnett (1994) and others that emphasize individual rather than family-focused criteria, framed in the language of psychology and self-actualization.

My project focuses on a more affluent segment of the population than Silva's. My participants' lives were not significantly impacted by family trauma, addiction, or economic insecurity. Quite to the contrary, they described placid, privileged childhoods with high expectations for the future. Yet, these college-educated children of the professional class showcased many of the same worries about the elusiveness of adulthood as the young factory worker.

NARRATIVE 1: BECOMING A "REAL PERSON"—MONEY AND PRESTIGE AS ADULTHOOD

Karl starts out his story: "Let's not be idealistic about this…you need money to do pretty much anything in this world." He is a loquacious, thirty-something lawyer from the Midwest who had the bad luck of graduating during one of the worst hiring downturns in the history of the legal profession. [48] Saddled with debt from a mid-to-low ranking law school in the area, he worked as a temp attorney at a large outsourcing firm for a few years after graduation but found the commute "mind-numbing" and the instability of project-based work unacceptable. During

[48] For media coverage of the legal field's underemployment crisis, see Weissman (2013) in *The Atlantic*: https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/04/the-jobs-crisis-at-our-best-law-schools-is-much-much-worse-than-you-think/274795/

those years, he also waited tables to help pay off his six-figure debt. He found that, on good nights, he was making more in the service industry than law. “I didn’t feel like I wanted to die at the end of the day, so that was a plus,” he says dryly as he discusses why he is “taking a break” from the temp firm to serve full-time.

As an engaging conversationalist and “born charmer,” as one manager put it, he is a talented server who has risen quickly at a top restaurant in the area. Karl is especially skilled at wine service. He has an uncanny ability to predict exactly the kind of wine someone will order based on only a few moments of interaction, and he will almost always successfully sell them on something better (and more expensive). His specialty is “desperate housewives,” he once remarked to me, “not because I’m good looking…but because I know my rosé.” On a good Saturday night, he might make $300-$400 in tips. Yet, despite the income he has generated from this “shadow” career, he is unequivocal when I ask him my standard question, “Are you an adult?”

> No. No, I’m not, at least in the sense that I’m a “real” person—that I have my life together and have a “real” job… I’m getting old, which is depressing, but I don’t have all the stuff you’re supposed to have when you’re getting old.

When I follow up by mentioning the amount of money he takes home from his job in service, he replies,

> Ok, first of all, it’s not that much money, not every night. That’s like a good night…An average twenty-two year old broker in this town sits around at the office and watches You Tube all day for that much money…I hustled for that…Sometimes I literally clean up people’s old food “goop.” That is my fucking job…no matter how nice the restaurants get, it is dirty work.

He goes on:

> I don't get paid time off or benefits…somehow the restaurant industry still hasn't figured this out. And even if I wanted to take time off, I'm going to lose money because if it's around a holiday, those are big volume days for us…I have not gone home for Christmas in literally four years.

Despite being popular at work and very social, Karl says he is most afraid of ending up alone. "Literally, what do I have to offer someone?" he asks me when we start to talk about whether he expects to have a long-term partner or get married someday:

> Despite the big stacks of cash that you say I'm always bringing home, I don't have a lot of money. I've got debts. I don't have the car and the house. I'm fat because half of my job involves eating and drinking way too much…

Karl believed that adulthood might come to him when he finally "pulled his shit together" and got hired at a real law firm, something that he was still working on in his spare time. He was considering going back to his temp firm and putting up with the lower wages in hopes that continued work in law, however unstable and low-paying, was the best path toward a secure job as an attorney. For Karl, service could never really be a "career," primarily because it lacked prestige, but also because there was little room for long-term promotion and salary growth. In a few short years, he had become a top server at a high-end restaurant. "Where do I go from here?" he asked me,

> Nowhere…you get out…A manager once told me that, in service, you give yourself a raise [through earning higher tips]. For once, I want my employer [not the customer] to actually pay me.

Notions of adulthood among the college-educated underemployed were inextricably tied up with their concept of work and career. Their stories of adulthood were stories of accumulation, not just of wealth, but also of prestige—achieved through a long-term, stable

career in a field that required a college degree. For these children of educated professionals, adulthood was primarily defined by maintaining class status—of achieving lateral mobility across generations.[49]

During interviews, one of the first questions I asked was simply, "Are you an adult?" This question was reliably met with a long-winded answer that boiled down to some version of "yes and no." Yes, regarding biological adulthood (generally understood as being over age 18). No, regarding social adulthood (meaning being a legitimate, fully mature member of a society). When asked what exactly it would take to become an adult in their view, I heard a plethora of answers that usually amounted to professional, "respectable" work and especially money. As one English adjunct-professor-turned-barista put it, "Marriage, family, house, car…all that stuff takes money. It takes money to even go on a date. I honestly cannot go on a date because I just don't have the money to buy a girl a drink." The only participants that seemed to have few qualms about their own social adulthood were the few who had children. Ultimately, parenthood was the primary feature that could trump money and prestige in the hierarchy of adulthood characteristics.

For the underemployed, the idea of professionalism or respectability hinged on the relationship of that job to a college degree—namely, did the job require a college degree and/or was it a legible step within a trajectory toward employment that required a college education. A teaching assistant position in graduate school? Acceptable. A manager at a rental car company? Not acceptable. An insurance agent? Borderline, but acceptable. An executive assistant? Depends. Is it an informal stepping stone to being the boss? Sales associate? Unacceptable. A

[49] See Hughes (2017) for a case study of adulthood conceived as upward mobility among youth in Sri Lanka.

stock broker or financial advisor? Software engineer? Doctor? Lawyer? All ideal. Server, barista, or bartender? Unacceptable.[50] These answers were remarkably consistent, and, with the exception of an entrepreneur or business owner, almost always hinged on credentials. Within a story of accumulation toward adulthood, work had to align with level of education. Post-secondary degrees (and the provisional accumulation of cultural capital that came with them) had to have a logical place within a narrative premised on further accumulation. For my participants who almost universally felt "abnormal" or "out of place" in their life course trajectory, in a "normal" adulthood story, college education was a necessary prelude to an adult career that resulted in long-term, robust accumulations of economic and cultural wealth.[51]

Bourdieu (1986) remarks on the "risky" nature of transmitting cultural capital across generations and the precarity of credentials as an institutionalized form of cultural capital. He remarks that a degree's convertibility into economic capital is, among other things, subject to principles of scarcity on the labor market (26). Among the American middle classes, the value of education remains (alongside some recent debate[52]) an economic and moral truth—the deep "common sense" upon which meritocratic claims rest. Among my sample, the value of education was a largely unspoken norm, shared widely by my participants. Yet, their own failures to "convert" their credential into wealth and prestige stood as a specter—a counter-story of the

[50] This list is not meant to be comprehensive but provides some examples of "adult" and not "adult" professions, as judged by my participants.
[51] The importance of cultural capital or economic capital in "adult" careers varied, with some participants valuing lower paying jobs, such as those in academia, that resulted in higher cultural capital.
[52] This common sense has shifted in the aftermath in the Recession, in no small part because of stories like Karl's. The value of education is now something that has been contested in the public sphere from a variety of angles—economically, morally, and politically. However, when my participants were growing up, attending college, and first entering the job market, many of these cultural conversations about education had not yet entered the public sphere.

value of education, stoking their own feelings of anomie[53] and stigma. They had fallen "off the wagon," as one participant remarked, and their very existence "reminded my parents of their failure." As another participant with two first generation college graduate parents remarked, "I am a walking-talking reminder of how everything my parents believed about the world was wrong." In Karl's case, he had grown up with the belief that a law degree was a reliable path to middle class adulthood. When his degree failed to produce a result that fit this deep cultural narrative, his adulthood story went awry. "The whole thing short-circuited," as he said. Being a server, no matter how much money he made, would never make him a "real" adult. Ultimately, his vision of adulthood was predicated on his graduate education playing a meaningful role in future accumulation of both wealth and prestige. All three elements had to be present in his history for him to be able to really consider himself "on track."

In interviews, when we reached the point when my participants' adulthood narrative "short-circuited," language began to boil down into talk of the "real." For example:

> "When I have a 'real' job…"
> "Someday I'll be a 'real' person…'"
> "One day, when I have a 'real' life…"
> "You mean, why don't I have a 'real' person job?"

Who were real people? People who had money. People who had "good jobs." People who could "afford a down payment" or pay a car loan off without asking their parents for money. People who "didn't live pay check to paycheck." People who could "basically have kids tomorrow and not fall into total financial jeopardy." People who "know what an IRA is" and have a plan for retirement. People who buy new clothes every season, go to the dentist, and get regular haircuts.

[53] Here I am borrowing the term *anomie,* meaning a condition of normlessness, from Durkheim's famous book *Suicide* (1897).

These are just a few of the attributes of "real" people that I observed in my interviews. In these conversations, reality language was used in a self-deprecating way, as if it to align their sense of humor with the "joke" that they felt they had become among their families and peers.

In their call for an anthropology of the "real economy," Neiburg and Guyer (2018) state that these enactments of the "real" in contemporary debates about the economy "are linked to concepts of truth and moral values" (1). Their theory grows out of an interest in the financialization of the American economy and, therefore, has primarily addressed how markets, money, and various financial instruments are framed and enacted as "real" or "not real" in everyday life.[54] What this work does not yet address is how people are also translated into "real" or less "real" entities in the context of today's financializing economy. For my participants, adulthood was not "just" about achieving social maturity—of reaching a particular social status—it was about having a social existence altogether. To be "real" for my participants was to fit into deep cultural narratives that linked higher education with accumulation. It was to fit into a particular set of intersecting cultural schemas—one of a progressive, stage-driven life course and one of the American economy, divided into "real" jobs and the rest. These schemas intersected at key points of transition, as when employment in certain sectors of the American economy accompanied social adulthood or when exiting the job market at retirement signaled the middle class elder years. To be unreal was to not fit—to be "out of order" within these linkages. Delivered in a key of self-deprecation and humor, this language of reality and unreality nonetheless signaled serious existential stakes for the underemployed as they pursued adulthood. To be "unreal" was to be misaligned with the social rhythms of the life course—to be "stuck," as many of my participants would go on to say, caught in a state of unreality—a waiting room of

[54] See Maurer (2012) for a review of the anthropology of finance.

until their "real" lives began, until they "got their shit in order" and their story came closer to fitting their parents' and peers' visions of how the life course should proceed.

Temporality—of the life course and of subjective experience— is an essential dimension of these narratives. In these stories of underemployment, multiple understandings of time co-exist and collide. Time emerged as a central language through which the underemployed could talk about topics like social class and downward mobility that, until recent years in the United States, have been largely muted.[55] I will further explore this theme of temporality through a second narrative that developed out of my interviews: adulthood as self-knowledge and self-actualization.

NARRATIVE 2: THE "SATURN RETURN," NEW AGE-IST ADULTHOOD, AND THE LANGUAGE OF TIME

Michael grew up in a wealthy suburb of Minneapolis, not far from Prince's well-known compound, Paisley Park. He is the son of a successful realtor and has a degree in art and English from a prestigious liberal arts school near Minneapolis. It is his thirtieth birthday, and, after multiple texts from his friends, we've convinced him to come out and celebrate at a small Japanese restaurant in St. Paul. A pot of green tea arrives at the table. Michael picks up the cast iron, elaborately-decorated tea pot and smiles, "One day, when I have a real life, I mean, a place I actually want to live, I'll get this kind of stuff." Indeed, Michael often describes himself as an "accidental tea expert." He graduated in 2009, during the Great Recession, and, after a year of

[55] See Cobb's (2016) comment in the *New Yorker* about the discussion of class in the 2016 election and how "Americans and their candidates are both out of practice."

looking unsuccessfully for work in graphic design, he found himself behind the counter at a tea shop on the city's gentrifying Northeast side, working for near minimum wage.

Six years later after graduation, I met Michael in a Minneapolis bakery close to a new workplace. After leaving the tea shop to take a job at a tea start-up in 2012 that ultimately failed, he was now a shift lead at a localvore coffee shop and restaurant not far from where he started his work in the artisanal industry. When we sat down for our first interview, Michael seemed weary. Years had passed, and the recession had officially ended. Many of his college acquaintances had moved on from service to graduate school or jobs of varying security and relevance to their degrees. Yet, he, with great ambivalence, was still "stuck in service," working full-time and bringing in an income narrowly above the poverty line. "I'm like the old uncle at my job," Michael told me as he described the revolving door of twenty-somethings that came in and out of his restaurant. "They call me dad and say that I would look good with a baby björn on."

Michael was in the process of moving out of a shabby old house he had shared with five roommates for about a year. Most were underemployed like Michael and had worked in tea at some point, along with a variety of side jobs, including Uber driving and serving to pay the bills. The place was sparsely furnished, yet often filled with the smell of chai. The abundance of tea brewing devices, teetering from worn shelves and filling the sink, gelled awkwardly with the apartment's otherwise near empty interior.

"I've decided that I'm going to quit my job," he told me with some trepidation, "I'm going to go to coding school." Like many in contemporary America, Michael was pinning his hopes on retraining in the fast-growing tech industry. Yet, as investigative reports emerged questioning the value of for-profit programs like some that he was considering, he worried about

getting scammed: “I know I have to be careful, but I can’t work in service anymore.” Now, in early 2017, we are sitting at his thirtieth birthday dinner. He has just quit his job at the restaurant and spends his days working through an online coding curriculum in his father’s vacant office in the suburbs. He is excited about quitting the job and brags to me about how often his boss calls to try to lure him back, but it is clear that unemployment is making him nervous. The coding program is more difficult than he thought. He is worried about spending through his small amount of savings and relies substantially on his parents to get by. He is increasingly considering taking another job in service, this time at a hip new coffee shop, again for near minimum wage. Yet, here we are, admiring the Japanese tea pot that would one day adorn his “real life,” that middle class utopia of wealth, “respectable” career, and self-realization that haunts so many of my participants as they imagine the future.

As conversation turns to my research on adulthood, Michael becomes animated telling the table about what he terms the “Saturn Return,” a phrase that had popped up in some of my other interviews, but I had never really paid much attention to. “The Saturn Return,” he says, “you know, the idea that every thirty years you go through this crisis period when you have to evaluate your life in the right way or else the next time Saturn comes around, it will be worse.” “Wait,” I ask him, “That’s what it is, astrology?” I had never known Michael to be particularly interested in New Age spiritualism, and yet, he appears at least half serious about this. A “life coach” that his parents had him see a few times had given him the idea as a way to better understand his present career difficulties. He believes that he is in the midst of such a trial period now—that his job change is part of a necessary, but unpleasant period of re-evaluation that will hopefully lead him toward a “real” life. Most of the people at the table know what he’s talking about. The skeptical few, like myself, half-seriously look up the “Saturn Return” on our

phones. Michael pulls up a rudimentary Saturn Return calculator onto his phone and enters my birthday. He announces to my chagrin that my Saturn Return has already passed, in December 2016. "What?!" I reply. I can't help but feel a twinge of anxiety. He turns to me with a wry smile as if to suggest, "Well, you're in for a long wait."

Where does this Saturn Return narrative come from, and what space does it occupy in American cultural life? The idea of the Saturn Return originally derives from astrology, a field of study and divination practice centering on the movement of the planets. As a human cultural practice, astrology has an ancient history that dates back as far as the fifteenth century BCE in Mesopotamia.[56] In Western traditions, astrology was, for much of its history, considered a scientific discipline, existing comfortably alongside astronomy, philosophy, alchemy, and medicine until losing credibility during the Enlightenment period. In astrology, the Saturn Return connotes the period when the planet Saturn completes its revolution around the sun and returns to the position it occupied at a person's birth—a journey that takes approximately thirty years. It is often described as a "cosmic rite of passage," a one to two-year period of struggle that can either usher one into a new stage of adulthood, or, if ignored or avoided, can leave you developmentally "stuck," waiting thirty years for Saturn's next revolution. In recent years, the Saturn Return has received splashy coverage in media outlets such as the *Huffington Post* with headlines reading, "The Skinny on Saturn Returns: What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger," and another, "What You Need to Know About Saturn Return" with a byline: "Are you in your late twenties or early thirties and feeling confused? It could be the planets."[57]

[56] See Schoener (2002) for an overview of the history of astrology.
[57] See Kaiser (2014) and Heaney (2015), respectively.

More recently, anthropologists have studied astrology within the context of the growth of so-called New Age spiritual practices in the 1960's and 70's. Pioneering papers from the era described New Age religiosity as, "a movement that emphasizes radical spiritual transformation that will bring adherents better in tune with the natural world through healing therapies and spiritual beliefs" (Lucas 1989). New Ageism has brought together practices and beliefs as disparate as millennial Protestantism and yoga. Yet, despite these relatively recent developments, New Age-ism in the United States has deep roots in European occult circles and has proliferated since early colonialism (Leventhal 1976). While some may have speculated that with the aging of the so-called baby boomer generation and emergence of younger cohorts, the popularity of New Age spirituality would fade, a cursory online search for materials on the Saturn Return produces a rash of recent news articles on the topic, often in the tenor of self-help:

> You have either gone through it, you are going to hit it, or you are currently deep in the turbulent trenches of the infamous Saturn Return. This is the notorious period of our life, which we hit every 30 years or so, where our life goes one of two ways — we either take off soaring like an eagle, successful, happy and financially free, or everything crumbles around us and we fall apart. For many of us, it's the latter.[58]

The Saturn Return is a potent cultural narrative for making sense of the life course and especially for understanding the approach to thirty in an American context inundated with the symbolism of that number as a marker of social and biological adulthood. For Michael, it was a ready narrative to cope with a central dilemma in his life: how was he going to become an adult without stable, long-term employment in a white collar field?

[58] From Kaiser (2014, 1).

The Saturn Return narrative puts a New-Age twist on well-known themes of self-fashioning and growth within therapeutic traditions in American psychology. These self-growth narratives, as also documented by Silva (2013), frame maturity in terms of knowledge and control of the self. As I heard many times from those participants who espoused this self-focused account of adulthood, a person is an adult if they can come to know and overcome their own emotional wounds and psychological flaws. Karl demonstrated this to me when he said, "I wish I could just flay open my mind and figure out what's wrong with me. What exactly it is." He locates his own failure to find a good-paying job, and therefore to become a "real adult person," not in the low-ranking law school he attended or the abysmal job market for lawyers at the time, but in some kind of pathology of the self. Among the underemployed, this sense of psychological disease was usually accompanied by a form of class guilt. As one person put it, "I was spoiled. My parents did fucking everything for me…I know that I'm privileged."

Silva (2013) argues that among the working classes this therapeutic perspective brackets structural issues and frames the problem of unachieved adulthood squarely on the individual (18). In my study, I sometimes found a similar dynamic at work among college-educated workers. Yet, many participants did speak about structural factors, such as growing up with money and stability, at play in their own adulthood narratives. But, interestingly, they deployed these class-based readings to further emphasize their own individual choices and failings—as a less affluent friend once framed it, to explain the tragedy of "starting out at third base and still not making to home plate." Because of the class advantage that felt they had, their failure was even more likely to be mostly their fault. Issuing self-judgements that might fit well into an early

Protestant sermon,[59] they pronounced their upbringings as "lazy" and "privileged." They looked back on the standard of living that their parents enjoyed at their age (weekends off, money at the end of the month, vacations, a house, no student debt) with ambivalence— as a locus of great desire, yet also of moral turpitude.

From among the many intellectual strands within American therapeutic discourse, I found that Michael's Saturn Return narrative drew most closely from the temporalities of developmental psychology, and, in particular, Maslow's (1943) "hierarchy of need" and Erikson's (1950) eight stages of psychosocial development. Rising to prominence in the same generation, their theories of human development continue to influence both therapeutic practice and American pop culture. Influenced by Gestalt psychology, Maslow's work sought to establish a "third force" in psychology that considered the uniqueness and fundamental goodness of in all humans (Goble 1980). This eventually grew into his theory of self-actualization, in which he sketches a "hierarchy of needs" that fulfill and direct behavior, ranging from physiological, to safety, to belongingness and love, to esteem, and finally self-actualization, the reaching of one's full potential (Maslow 1943, 2). More closely associated with Freudian psychoanalysis and the cross-cultural study of childhood, Erikson (1950) theorized eight stages of development that a healthy person should pass through in their life, ranging from infancy to late adulthood. Each stage contains its own crisis that the individual must resolve (237). Both theories lay out a linear, stage-driven course of human development across the life course, with cumulative progress punctuated by defining moments of transitional crisis, as in Erikson's theory.

[59] Here I am referencing Weber's famous argument in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904) that Protestant valuing of hard work, thrift, and this-worldism were significant influences in the early emergence of capitalism.

At first glance, the rhythms of the Saturn Return narrative hue closely to these developmentalist approaches. There are set stages of development as the planet returns every thirty years. As the planet arrives, an acute crisis must be resolved to advance. Yet, there is also a stasis and circularity in the Saturn Return narrative. If a stage is missed, "objective time," or the external, autonomous time of the outside world, keeps ticking while "subjective time," or the time internally experienced by the subject, stays still.[60] Reflecting a constant fear that I heard among my participants, the biological clock continues on yet, socially and psychologically, the individual is stuck in a regressed state (i.e. childhood) until the planet comes back again in thirty years. Biological and social aging processes become misaligned. The underemployed wait thirty years for another chance at adulthood, temporarily stuck. Through the Saturn Return narrative, complementary rhythms of stasis and circularity co-mingle with and occasionally disrupt the developmentalist linearity so familiar in western psychology.

In this mixture of chronotypes, I observed a novel language of downward mobility among the underemployed, who increasingly described their lack of career prestige and wealth in the language of time and interrupted adulthood. A sense of temporal and developmental disruption surfaced in my conversations with participants as they described the fear of getting "stuck" in the service industry while the outside world continued on without them This discourse is an example of a larger phenomenon increasingly demonstrated in the literature of youth: the central role of time and adulthood as a language to make sense of the social changes wrought by globalization and neoliberalism.[61] Katherine Newman (1999) stated in her landmark study of laid-off middle class workers that American culture had no language for downward mobility (10). My study

[60] See Wackermann (2008, 10)
[61] See Durham (2004); Jeffrey (2010); Mains (2007; 2013); and Dungey and Meinert (2017)

found such a language emerging as a discourse of temporality, strongly linked to cultural ideas of the life course.

Among the primary time-oriented phrases that participants used to describe this disjuncture between subjective and objective time were the phrases “killing time” and “waiting room.” This language had a critical and moral edge, evoking killing to describe the condition of underemployment. As one early participant from Milwaukee related to me:

> I think people just get kind of stuck in the restaurant, because it’s so easy, so mindless...It’s fun! I’m having fun doing what I’m doing right now, but I still have this itch or nervous tick. Like there’s a clock running in my head. I’m applying for grad school. I have deadlines. The next chapter is happening. I have to have the clock going at all times, or I will get sucked into the fun.

For this participant, the restaurant industry constituted a dangerous vacuum that you could get sucked into, where the progressive movement of time leading toward adulthood could slow while the “clock” of the outside world continued. He used violent themes of stasis to describe those people he knew who were “killing time” in the restaurant industry, perpetually frozen in youth.

From another Milwaukee participant:

> Killing time means those people who are basically just drinking and hanging out in the waiting room for something better to come along. Trying to get my foot in the door here for things down the road. Maybe something else. Who knows? And as you wait, the world just goes on without you.

What exactly is the waiting room? In my interviews, I asked participant to tell me more about this idea. “It’s a place where you sit and waste time,” according to Michael. From another Minneapolis participant, “It’s a place that is kind of fun, where you can avoid growing up for a while, but, ultimately, it sucks.” Another participant, who had only been underemployed for a year, described it:

> You kind of see it all the time on TV these days, like *New Girl* or *Insecure* or whatever…even *Friends.*[62] It's this part of your life where you don't yet have the job you actually want and you're trying to figure things out. If you're like me, you're just waiting to finally get that FTE [full-time employment position] and get on track with your life…you still ask your parents for money and feel like a kid.

In this participant's account, the waiting room mirrors "emerging adulthood," a new category popping up in developmental psychology between adolescence and adulthood. Like "adolescence" before it,[63] this category is gaining recognition amid widespread economic and social change. It transmutes the waiting room into a natural state and places it along a traditional developmentalist track of the life course.

Most of my older participants saw the waiting room in a more foreboding light, as a trap. Many had been underemployed for over five years and had begun to lose hope that it was "just a phase." As one person remarked, evoking the language of the prison, "This is my reality. This place. It's my normal…At a certain point, when do you become locked in?" For many, the waiting room was an unnatural and largely undesirable place to be, "a bad rest stop," as another described. It was a subjective state, a kind of detour phase that was off the typical progressive track of the life course. A "purgatory," as a former Catholic described it while motioning downward as if to suggest underneath the typical linear track, where the steady progress of social maturity paused as the rest of the world went on. Another participant who was a fan of the *Netflix* science fiction series *Stranger Things* once wandered aloud, "Maybe it's like being in the 'upside-down' [a fictional parallel universe]." Whatever colorful language participants used to

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[62] All of these television shows feature young people in their late 20's and early 30's struggling to build careers and relationships in large cities (New York and LA). *Insecure* is particularly notable because its centers the African-American woman's experience.
[63] See Jordan (1978); Côté (2000).

describe the waiting room, they borrowed heavily from developmentalist ideas of the life course, describing it in the familiar vernacular of phases and states, but placed its location underneath or parallel to the established track of the life course—as in the Saturn Return, in a place where developmental time stood still.

Ultimately, the waiting room and other time-focused language in my participants' narratives offered both a submerged moral critique of conditions of underemployment and a novel language for talking about precarity and inequality in the United States. This language, however, also obscured the structural conditions that influenced the "stuckness" of these workers. Killing time suggested agent-ful action and choice, rather than highlighting the broader economic conditions which limited so many of these people from pursuing careers related to their degrees. Much as Willis (1981) and McLeod (1987) described in their ethnographies of youth, my participants were only partially able to penetrate the structural conditions of neoliberalism through their critiques. The consciousness of such structural issues varied, even within one participant, with the same Milwaukee participant remarking on the conditions of inequality in the United States on his *Facebook* account status while expounding in a nearly contemporaneous conversation with me on all the positive elements of restaurant work that suck people in: "You hang out with people. You eat and drink. If you're at a good restaurant, you're eating and drinking delicious things. Why pull the plough when you can sit at the trough all day?"

This tension between structural critique and individual choice is shot through the narratives of service workers as they tell their story of downward mobility through the language of time and aging. In the Saturn Return, the individual subject so lionized in developmentalist theory could not alter the ageless movements of the universe. Reflecting the powerlessness that

many of my participants described as they struggled with becoming adults, Michael had to navigate around the greater structural force of the planets. Yet, ultimately, the failure remained in his hands. The stars exerted their mysterious power on the individual actor, forcing them into a solitary trial toward self-realization. A cold logic predominated. Failure to emerge successfully from the Saturn Return trial (with all of its trappings of wealth and emotional tranquility) reflected an individual failure to "deal" with one's problems and self-actualize.[64] This narrative bracketed the larger political economic shifts at work in my interlocutors' adulthood projects and framed their failure to get a new job, find a relationship, or, in Michael's case, get "out of service" as a personal blunder born of a universal process of meritocratic sorting. The Saturn Return surrendered considerations of class and generational struggle to the eternal movements of the planets and the heroic individuals tasked with navigating them. Overall, in these New Age narratives, the language of time only incompletely pierced the structural issues at stake in underemployment. A more direct critique of the structural conditions of underemployment developed in the third type of narrative that I encountered, which I will now describe.

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NARRATIVE 3: OPTING-OUT: RESISTING ADULTHOOD AND "CHOSEN" DOWNWARD-MOBILITY

Kate is a 2013 graduate of a prestigious liberal arts school near the Twin Cities. The daughter of two successful business executives with resumes that included C-suite positions at well-known companies in the area, she grew up "with everything I wanted," she tells me. Entering the job market nearly five years after the economic downturn, she quickly found a job

[64] See Foster (2015) for an analysis of the "the therapeutic spirit" of neoliberalism and how the therapeutic ethos emerging in the mid-twentieth century was severed from an "alignment with social democratization" by a resurgent right wing (1).

as a retirement consultant and financial advisor at a company where her father was an executive vice president. Shortly after graduation, she married her current spouse and found herself, "basically, living that adult life," she laughs, "earning $75K, saving for a house, investing when I could, getting married, all that, having a fancy finance job." And then, she decided to quit.

Six months later, she is working as a barista at a high-end bakery not far from where she grew up. Most days, she gets up at six in the morning and spends much of her day slinging donuts, croissants, and coffees to stay-at-home mothers and retirees in this upscale suburb. At night, she works as a busser in top restaurant, hoping to eventually move up to server. She insists that she doesn't regret leaving her "adult" job:

> I hated the [finance] job. Basically, I sat around all day on Reddit with nothing to do…and we just got money for that…It was a bullshit job.[65] It was soul-sucking.

Kate had spent most of her time in college travelling, volunteering, and learning about politics. She now hopes that someday she will perhaps become a teacher or non-profit professional. Going back to finance is "not an option," she says. Instead, she plans to work in the service industry until she comes up with something better. Between modest help from her parents and her spouse's salary, they have enough money to live on. When pressed, however, she admits that the service industry life is harder than she expected:

> Well, I used to work as a barista as a high schooler and remembered that it was fun, so this was kind of what I went for. I needed a job right away, and, sad to say, this was the skill that I had.

A few months in, the difficult schedule and lack of prestige is getting to her:

[65] See Graeber (2018) for a critical analysis of "bullshit jobs" and the impact of meaningless work in today's economy.

> Literally, I saw some high school friends come in [to the bakery] last week and recognized me. We all said, "Hi," and everything, but I could tell that they were looking down on me.

In addition to these awkward run-ins, Kate feels like an outsider in the artisanal service culture. Despite leaving the corporate world, she has not lost some of its polished speaking style and professional deportment. She is starting to get annoyed with its hard-drinking late nights and alternative aesthetics. "I'm a normal person," she says with a laugh, "I don't have tattoos. I go home after work. I don't care about these little cliques—these people that actually buy into this stuff," referencing servers who spend their days off visiting trendy restaurants and bars. "I honestly do not care about the newest craft cocktail bar," she reiterates. Ridiculing those underemployed people who have decided to stay in the industry long-term, she says:

> Honestly, these people have NO idea how much money other people make. [Another busser] was bragging that he made $50K in tips last year, as if it was some kind of big deal," she laughs, "I used to make more than that just sitting around in an office. This guy had literally worked every single day for a month, he said. He gets no vacation, no weekends. It's honestly sad. They have no idea what the rest of the world is like.

If the people are so annoying and the job is miserable, then why stay? Why not go back to her "adult" job? "Nothing is worse than what I used to do," she says, going on about the boredom and purposelessness that she felt in her work. I ask her if she expects to make as much as her parents in her lifetime, and she immediately says, "No," before interjecting, "but it's been my choice. I chose to not have that life." She goes on: "My parents basically got good jobs, worked the 9-5 for their whole lives for those few weeks a year when they got vacations. They didn't have any passion for their work." She believes that, "if you don't have passion for your job, you

should quit." She says that she and her spouse have made the decision to "opt-out" of their parent's affluent adulthood. They have "chosen" a path of downward mobility.

Kate's story demonstrates another narrative that I encountered in research, what I call the "opt-out" narrative. Opt-out participants typically acknowledged that adulthood was largely a "game of wealth," as one person put it, and decided to reject the "money and prestige" narrative of adulthood (i.e. Karl's story) in favor of crafting their own usually altruistic or social justice-oriented definition. Typically, they aimed to build some kind of policy or activism-related career. For Kate, her passion was education and anti-racism initiatives. For others in my sample, it was environmental justice or sustainable food systems. They eschewed definitions of adulthood that prized high-earning, high-prestige jobs in favor of fields like teaching, social work, and non-profit management, but were typically in no big hurry to leave service and start these careers. In all these cases, these few individuals came from higher wealth backgrounds and grew up in households with incomes over $300,000 a year. Their service industry careers were often a source of embarrassment for their parents, but they framed their downward mobility as a "choice" made in order to pursue a lower-paying "passion" that was viewed as more moral and meaningful than the typical corporate job— the "bullshit" job, as Kate remarked.

Often, this "passion" view of career[66] would dovetail with the kind of Neo-Ageism apparent in the Saturn Return adulthood narrative. Kate and others sometimes described their "new" version of adulthood as, at least in part, a task of self-discovery. Unlike Michael, however, their journey of self-discovery was closely tied to progressive causes, volunteerism, and "giving back." This volunteerist approach usually led to more clear critiques of the "money and prestige" definition of adulthood, as when Kate complained about her parents' white collar

[66] See Cannizzo (2015) for an analysis of "passion" discourse in the neoliberal university.

careers, “bullshit” jobs, and the meaninglessness that they entailed. For Kate, service industry work was not so much an experience of sitting in a waiting room and trying to get out. Rather, it was a matter of busting down the walls of the waiting room by acknowledging that they are illusory to begin with: “This whole idea of adulthood is complete arbitrary,” she remarked one day. And later, “We *chose* not be rich, and it makes me happy.”

Such pronouncements, however, are more easily made from a place of significant familial wealth and privilege. Unlike the majority of my participants who grew up in households generating under $150,000 per year, Kate reported that her parents earned approximately $500,000 per year, placing them in the top one percent of American households in 2016.[67] Kate admitted to having a significant safety net of familial wealth in case she or her spouse needed help, though she insisted that they did not currently borrow from her parents or receive financial support. She was “serious” about opt-ing out of “successful” adulthood in favor of “doing what she loved” and “living my life on my own terms.” If that meant spending through her savings, renting into her 40’s, and getting sympathetic looks from former high school classmates, she would deal with it. “Who wants to be that kind of person, anyway?” she asked me in a second interview, “Life is happening now. This *is* adulthood.”

Coming from a background of significant wealth, Kate did not feel the same anxieties of downward mobility as the other participants in my sample. She could afford to “pursue her passion” without living in fear of being “stuck in service” forever. However much distaste she had for finance, she admitted that it would be relatively easy to return. Most importantly, she admitted that someday she would get a large enough inheritance that it would probably be

[67]See DQYDJ’s online income percentile tool utilizing U.S. Census Bureau data: https://dqydj.com/income-percentile-calculator/

unnecessary to save for retirement or work any longer. Unencumbered by fears of precarity, she wove a narrative that was able to see through the waiting room and level the closest thing to a direct critique that I found during my research. Far from temporalities of waiting or stasis, for Kate, adulthood was "now," whether or not she had a prestigious, high-earning career. Nonetheless, her opt-out view of adulthood ultimately came from a place of privilege—where the idea of accumulating money and prestige through her own work was deemed unnecessary, boring, and perhaps even immoral.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have sketched three types of narratives that surfaced in my conversations with underemployed workers: adulthood as money and prestige, adulthood as knowledge and mastery of the self (understood in the language of psychology and New Age cosmologies), and adulthood as opt-ing out of these definitions altogether. In the money and prestige narrative, adulthood was defined primarily through accumulation—of wealth and of prestige—through employment in a career requiring a college degree. Maintaining the same class status as their parents was a key requirement to becoming an adult or, as my participants sometimes described it, a "real" person. In the second narrative, adulthood was defined through knowledge of the self, typically achieved through internal, psychological struggles during periods of crisis. Often these narratives incorporated New Age cosmologies or the language and schemas of developmentalist psychology, as I described through Michael's "Saturn Return" story. The third narrative rejected accumulation-focused notions of adulthood, in favor of following one's "passion" and working to "make the world better," as one participant described it. In this narrative, mid-twentieth century definitions of adulthood, premised on high-prestige,

high-income careers were exposed as arbitrary and perhaps even immoral. Instead, these individuals aimed to build careers focused on volunteering and social justice causes. They rejected the idea that their social maturity was somehow in jeopardy because of opt-ing out and insist that adulthood was "now." This narrative, at times, overlapped with the self-knowledge narrative of adulthood, but rejected the notion that adulthood was something to be worried about or even desired. In my sample, I commonly heard the opt-out story among underemployed people at the higher end of the income spectrum, who had the insulation of familial wealth to protect them from exposure to the vulnerability and precarity experienced by others from more modest class backgrounds.

Overall, time—its shape, rhythms, and movement—was an essential feature of each these stories. While a linear, stage-based vision of time dominated all of these narratives, it co-existed with other chronotypes, such as circularity. Stasis was of particular importance, as my participants described being stuck in a waiting room to adulthood. As the objective time of the outside world carried on without them, their own internal, subjective rhythms stayed still. Perhaps most importantly, time functioned as novel discourse for talking about downward mobility and critiquing contemporary capitalism. In an American context where class remains an ill-understood concept, time and the life course surfaced among my participants as novel pathways to talk about class-based anxiety. In the colorful language of the waiting room, the underemployed expressed their "fear of falling."[68]

Yet this language was only able to partially penetrate the structural factors that contributed to their suspended social maturity. My participants mostly commonly blamed themselves and their own individual actions, citing their own privileged childhoods and

[68] This is a reference to Barbara Ehrenreich's (1989) famous book *Fear of Falling*.

“laziness” in their failure to maintain the class status of their parents. Only among the wealthiest did more direct critiques of adulthood and the contemporary economy emerge, as the children of C-suite executives and financiers “opted out” of an adulthood predicated on wealth and prestige. They “chose” their own downward mobility, insisted that they were approximate adults regardless, and questioned whether it was even worth worrying about at all. They articulated a radically post-work vision of identity and social maturity in the American context, driven by familial wealth that rendered further accumulation unnecessary and immoral. For the majority of my participants, however, underemployment had “short-circuited” their adulthood stories, leaving them stuck in a waiting room world, struggling to build a career that might open a door to social maturity and the rest of their lives.

A deeper cultural theme, however, undergirded all three of these narratives: the value of individualism. To explore this value and what it reveals about my participants’ understandings of adulthood, I turn to their household economies and the ambivalent relationships that kept them financially afloat.

CHAPTER FOUR: EMERGING MIDDLE CLASS HOUSEHOLDS - AMBIVALENT DEPENDENCY AND ITS ALTERNATIVES

What deeper patterns surface from the adulthood narratives of the underemployed, and how does this discourse compare to everyday life in their households? This chapter explores a foundational theme, what Dumont (1966) termed a "paramount value," underlying each of the three adulthood narratives that I analyze in Chapter Three: individualism. "Being on your own," as one participant phrased it, was an essential underpinning for how the underemployed framed adulthood. To a "real" adult was to be independent, able to understand and take care of oneself. I juxtapose this deep individualism with description of dependencies within and between households to show how my participants' talk of autonomy sits in ambivalent tension with robust relationships with others.

I focus on a particular social tie that most troubled the underemployed, such that it rose to the level of collective obsession: financial dependency on parents. Almost all of my participants received regular financial resources from their parents, whether through free housing, direct transfers of wealth, or other forms of exchange, and these highly stigmatized kin-based flows sparked secrecy and shame. Drawing on this finding, I argue that adulthood for the underemployed is not just a matter of clearly-articulated criteria such as prestige, self-knowledge, or wealth, but, rather, it is fundamentally relational, defined especially by evolving relations of exchange between parent and child. For the underemployed, reaching an "ideal" adulthood necessitated a symbolically-loaded shift in the relationship between parent and child, from one characterized by what Ferguson (2013) has termed "hierarchical dependency" to egalitarianism. Whether, in practice, such a standard for adulthood was ever truly realized in social life was not important. Rather, the idea of being disentangled from one's natal household

functioned as a never-quite-reachable "goal post"—the product of a deep, and often self-defeating, social mythology of individualism.

The chapter begins with a brief examination of the deep value of individualism undergirding my participants' stories of adulthood and how this theme makes sense within longstanding norms of American cultural thought, especially among the middle classes. Then, I turn to the practices themselves to describe three households of the underemployed and analyze how despite talk of independence, my participants were enmeshed in relations of hierarchical dependency that provoked ambivalence and shame about their own adulthood status. Enamored with a pervasive individualism that elevated independence or, "being on your own," as the primary architecture for achieving adulthood, these workers found themselves nagged by the sense that they were still children, reliant on their parents for subsistence and situated in relations of dependency that clashed with espoused ideals of a free and autonomous adult life.

To finish the chapter, I explore an alternative to parent-child dependency emerging among the underemployed, what my participants called the "chosen" family. This term referred to fictive kin relationships between unrelated, unmarried adults living in a household together. Using the example of a participant in a polyamorous household, I show that although dependency on one's parents carried stigma among the underemployed as they aged, this ambivalence did not necessarily carry into relationships with their chosen kin. Colored by the deep individualism that pervaded my participants' thinking, fictive kinship relationships elevated individual "choice." They served as a virtuous alternative to the laziness associated with parent-child hierarchical dependency.

Taken together, these kinship ties—chosen and otherwise— constituted the building blocks for a new kind of middle class household, improvised out of the lived experience of

underemployment. In spite of a persistent, powerful social mythology of individualism, my participants found paths for action through interdependency and cobbled together viable forms of association in precarious times. This was the kind of ambivalent agency that flourished in the waiting room.

DEEP INDIVIDUALISM: ADULTHOOD AS BEING "ON YOUR OWN"

"When you are really on your own," Emily tells me, "then you know you are an adult." I opened this dissertation with an account of my first meeting with Emily, a bartender at an upscale hotel in downtown Minneapolis. We are talking at a coffee shop several minutes from where I first met her. In minimalist neutrals and lacking her usual bartender apron, she could easily pass for a freelance writer or graduate student busy at work on her laptop. The staff at the coffee shop, however, immediately recognize her as "one of their own," she jokingly remarks to me when I comment on how they were friendlier to her than me when taking our orders. I ask her how they know that she is a fellow service industry employee even though she had never been here before. She says, "Well, my tattoos, and it's 2 p.m. on a Monday. Who else isn't at work?" I ask Emily if she's an adult, and she replies after some thought, "Sort of, yes. I'm actually on my own…I'm mostly financially independent. I take care of myself. I know who I am."

If there was a deeper theme that undergirded almost all the versions of adulthood that I encountered during my research, it was independence. Whether independence was primarily defined through wealth and career prestige, psychological development, or the rejection of the adulthood norms of their parents, it permeated my participants' accounts of their own histories and what adulthood meant to them. Being able to be "on your own" or "independent" or

"supporting yourself" was something to be proud of. Relying on parents, whether for financial stability or primary emotional support, was a serious obstacle to becoming an adult. As Emily remarked of a co-worker who she felt was not really grown up, "She still calls her mom every night, for Christ's sake…I've got a boyfriend for that." Depending on parents for money was especially embarrassing, even though most of my participants received precisely this kind of substantial, regular financial support. Such kin-based dependency was clearly a sore topic; most of the time, participants would only reluctantly share the monthly bank transfers, credit cards, and personal loans their parents had given them since graduation.

Being overly reliant on a partner could also be a sign of immaturity. As one participant framed it:

> You cannot really love anyone until you love yourself, until you can fully take care of yourself, meet your own needs. If you are dependent on someone for money or happiness or anything you are going to get screwed.

To be a mature adult was to "not really need anyone," as Emily remarked to me when I asked about her own relationship, "You have to find someone you want, not need." I later heard nearly these exact words in a reading of marriage vows at a college friend's wedding. To need was a weakness in a marriage. It was something to be avoided in favor of two independent, autonomous people choosing to become "a fruit salad, not a smoothie," as another participant described to me. He was explaining how to avoid "codependence"[69] and form an "adult"

[69] Codependency is a somewhat controversial term in the psychological literature and has not been included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, despite early calls from Cermak (1986) and others. Wegnscheider-Cruse (1985) defined it as "a specific condition that is characterized by preoccupation and extreme dependency (emotionally, socially, and sometimes physically) on a person or object. It is associated with "denial, compulsions, frozen feelings, low self-esteem, and stress-related medical complications" (2). It is sometimes associated with family members of people with addiction disorders. In recent years, the term has

relationship. He had recently seen this advice in an online dating column he started reading after a bad breakup. About my own relationship, he told me, "avoid blending too much and stay who you are." For him, autonomy appeared to be an essential underpinning of adult life.

Emily and I venture into the topic of codependence as we discuss a new project she started since our first meeting, a savings account or "fuck-off fund," as she calls it, to get out of the service industry. She has recently read Paulette Perhach's (2016) viral blog post, "A Story of a Fuck-Off Fund" after a friend re-posted it on her *Facebook* feed.[70] In this post, the writer describes two different versions of a story. The first starts with a young professional woman who has just gotten her first job. After an initial period of happiness, she quickly finds herself with no savings, living beyond her means, and unable to leave her now-toxic job or dump her boyfriend when a relationship turns sour. In the second version of the story, this young woman has lived much more frugally since taking the new job and now has a "fuck-off fund" of savings that has given her the financial independence to leave her boyfriend and search for something new. In a later commentary, the feminist blog *Jezebel* described the fuck-off fund as "the money you may need at any given moment to get away from your job, partner, or life. You need one. We all need one."[71] Emily read this article a couple of weeks ago and described her reaction to me: "It kind of got stuck in my head. What am I doing around this? This is something grown-ass women have." She says that she loves her parents and is excited about her home with her boyfriend, a trainer, but that "you can't rely on anyone." Setting her coffee down with an assertive clank, she

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been criticized for pathologizing healthy human behaviors and has been set aside in favor of attachment theory. See Levine and Heller (2010).

[70] See Perhach (2016) in *The Billfold*: https://www.thebillfold.com/2016/01/a-story-of-a-fuck-off-fund/

[71] See Merlan (2016, 1): https://jezebel.com/yes-you-should-have-a-fuck-off-fund-in-case-of-life-r-1754026571

tells me that, "A real woman can pick up and leave if she has to. I can't say that I could afford to do that right now."

Emily's "fuck-off fund" clearly highlights some of the gendered aspects of the adulthood experience, in particular the challenges and opportunities that themes of independence and autonomy offer for women trying to make sense of adulthood.[72] In this case, Perhach situated her "fund" within the context of a woman's heightened risk of domestic abuse and sexual harassment,[73] referencing the pervasive gender pay gap[74] and domestic workload[75] that can keep women tied to dysfunctional relationships or work environments.[76] Yet, I found that "the fuck off fund" resonated with men in my sample as well, one of whom delayed breaking up with a verbally abusive partner for months because he simply could not afford the rent without her. For these participants, monetary wealth offered the ability to sever ties to jobs and people at will—to be able to be "on your own," as Emily said. The savings account that might, in a different era, have been earmarked for a house down payment or child's education fund emerged reframed as a means to tell your boss or partner to "fuck off," to literally extract yourself, at will, from your social world. This was the stuff of adulthood among the underemployed.

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[72] For a discussion of gender-focused research in the adulthood literature, see Durham (2017, 6). For examples, see Boddy (2017) and Dungey and Minert (2017) in the same volume.
[73] See the World Health Organization's report on sexual violence: https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/violence/sexual_violence/en/
[74] See U.S. Census Bureau (2016) "Income and Poverty in the United States" report: https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2017/demo/p60-259.html. The latest data indicates a female-to-male earnings ratio of .80.
[75] In the Edmonton Transitions Study, Horne, Johnson, Galambos, and Krahn (2017) found that, in addition to a pay gap, there is also a gap in the amount of housework that women do relative to men. They found that women tend to spend more time doing domestic chores than men, regardless of how much they work outside of the home.
[76] Bennett-Smith discusses the potential of the "fuck-off" fund idea to address systemic gender inequities in her 2016 article in the blog *Quartz*. See https://qz.com/602515/the-feminist-implications-of-the-fuck-off-fund/

Individualism is an old theme in American cultural history. Alexis de Tocqueville (1835), one of the earliest interpreters of American national culture, noted a distinct individualism among Americans that influenced their everyday habits and ways of thinking, what he termed "habits of the heart" (28). He defined this individualism as a "calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends" (506). These individual-focused habits and mores had to be counterbalanced, he posited, by face-to-face civic engagement for the American democracy to work and not fall into self-interest and antagonism. Inspired by Tocqueville's early observations, Bellah et al. (1985) offer one of the most well-known treatments of contemporary American cultural life in *Habits of the Heart,* their ethnography of the tension between values of individualism and commitment in the lives of Americans. In their study, they explore how a "first language" of individualism belied the many ways that their participants were enmeshed in relationships with others (20) and trace the roots of American individualism from the biblical and republican strands of the early colonies[77] to the utilitarianism of Benjamin Franklin[78] to the "expressive individualism" exemplified in the writings of Walt Whitman (34).[79]

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[77] Bellah et al. (1985, 28-30) focus on early colonial figures such as John Winthrop, one of the first Puritans to sail to North America. In his writings, Winthrop emphasizes the importance of "moral" freedom rather than "natural liberty." In this distinction, he differentiates between the freedom to do whatever one wants (natural liberty) and the freedom to do "only which is good, just, and honest" (moral liberty) (30). These early biblical strands emphasized the ethical and moral limits of freedom.

[78] The authors outline how, although Franklin likely never espoused the kind of pure utilitarianism that became associated with him, his famous aphorisms like "God helps those who help themselves," were taken up by others to support the utilitarian view that if everyone in a society pursues their own interests, "the social good will automatically emerge" (Bellah et al. 1985, 33).

[79] Bellah et al. link Whitman to an emerging "expressive individualism" focused on cultivation of the self in contrast to the dry pragmatism of utilitarianism. They link expressive individualism to modern psychology and self-help movements of the twentieth century.

Citing early interpreters of American culture like Tocqueville (1840), Bellah et al. identify several "representative characters" driving individualist thought in early American society.[80] Each of these figures—the Independent Citizen, the Entrepreneur, the Manager, and the Therapist— constitutes a kind of public symbol of individualism, a model for a virtuous life of individualism in the United States. Taken together, they form a useful, if admittedly partial, sketch of American cultural influences across its history. They also capture some of the differing strands of thought that make up American individualism and allow one to consider the rise and fall of these strands across economic events, such as the Industrial Revolution.

Among these is that heroic figure of liberal democracy, the "Independent Citizen" (39). Classic liberalism, as most famously framed by English philosopher John Locke (1690), posited that protecting the person, property, and "natural rights" of the individual was the central purpose of government. It, therefore, placed the autonomous individual, rather than the group, at the center of politics. This Enlightenment-era philosophy emerged in tandem with the growth of market economies in the West (Polanyi 1944; Dumont 1977)[81], and alongside a tradition of civically-engaged republicanism, liberalism was among the central political philosophies that shaped the early form of the United States of America (Bellah et al 1985, 35-37). Bellah et al. (1985) describe the Tocquevillian figure of the Independent Citizen as a person who, in their

[80] By "representative character," the authors mean "more than a collection of individual traits or personalities. It is, rather, a public image that helps define, for a given group of people, just what kind of personality traits it is good and legitimate to develop" (Bellah et al 1985, 39).
[81] In *Homo Hierarchus* (1966) *From Marx to Mandeville* (1977), and *Essays on Individualism* (1986), Louis Dumont utilizes a comparative approach to understand the emergence of individualism in the West. He concludes, among other things, that hierarchy (in his usage, a synonym for holism) is natural, whereas individualism or "equality" is a modern invention (*Homo aequilis)*. He links the rise of individualism in the West to the rise of markets and post-feudal developments in Europe. His stark characterization of the non-Western as holistic vs. the Western as individualistic has been a source of criticism. Later authors argue that both tendencies are present in all systems. See Robbins (2015); Peacock (2016).

habits and mores, combined the individualism of liberal democracy with the civic engagement of republicanism (40). The symbol of the Independent Citizen, they argue, encompassed that central tension between individualist utilitarianism and community-engaged republicanism at the heart of American democracy.

Shifting to twentieth-century strains of American individualism, Bellah et al. next identify the capitalist figure of the self-made "Entrepreneur" and his banal, rationalistic counterpart "The Manager" (43-44). The Entrepreneur symbolized that "self-made" titan of business who was "competitive, tough, and freed by wealth from external constraints" (44). He was a symbol of aspiration and promise for an entire middle class, part of the mythology of capitalism and the mobility it promised. Yet, there was also the Manager, the "the old image of the business-man as family provider and citizen." The Manager was more concerned with efficiency and the rational organization of resources within a corporation (45). He was that reliable mid-century representation of middle class prosperity, the "Company Man" as Whyte (1956) termed it. Taken together, these figures represent two intertwining fundamentals of industrialism in the United States, capitalism and bureaucracy.[82]

For the authors, the Entrepreneur and the Manager represent both the great potential and risk of industrialism in the United States. Each enjoyed a newly split life, divided between the "private" sphere of family, neighborhood, and non-occupational hobbies and the "public" sphere of work (45). Out of this schism, earlier models of civic engagement made less sense. As Bellah et al. state,

[82] The link between capitalism and bureaucratic rationalization was a key locus of inquiry for sociology's foundational figures. For classic examples, see Marx (1843) and Weber (1922). For a more recent discussion, see Graeber (2015).

> Under such conditions, it is not surprising that the major problems of life appear to be essentially individual matters…As its point of reference contracted from an economically and occupationally diverse local community to the geographically spread, but functionally homogenous, sector within which a person competes, success came to be defined in professional terms. The concept of one's "peers," concomitantly underwent a subtle but important shift of meaning. It came to signify those who share the same specific mix of activities, beginning with occupation and economic position, but increasingly implying the same attitudes, tastes, and style of life (44).[83]

Engaging with a broader community of fellow citizens that stretched beyond one's narrow social or professional world gradually faded into irrelevance. The norms of civic engagement so prized by early republicans began to erode.[84]

The authors conclude with the "Therapist," a variation of the Manager who directs rational methods, not toward the goals of an organization, but, rather, toward the interior states of the self. For the Therapist, the "elusive criterion" of measurement is not efficiency, but "personal satisfaction" and "happiness" (47). The center of the Therapist's world is the "autonomous individual, presumed able to choose the roles he will play and the commitments he will make." Underpinning this representative figure is an expressive individualism that foregrounds the freedom and fulfillment of the individual self. Here Bellah et al. trace the influence of

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[83] Here, Bellah et al. track a shifting sense of social belonging from one based on national or community identity to one based on "lifestyle" in the United States. As Applbaum (2000) describes in his ethnography of the marketing industry, this shift was also heavily influenced by the rise of a global consumer marketing and its unique cultural logic.

[84] *Habits of the Heart* touches on concerns about modernity and social cohesion that were articulated long ago by Émile Durkheim in his writings on religion (1912) and the division of labor in a society (1893). One can map Bellah et al.'s account of the American Industrial Revolution onto a broader, modern transformation from small-scale communities connected by "mechanical" solidarity to national industries built on "organic" solidarity. This history also mirrors Karl Polanyi's (1944) account of the "great transformation," in which economic life is "disembedded" from its social context by the rise of a Market Society.

psychology in American culture life and the expansion of managerial logics into the "private" life of the home.

In the contemporary United States, new critiques of individualism have risen in response to what is often referred to as "neoliberalism," that uniquely evangelistic variety of market liberalism that rose to prominence in the late twentieth century.[85] Ushering in widespread privatization and the rollback of public benefits, neoliberal policies have resulted in what Harvey (2003) has termed "accumulation by dispossession" and framed later (2005) as, simply, the upward transfer of wealth in a society. This is achieved in part through state-driven privatization of what were once public goods, including housing and natural resources.[86] *Habits of the Heart* must be understood, in part, as a response to the cultural perils of neoliberalism—namely, the growth of an anti-social, anti-democratic individualism that Tocqueville anticipated over one hundred years ago.

Indeed, perhaps now more than ever before in its history, individualism remains part of the deep common sense of American cultural life.[87] Taking up French structuralism's concern with the deeper symbolic systems driving cultural life, Dumont (1966) coined the term "paramount value" to describe how certain elements in a cultural system are arranged

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[85] See Harvey (2005); Brown (2006); Collins (2012); and Walley (2013) for some of the definitive accounts of neoliberalism.

[86] For an anthropological case study of neoliberal policy-making and its aftermath, see Collins' (2012) account of the 2011 Wisconsin protests, one of the key events that precipitated the Occupy Wall Street protests.

[87] Against this conclusion, some commentators (Liu 2017) have argued that the election of Donald Trump in 2016 has ushered in a new wave of civic engagement, reminiscent of early republicanism. Others argue (Fukuyama 2018) that the various populisms that have emerged at the heart of American politics in recent years signal a return to collective concerns. This new collectivism, however, links primarily to membership within a narrowly-defined identity category (race, political party) rather than a sense of belonging to a coherent national polity. David Brooks' post-2016 election columns in *The New York Times* provide a layperson's overview of some of these debates.

hierarchically based on their value.[88] He posits that classical structuralist oppositions such as "hot/cold" or "male/female" are not only opposed, but are often also ranked within a cultural system. Within an Indian caste system, he suggests, the paramount value is purity. Later in his career, Dumont (1980) cites Francis Hsu (1972) to argue that the core American value is "self-reliance, itself a modification or intensification of European, or English, individualism" (290). In this formulation, individualism emerges as a deep cultural ideal, underpinning an array of other cultural categories, including whether one is a "good" person and, most relevant for this study, whether one is a proper adult.

Contemporary ethnographers of the United States have documented how this deep individualism articulates with precarious labor practices in powerful industries like finance (Ho 2009) or technology (Lane 2011). Such labor practices have lead workers away from "The Company Man" model of the mid-20th century corporate manager (Whyte 1956) toward an individualist model of the worker as a Company of One (Lane 2011). This modern incarnation of the Entrepreneur figure casts the worker, not as a permanent part of larger corporation, but, rather, as an autonomous entity to be branded and marketed to employers, much like a commodity (Gershon 2017).

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[88] Robbins and Sommerschuh's (2016) working definition of value as "what has to do with the good and the important" (1) is a useful starting point for defining value from an anthropological perspective. I do not intend to wade into the more detailed definitional debates that define the anthropology of value, a growing subfield. For further reading, see Robbins and Sommerschuh (2016) and Robbins (2013). The sides are largely made up of those who understand value from a structuralist lens and practice-oriented thinkers who view value as deriving from human action. As Robbins and Sommerschuh (2016) remark, however, both sides agree that a final theory should synthesize these divisions. The dilemma has been framed differently by Graeber (2001) as the, "difference between what one might call top-down and bottom-up perspectives: between theories that start from a certain notion of social structure, or social order, or some other totalizing notion, and theories that start from individual motivation" (20). I utilize Dumont's structuralist concept of value here because it captures the powerful *leitmotif* of individualism that underpinned my participants' narratives of adulthood.

Other authors focus on the affective worlds of middle class families as they document the hyper-individualistic practices that surface among middle class families who feel increasingly insecure in their class positioning. These insecurities play out in what Cooper (2013) refers to as "upscaling" practices, in which, for example, parents hire consultants to secure a spot for their children in an elite private school or sign their children up for an endless array of extracurricular activities to improve their chances of getting into a top college. Focusing on the broader "common sense" of American suburban life, Heiman (2015) describes the self-defeating "rugged entitlement" that drives middle class Americans to ostensibly vote against their own economic interests and support neoliberal policies in an attempt to guard their own fragile prosperity.

My participants grew up in similar cultural worlds to Heiman's New Jersey suburbanites. Individualism was very much a "first language" to them too. Yet, when I visited their homes and explored their social worlds further, I found a dense network of interdependencies, linking them to their natal families, but also, among some, to a chosen family of unrelated adults that they lived with. This chapter, therefore, looks not just at the individualist discourse of autonomy and independence that pervades my participants' adulthood stories, but also the interdependencies that exist in practice, especially in the domestic sphere. I will now sketch some of these relations through one of the fundamental concepts of economic anthropology——the household.

AN EVENING IN THREE UNDEREMPLOYED HOUSEHOLDS

Household 1: Dan

I first introduced Dan in Chapter One of this dissertation. He is a graphic design major and server who lives in a turn-of-the-century brownstone on a quiet corner of south Minneapolis. It has one of those quaint names like "Century Heights" or "Park Villas" mounted in cursive

lettering over the door. When he gets home from his dinner service shift at around 11 p.m. most nights, he parks his car on the street, uses his key to enter the building, and walks up a flight of worn, carpeted stairs to the three-bedroom apartment he now shares with his girlfriend and an old friend from college. The apartment door is rarely locked, to accommodate the comings and goings of the roommates.

Upon entering, he usually greets his girlfriend if she is still awake and then heads to the inlaid wooden cabinet in the living room to make himself a drink before he eats whatever he has brought home from work. “This is when I feel like an adult,” he says to me one evening as he pulls bottles of vermouth and whiskey from the cabinet’s shelves. He has carefully arranged approximately ten bottles of liquor in the cabinet to resemble something like an in-home bar. Antique cocktail glasses sit in adjacent shelves, alongside white and red wine glasses. He makes himself a Manhattan and sits down for a drink on a couch that took four people and the removal of a door to drag up the stairs. The furniture in the room reminds me of my own apartment that I share with three roommates—a mixture of parental hand-me-downs, hold-over futons from college, and *IKEA* bargains. Like many brownstone apartments in Minneapolis, it clings to its splendid nineteenth-century details—the hardwood floors, cabinetry, and odd custom moldings—but scattered among these luxuries of bygone eras are clues to its state of ill repair: moldy walls, the tiny, out-of-place kitchen and bathroom, poorly-sealed windows, and a sketchy balcony. As the radiators pour warmth into the room, you hear a chorus of creaking and clanking. All considered, it is a typical household setting for the participants in my sample.

For Dan and his roommates, the primary draw of this living arrangement is the cost. If they split the rent and utilities, each pays $600, far less than a one-bedroom apartment of similar quality in the neighborhood. As he picks up a pile of his roommates’ clothes and makes a space

for me on the couch, he says that he would prefer living in a smaller household: "Honestly, I'm just waiting for it…like that year when I don't have to live with a roommate. Since college, I've never had it." But he considers himself lucky to even know people who he could live with: "If I didn't know anybody here, I'd be fucked. I'd be living with my parents because I can't afford a one-bedroom…I refuse to take my chances on a *Craigslist* person." Dan and other participants were hesitant to move in with strangers from the well-known classifieds site. "I've heard horror stories," he says and tells me about a friend of his who ended up moving in with a twenty-two-year-old recent graduate he met on *Craigslist* who "partied 24/7." Roommates are a "necessary evil," for Dan. They are the primary way that he can afford to live outside of his parents' home and remain underemployed.

Dan and his girlfriend had only been dating for seven months, "not long enough to really move in," he states, when a former roommate moved out early in their lease, leaving him and his friend to split the $1800 between just two of them. He calculated that if his girlfriend moved in, despite some of her misgivings about it being "too fast" for their relationship, they would together save $900 in rent. After eventually talking her into it, he rode out a couple months at the higher rent by asking his parents for monthly transfers of $300 into his bank account until she finished her lease and moved in with him. As part of an informal agreement, Dan's roommate received the monetary difference from their ex-roommate until they were able to find a new person, in exchange for returning the former roommate's portion of the apartment deposit once they found a new person. Three months later, Dan's girlfriend has moved in, and "Things, so far, are working out," Dan tells me, as we sip drinks in his living room and stream episodes of *The Office*.

To the average homeowner, this tangle of personal and financial ties might seem odd, but I found situations like Dan's to be common among the renters in my sample. In households of multiple unrelated adults living together primarily to save money, roommate turnover was high, and, with little savings, most people relied on their parents to make up the difference until they could find a new roommate. What I found among the underemployed was a web of interdependencies and financial flows—between friends, exes, relative strangers, and parents—that came to the foreground in moments of flux, as people moved away to pursue new jobs, relationships, or sometimes just to escape. These relationships required maintenance and management from my participants. Without them, many of my participants would be unable to rent outside of their parent's homes at all, let alone purchase a home themselves.

Dan says to me later in the night, "You know, you'd expect this in New York or San Francisco, but this is the Minneapolis…At my age, my parents had been homeowners for seven years." Juxtaposed with what he calls the "golden starter home years" of his parents' twenties, his household arrangement seems almost laughable to him. "It's really embarrassing," he says through a chuckle, "that they [his parents] still give me money," referring to the cash transfers that his parents sent while he was waiting for his girlfriend to move in. He tells me that he wants very badly to be "on my own… not living some Midwestern version of *Friends*," the hit sitcom from the 2000's about a group of single, adults living in New York together. His voice becoming more animated, he continues, "I can't really say that I'm, like, a 'real' person when I still pay my laundry out of a quarter machine." He pauses for a while and gets up to make another drink. It is midnight, and we are already on our second round. He takes out a new bottle, a high-end bourbon that I know must have cost him at least $50. He pours an inch of liquid into two low-ball glasses and goes into the kitchen to add some ice. As I wait on the couch, the

sounds of late-night Minneapolis filter in—sirens, the clatter of an occasional car, general quiet. Dan returns and hands me my drink. “Don’t feel too bad,” he tells me, “Everyone I know is living this way.” He slumps back into the couch and takes a deep sip.

Household 2: Kasey

Thirty minutes outside of the Minneapolis city limits, I am sitting in comparative luxury with Kasey. She is a bartender who lives in a wealthy suburb of Minneapolis, in one of the newer subdivisions that probably was the site of a farm twenty years ago. After graduating with a business degree from a local college, Kasey got an entry-level job at an insurance company, but quit after a disagreement with a co-worker that she will only say made her feel like she “had no choice.” Unable to quickly find another job, Kasey worked for a few years as a bar-back and then a bartender at a Vegas-style lounge that required employees to wear sexy, provocative clothing. She made excellent tips at the job, but decided to leave because she, “got tired of feeling like a piece of meat,” she tells me. She now works at an organic-focused restaurant near downtown, but regularly gets texts from regular customers who frequent her former lounge.

When we start our interview, she says that she has always felt a little “out of place” in the artisanal side of the service industry. When I her ask why, she laughs and says, “Well, I’m not a hipster,” gesturing obliquely toward her long bleach blond hair and spray-tanned skin. We are watching cable on a flat screen TV in her parents’ living room that her mother just redecorated to “get rid of the Lazy Boy look,” she tells me. She drives a half hour into the city to work but says that she does not mind the commute. Unlike Dan, her car spends most of the Minnesota winter in the comfort of a clean, warm garage, which saves her fifteen minutes of necessary ice scraping every morning. “It’s nice, really nice,” she says, when I ask her how she likes living out here,

away from the brownstones and bustle of the city, “Living with the parents has its awkward stuff, but I’m happy right now.” Five year after graduation, she is “happy enough.”

“It is kind of a sensitive thing,” she admits to me, as I press her more about how she feels about living in her parents’ house. Each year that she stays, she feels like her parents get more pointed in their inquiries about her career. Kasey’s mother, a high school teacher in the local school system, has told me, “We don’t care at all about that [her career prospects outside of service]. We just want her to be happy.” Kasey insists that, “They are just saying that because you’re here.” She goes on:

> They care. I can tell they care that I’m still here…It just made sense financially. I have student loans, health insurance, my car. I never got a real job after college, and so this just made more sense than paying rent. I am really close to paying back my student loans and car off, and then maybe I’ll move out…At least they aren’t paying for me to live somewhere else.

Kasey largely places the blame for her choice to live at home on her $50,000 of student debt and “not wanting to live in a shitty place like that,” she says referring to the apartment that I am living in during my research. She also suffers from chronic pain and anxiety related to fibromyalgia, which was diagnosed shortly after she graduated college. Living at home has helped her to afford the alternative therapies like massage and acupuncture that her parents’ insurance (and now her own employer plan) generally do not cover. “I would be living in a dump,” she says, “Paying only a tiny amount of my loans. I couldn’t afford the stuff that actually helps my pain… I couldn’t afford a gym membership.”

Now that she has a job at a restaurant that she feels like she could tolerate for a while, Kasey plans to move out roughly within the next two years, “before I’m 30,” she says. By then, she will only have around $10,000 left to pay off her government loans. She hopes to find a

boyfriend and thinks that it will be easier to date when she's living on her own. She admits that the prospect of bringing men home to her parent's house has been "so awkward" that she has avoided it altogether. "I live way out here," she tells me, "so I end up just staying at their [her date's] place, anyway." Living in the suburbs has sometimes forced some of her relationships to move faster than she would have liked in hindsight because she was often forced to stay over at her boyfriends' homes in the city after dates rather than drive home to her parents' house at night. She tells me,

> It's like you basically move in with someone right away. That hasn't worked out for me so far…like generally, living with the parents is definitely underrated. I save tons of money on rent, food, laundry, parking…pretty much everything…I help my parents too, like help with home projects and stuff. We eat together on the days that I'm not working dinner service… I'm going to be lonely when I move out...The dating thing is pretty hard, though. It's one thing to tell your date that you live with your parents, but it's another to actually have him stay over.

She maintains, however, that she has no interest in "anything serious" and sees marriage and children "far down the road." Caught between the financial benefits that living in her natal home provides and the awkwardness it creates in meeting potential partners, Kasey has chosen to set her dating life "to the side for now." When I ask her if she does plan to get married someday, she says that, she is not "100% percent sure," but she cannot, under any circumstance, imagine living with her parents while she is married. "Hopefully, it doesn't come to that," she tells me under her breath after her mother leaves the room.

For Kasey, living with her parents is a pragmatic decision. She is making the bet that living with them in the short-term will ultimately foster the long-term financial independence that, like most in my sample, she believes is a key part of being an adult. In the meantime, because her parents do not ask her to pay rent, she can also afford to enjoy some of the material

luxuries she associates with adult, professional women, like an expensive designer purse and grooming treatments such as manicures, eye brow waxes, and bi-monthly hair coloring to maintain her pristine blond hair locks. “In a lot of ways, I kind of feel like I have all that stuff [that an adult would have],” she says as we watch *Shark Tank* on the living room flat screen. Her mother brings out a bowl of tortilla chips, and I can’t help but crack a smile at the relative luxury of Kasey’s household environs compared with the renters that I interviewed. She notices my expression and guesses my thoughts, “Not bad, *right*?”

Later in the evening, after her parents have gone to their bedroom, Kasey brings out a bottle of wine, and I finally hear more about “the downsides” of what, up until this point in the conversation, seemed like an ideal housing arrangement. Every week she makes sure to “pay back” her parents by assisting in home repair, making dinners occasionally, and “just being around” more than her other siblings. “I have to sort of pay them back,” she says to me. Sometimes this feeling of obligation can cause tension when Kasey is tired from a long night at the bar and does not want to help her mother clean or would rather skip a family holiday to work a high-volume shift. “I love my parents, but it will be nice to not have this constant feeling of owing them,” she says. She admits to me that living at home “is pretty weird” and that she initially hesitated to join my study because she did not want to admit she lived with them. “I’d really like to be on my own, but this is part of the plan,” she says, before opening her student loan servicer account on her laptop and proudly showing me her remaining balance. “I will get there,” she tells me pointing to number. “If I didn’t live with them, that wouldn’t be even close to possible,” she says.

Eventually, she sets down the laptop and takes me upstairs to her bedroom. It is the kind of large, brightly-colored room that I always envied as a teenager. The pale-yellow walls are still

lined with certificates and awards from Kasey's past—a student athlete commendation, a certificate marking that she was MVP of her basketball team in high school. Wrinkled clothes pile out of a mesh hamper in the corner of the room, but her work aprons sit freshly laundered and folded on the teal duvet that covers her bed. "My mom does these for me," she admits, "I'd get fired if I showed up with a dirty uniform." She has a vanity in the corner, cluttered with what seems to be an endless array of beauty products. Two windows look out over the spare suburban landscape outside, dotted with playsets and immature trees. She points to some cocktail books that well-meaning family members have bought for her on a small book shelf in the corner: "Honestly, I never look at these. You just learn this stuff on the job. My family doesn't understand that you don't, like, sit at home and look at bargain book cocktails when you're a professional bartender."

Her cell phone chirps, and a text comes in. It's a group text from some of her co-workers who just finished their shift. They are going out to a bar on the west side of Minneapolis, not so far from where Kasey lives. Kasey is not sure if she wants to go but sits for twenty minutes on the bed texting with her friends as I wander around the room. Her closet reminds me of Las Vegas. It is filled with sequins and sparkles, "all the stuff from my old job," she tells me. There is, nonetheless, a staid black and navy patch in the corner. These appear to be clothing from her first job—a black suit, white blouses. She pops her head, "Honestly, I've been meaning to get rid of that stuff," she says as she watches me pull out some of the business casual garments. Kasey returns to the bed and taps away at her phone. She will go out tonight. It's Sunday and the next two days (Monday and Tuesday) are the closest equivalent to a weekend in the service industry, when multiple people typically have some time off. It is getting late, and I am already yawning.

Kasey pats me on the back as she heads into the closet for some clothes, “Wake up! We’re going out.”

Household 3: Michael

Back in Minneapolis, I am sitting in the bedroom/living room of one of the three different places that Michael tells me he is living right now. I first introduced Michael in Chapter Two of this dissertation, during his thirtieth birthday party. At the time, he was in the process of moving out of a house he had rented with several roommates from the tea industry. He now lives between houses of family and friends. “You want to see my *household*,” he asked me over the phone earlier that day, gently mocking me. “Yes, I said, “I mean, where’s your home? Where do you sleep at night or cook dinner? Who would you say you live with?” “Can a person have three households?” he replies.

We are now at his new girlfriend’s studio apartment in St. Paul. They have just finished eating a frozen meal that they bought from *Trader Joe’s* down the street. A pile of dishes sits in the kitchen sink and the smell of Indian food fills the tiny apartment. Today they are taking me through what they tell me is their usual weekday routine: dinner (he prepares, she does the dishes at the end of the week), *Netflix* in bed, and lights out before 10 p.m., since they both get up at dawn to get to their morning shifts as baristas. By wedging some large pillows against the wall, they have turned her bed into a passable couch that we can all sit on while we drink wine and watch an episode of *The Crown*, a television series that follows the life of Queen Elizabeth II.

During a break, I tell Michael that I want to hear more about the places he lives, even if does not know quite what to say. So, he begins:

> My first home is my dad's house still. Before I met my girlfriend, I slept there four to five days a week in my own room...My second home is my sister's couch, basically. She lives in downtown, and it's easier to stay over there when I don't want to drive all the way home on the weekends. My third home, I guess, is this apartment…but only for the past three months. Now I stay here pretty much every night, though.

Michael is torn about leaving his old house that he shared with the roommates. He had a room to himself there, but there were always people around if he wanted to socialize. Because they had very little furniture, they sat on giant pillows in the living room when guests came over or gathered around a large bonfire pit in the front yard. There was a grumpy cat that made everything smell a little weird. "It felt like a college place," he tells me with a smile, "except everybody was in their thirties and forties."

Around the same time that he moved out of his old house, he quit his job with the hope that dedicating himself full-time to an online coding class might get him "out of service." He explained to me that he thought, "Service just sucks up all your energy. Sometimes you just have to take the plunge and put in the time to get out of this business, so that's what I did." He spent some weeks unemployed, working on the coding curriculum out of his father's suburban office and living at home. He quickly grew discouraged, however. The coding program "seemed a little sketchy," he admits, "like will this get me a job or am I just wasting my time?" An opening came up at an up-and-coming coffee shop and roastery in Minneapolis, and he had a new job in service within a few weeks of quitting his old one. In the end, he decided he needed the money, but did not want to commute back and forth from his dad's suburban neighborhood every day. As a temporary solution, he slept on his younger sister's couch in a trendy area of downtown Minneapolis and drove the fifteen minutes to work in the morning. There had always been a bit of tension between them. His sister was five years younger, yet owned a condo, had a husband,

and worked at a marketing firm. Her trendy loft was furnished with mid-century modern furniture and a flat screen TV. “Everything is actually organized and clean, like somebody has time to care for it,” he says, gesturing around to the dirty plates and food boxes that populate his girlfriend’s studio.

On the first day of his new coffee job, Michael met his new girlfriend, a young woman with a similarly sardonic sense of humor and long track record working in service. After a month of spending nearly every day together at work and every night together hanging out in her apartment, they started dating. Quickly, Michael was staying at her home every night and driving both to work. Splitting dinner and the rent with his girlfriend has lowered their living costs, and the arrangement has ultimately saved him the trouble of shuttling back and forth to the suburbs all the time. “I guess some things move faster than others,” he tells me, turning to his girlfriend. “At least in this respect in life, I’ll have caught up to my sister.”

The constant togetherness, however, has challenged them. His girlfriend has decided to find a new job because working and living together is straining the relationship. Michael stays at his parent’s house once or twice a week to “recharge” and “get the space that I need to actually read without someone talking to me all the time,” he says giving her a knowing smile. He helps his father with household chores and projects on the weekends and says that they are closer than ever. “Being stuck like this has actually brought me closer to my family,” he remarks, describing how he does more around the house than he ever used to when he was in high school. He says that he used to “care more” about “how it looked” that he sometimes stayed with his family, but he is starting to care less and less. “I still kind of live with him [his dad]. I feel that way. It’s just a nice out from always being in our little apartment,” he tells me. His father’s home may no longer be his primary household, but it feels like “home base” to him:

> My stuff is all still there. I never had a wedding like my sister did, where you get all the crap on your registry—the knives, the plates, the blenders. And then you just fill your own house with it…you have like a 'mancave' or something. I guess we're [he and his girlfriend] probably going to get married eventually, but ya. My childhood bedroom still has all my stuff because I never wanted to haul it all around from apartment to apartment. I don't spend as much time there anymore, but if I had to answer you and say, where's my real home, it's still my dad's house.

Michael explains to me that his household structure, "doesn't really fit." He doesn't "fully live with his parents," and yet he still "sort of does." Caught between the ideal of his sister's affluent, independence, the security of his natal home, and the tenuous promise of a relationship that might "catch him up" to his sibling, he feels "kind of homeless" and "stuck" somewhere in between.

Michael's girlfriend gives us a half-serious glare, "I thought you wanted to see 'real life' here. We don't just sit and blab about how shitty it is all the time…I just want to watch this show." She abruptly hits play on their laptop, and young Queen Elizabeth continues walking slowly down the aisle of some English cathedral toward her coronation. I settle in to the pillows propped behind me, and she passes me a beer.

THE *OIKOS* AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE HOUSEHOLD

Economic anthropologists often trace the idea of the household to the Greek philosopher Aristotle's concept of the *oikos*, the basic social unit making up the polis, or Greek city-state (Aristotle 1984, 1253^{b}1). For Aristotle, the household is defined by a few primary relationships, including husband and wife and father and child.[89] In his work, Aristotle considers the household

[89] For a detailed account of the historical literature on the ancient Greek household, see Roy (1999).

as “the first model of association” and “formed to meet the needs of the family (Hann and Gudeman 2015, 4). While Aristotle’s original writings tend to sketch out a model of the household as a nuclear family unit, according to historians (Roy 1999, 2), its meaning could also encompass multi-generational families.

In their edited collection on the household in post socialist Europe, Hann and Gudeman (2015) argue that central to Aristotle’s idea of the household is the idea of community self-sufficiency, meaning that a social group meets “the totality of the material and moral needs” of the individual (4). Through an everyday practice of reciprocity and mutuality, the household shares “productive efforts and its returns” (13). Unlike markets, the purpose is not to drive profit, but to meet subsistence needs. Hann and Gudeman elaborate:

> House economies measure their food needs and supplies, the work that has been accomplished and needs to be done, and money savings. The purpose is not to calculate profit but to meet house needs, achieve sufficiency of supplies for communal obligations, and maintain a sense of “well-being,” which may be partly accomplished through reciprocity and sharing with other houses and participating in social rituals (14).[90]

They juxtapose market principles of profit with the subsistence principles that drive Aristotle’s household. The house economy emerges as a socially-situated economic unit, basic to the make-up of larger social groups such as the village and city-state.

As a social science of the economy began to emerge in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Aristotle’s idea of the *oikos* and the importance of community in economic life evolved into a kind of foil to free market economics and the utilitarian principle that self-interested activity best serves the needs of all. Anthropologists like Malinowski (1922) and

[90] This is the final of seven “characteristic processes” that the authors posit are found in the household. See Hann and Gudeman (2015, 13).

Mauss (1925) documented complex subsistence economies within the non-Western world, anchored by communal logics of the household and rooted in social institutions. These findings stood in stark contrast to the highly differentiated, self-regulating markets envisioned by liberal economists.[91] In *The Great Transformation,* Karl Polanyi (1944) synthesizes this longstanding anthropological critique of liberalism by arguing that the wars of the twentieth century had largely been caused by a market-driven "disembedding" process, in which land, labor, and money were extracted from their social contexts and re-imagined as commodities for trade.[92] He offers household economies as the key to re-embedding economic life in its social context and avoiding future calamity. Polanyi's work went on to set the stage for the famous formalist vs. substantivist[93] debates of the late twentieth century, and his substantivist program underpins much of economic anthropology today. Hart's (2010) "human economy" research program is perhaps one of its more well-known recent evolutions, as it relates to the household. In his edited volume (2010), Hart argues for a vision of an economy that is made by humans for the purpose of sustaining human life, rather than as an "impersonal machine" (1). He envisions an engaged research program that centers the human elements of the economy and renews the Aristotelean vision of socially-embedded self-sufficiency

[91] For early examples of liberal economic thinking, see Mandeville (1714) and Smith (1767). For an account of Durkheim and Mauss' work framed as contra liberal economics see Douglas' (2002) introduction to *The Gift*.
[92] He uses the term "fictitious" commodities (72).
[93] The formalist vs. substantivist debate refers to a series of polemics within the subfield of economic anthropology in which formalists, who favored the view that human economic activity was driven by universal scarcity and utility maximization principles (drawing from neoliberal economics), debated with substantivists who, following Polanyi, did not presuppose universal scarcity or utility maximization in human economic activity. Rather, substantivists argued that human economic activity should be understood as emerging out of its environmental and social context, which may or may not be driven by utility maximizing. For a summary of the debate, see Hann and Hart's (2011) review of the subfield.

A critical mass of feminist ethnography also draws on insights from the household, questioning prevailing economic theory that orders the world into "market" and "non-market" spheres (Strathern 1989; Kondo 1990; Weiner 1992; Wolf 1992). Within the anthropology of work, some authors (Collins and Gimenez 1990) have drawn attention to productive activities in the household that economics has typically excluded from the domain of the "market," and, therefore, also the domain of "work." Tsing (2015) introduces the concept of "pericapitalist" space to analyze this labor on the edges. She argues that pericapitalist spaces, such as the household, are sites for productive processes both "inside and outside" capitalism (Tsing 2015, 63). Ethnographies of work, for example, document how steady incomes coming from spouses (particularly women) insulate precarious workers during periods of unemployment (Lane 2011), how an intergenerational flow of economic and social capital props up affluent families and exacerbates income inequality (Cooper 2013; Yanagisako 2015), or how gendered skills honed in the household are "salvaged," as Tsing (2015) describes it, into the profit-making schemes of late capitalist firms (Freeman 2000). As part of Guyer's (2018) research program of "the anthropology of the real economy," Zaloom (2018) has studied how logics imported through the finance industry penetrate the household as parents approach child-rearing and the life course through the language and temporalities of stocks, bonds, and IRA's. This feminist substantivist program looks beyond familiar dichotomies such as work/home or market/society to understand the economic forms that trouble these categories. The household serves as a generative locus for such work.

Overall, over two thousand years since the time of Aristotle, the household remains a productive starting point for examining how human relationships and practices mediate large-scale economic phenomena, such as rising underemployment. I now consider the household

economies of the underemployed and examine, in particular, the interfamilial flows of wealth that kept the underemployed "afloat," yet also dogged them with a sense of persistent social immaturity. Without financial help from their parents, most of my participants would not be able to "balance the books" of their own households, whether that involved playing for groceries, rent, utilities, transportation, clothes, medical care, or other necessities. They found themselves dependent on their parents and, through this dependency, they were able to sustain an approximation of middle class affluence and security free of the specter of homelessness, prison, or hunger. Yet, they were deeply ambivalent about these interfamilial links and struggled throughout my research to square these obviously fruitful socialities with the deep individualism that pervaded their worldview. This was the kind of ambivalent agency that defined the waiting room.

"SUBSIDIZED" HOUSEHOLDS: THE STIGMA OF HIERARHICAL DEPENDENCY

Households of the underemployed were a node for many flows of support—primarily between my participants and parents, siblings, and significant others. These flows might be social interactional in nature, for example, daily phone conversations with a parent to talk through persistent sadness and anxiety. Or they might constitute flows of wealth such as loan assistance, legal fees, insurance payments, co-signing help, incidental financial support, and a roof to shelter under in an emergency. Or they might involve some sort of labor, for example, a child who comes home every weekend to perform chores for their parents or a parent who drives into the Twin Cities to help a child move in to a new apartment. The support activities that I observed in my participants' homes often involved all three.

This analysis focuses primarily on the most controversial of these household flows, financial support from parent-to-child. In these cases, wealth almost always flowed unidirectionally from a parent's household to the household of an underemployed child to pay for medical bills, rent, or other major expenses. This source of support kept the underemployed household solvent and insulated my participants against the catastrophic incidents that haunted the working class young adults in Silva's *Coming Up Short* (2013). Yet, this was also the most socially-marked vector of economic activity in the household, prompting secrecy and ambivalence from the underemployed.

In his critique of liberal social policy, Ferguson (2013) uses the term "hierarchical dependence" to describe top-down systems of authority and obligation that flourished in the Ngoni state in southern Africa. Countering the liberal tendency to see hierarchical systems of social dependency (such as chiefdoms) as backwards and immoral, he argues that dependency on others can beget agency and social personhood. Furthermore, he contends that in a context where the value of labor is shrinking, such structures can be especially effective at providing social support. He contends that social policy should not "treat dependency as a disease" but, rather, try to "construct desirable forms of it" (237). In her study of early-career academics in Europe, Peacock (2016) extends his analysis to Europe by examining hierarchical dependencies among precariously-employed scholars at the Max Planck Society in Germany. She concludes that hierarchical dependence (and its accompanying structure of precarious academic work) function as a kind of "mode of action" structuring agency among the scholars at Max Planck (1).

I observed similar structures of dependency among the underemployed, as they relied on their parents for economic support and occasionally vented to me about feeling indebted to them or having to obey them because of it. Although rarely at the forefront of our discussions,

hierarchical dependency between parent and child emerged in practice as a key exclusionary criterium in my participants' estimations of adulthood. My participants almost universally described the "normal" trajectory of the parent-child relationship as a move from "relying on your parents and doing what they say" in childhood to a more egalitarian model in adulthood, "like friends, a relationship of equals…if anything they rely on me," as one participant framed it. Forms of economic exchange were a crucial puzzle piece in achieving that shift. To be enmeshed in asymmetrical economic exchange with one's parents was anathema to these participants' views of what an independent, autonomous adult should be. The redistributive, hierarchical logics of the natal household, so normalized in childhood, carried with them a new pathology as my participants aged past college. Upon closer inspection, social maturity was not just as a matter of possessing certain traits or having personal wealth, but also about reshaping the nature of the parent-child relationship, itself, and this was most clearly enacted for my participants through forms of exchange, particularly as they related to household subsistence.

Supported by affluent kin networks and roommates willing to share expenses, the underemployed achieved a kind of partial independence, what one participant termed in the terse language of the welfare state,[94] a "subsidized adulthood," made possible through flows of wealth, labor, and sociality. Did this particular kin configuration reproduce dynamics of class privilege in the American context? It seems likely. And, to be sure, my interlocutors met this kin-based interdependency with utter ambivalence, as I will discuss further. I will now outline some of the different varieties of parent-child hierarchical dependence that I observed among the

[94] This participant was a self-avowed "small government libertarian." The remarkable metaphor implied in his phrase highlights some of the liberal ideological underpinnings of my participants' aversion to kin-based dependency.

underemployed and describe some of the dilemmas each arrangement posed for my participants as they considered their own social maturity.

Household One: Parental Aid as Savings Account

For participants like Dan, parental help for household subsistence was not so much a constantly, monthly necessity, but rather a kind of "savings account," as one person described it, that he could tap into in emergencies or transitions, as when he lost a roommate. This was, by far, the most common form of parental dependency that I observed in my sample. His parents' wealth functioned as a kind of "rainy day fund" that he drew on for unexpected expenses. Through this relationship, he was able to avoid credit card debt and own a car and cellphone, all while continuing to pay his income-based student loan repayments.

Dan had lost his "credit card privileges" a few years after college, when his parents asked him to finally cut up the *Visa* that he shared with them and used for miscellaneous expenses like clothes or gas. "I guess they decided there would be more 'gatekeeping' on their end," he told me when recounting his history of parental support. Since then, Dan has had to ask his parents personally each time that he needs money to transfer funds to his bank account or reimburse him. When he needed extra money for rent before his girlfriend moved in, he had to call his father (in his usual weekly phone call) and ask him for the funds. "It's kind of awkward because it's like he still controls my life," he tells me, "Like if he pisses me off, I really can't do anything about it. I need him and still have to feel bad about it every time I call." After negotiating with his father for a couple days, his parents decided to send him the money. "I kind of hate it," he admits to me:

> This whole thing definitely keeps me from spending on random stuff. It was just easier to put gas on the credit card and hope that they didn't notice it along with everything else. Now I actually, well, have to basically beg them to give me money…I had to update then on everything [regarding the roommate replacement]…I call more.

In addition to his rent, he often requested money for medical bills. Unlike many of my participants, Dan received health insurance from his workplace, but in the form of a high-deductible, low-premium account that only began covering expenses once he paid $6,000 himself. When Dan suffered from a bout of acute anxiety last year, he wanted to see a therapist, but his insurance would not cover it until he reached his deductible. His parents ultimately covered the expenses in cash. Without their help, Dan could not have paid for a therapist and told me that he felt his mental health problems might have prevented him from continuing to work full-time. His own savings account had approximately $400 in it at the time of fieldwork and could not even cover the cost of one month of rent.

Without the direct access to his parent's funds that the credit card made possible, Dan had to engage in regular appeals and rituals of maintenance to cultivate his hierarchical dependency with his parents. A weekly phone call became a regular ritual. At times, he balked at the obsequious tone that he felt that his father expected and was dogged by the sense that his parents were "constantly disapproving" of him. Craving a more egalitarian relationship with his parents, Dan felt like he was still "stuck" in the hierarchical dependency that he experienced as a child, and it grated with the ideals of independence and self-reliance that undergirded his view of adulthood. Although spatially, he had "left the nest," as he termed it, his relationship of financial dependence made him feel that he was very much still "under their roof," living a kind of pseudo-adulthood that "doesn't feel normal," as he said. He laughed when I told him about the

"subsidized adulthood" phrase that another participant coined. "It is sort of like that," he told me with a shrug, "I'm on my dad's dole."

Dan often compared his dependency with his parents to what he termed a "more equal" relationship with his roommates. He showed me one evening, through his history on the mobile payment service *Venmo*,[95] how the roommates equally split the utilities and rent costs down to the cent. "Here," he said pointing to a notification with a dollar sign emoji in the message, "This is where he [his roommate] paid me last month," walking me through the minutiae of what appeared to be a careful, surprisingly rigorous regime of cost-sharing made possible by digital technologies. Dan told me that, in many ways, he felt more comfortable with the transactional, equal pooling of funds that happened with his roommates compared to what he saw as a one-sided flow of financial support coming from his parents. He described feeling "indebted" to his parents and ambivalent about the flow of wealth that was coming to him, which he was unsure he would ever be able to pay back. He seemed apprehensive that he would have to repay this debt.

Dan's ambivalence about kin-based hierarchical dependency and the fears he expresses about his "debts" connected to classic work in anthropology on forms of exchange. Mauss (1912) summarized one of the key issues animating this subfield in his famous treatise on gift economies: what power within a gift necessitates a return. In the case of Dan, why does he suddenly feel he owes his parents a debt? Mauss drew on ethnographic data describing gift-

[95] *Venmo* is a mobile payment service owned by PayPal that was ubiquitous among my sample. It functions as an application on mobile phones that allows the user to easily transfer money from their bank account into the bank account of someone else. The application is growing in popularity and saw an increase of twenty-five percent in payment volume in 2018 (Rooney 2018, 1). Per its website, the company reports that it handled $12 billion in transactions during first quarter of 2018. During fieldwork, I saw the application used to split rent costs, utilities, and dinner. Participants viewed it as an easy way to quickly "pay someone back," as Dan said when I asked him why he used it.

giving practices to show how systems of reciprocity stand in for social relationships. They "enhance solidarity" (Douglas 2002, vii) and function as a "total system," encompassing all aspects of a society. Sahlins (1975) later extends this theory by positing multiple systems of reciprocity, including generalized reciprocity, balanced reciprocity, and negative reciprocity. He argues that the social distance between the parties involved in the exchange affects how "generalized" the gift is, meaning whether there is an expectation of immediate return (balanced) or not (generalized). Close kinship relationships within a household, such as between parent and child, tend to produce more generalized forms of reciprocity. In the case of Dan and his family, however, once he reached some of the markers of social maturity (completing his education, getting a full-time job, moving out), the kind of kin-based systems of generalized reciprocity described above re-emerged as problematic. Balanced forms of exchange increasingly replaced generalized reciprocity as the ideal. Given that Dan has moved out from his parents' home, his case also seems to support Sahlins' classic proposition that social and spatial distance mirror forms of reciprocity. Yet, Dan's situation suggested a kind of misalignment, as he had moved out of his parents' household (a key measure of both spatial and social distance), but still needed forms of generalized reciprocity to pay some of his bills. Thus, these exchanges, re-signified as inappropriate for his life course stage, began to take on the weight of "debts" that he knew he could not really pay back.

"Maybe I just want to move to another state or something," he said to me during my first household visit, "I can cut the cord finally and try to make it on my own." These sorts of dreams about leaving rarely came to fruition during my fieldwork. Caught up in flows of aid from his parents, Dan was ultimately faced with a dilemma: on one hand, with his parents' incidental help he could sustain at least a partially autonomous household life. He lived under his own roof and

paid some of his own bills. He had a job, a car, and well-stocked home bar. At the same time, he was enmeshed in a web of dependency that clashed with his native ideas of adulthood. Caught in the morally-marked hold of a "subsidized" maturity, he felt ambivalence, stasis, and shame.

Household 2: Under the Natal Roof

Kasey's household situation showcases a kind of parental dependency that was uncommon in my sample, but nonetheless significant: living in the natal home.[96] These multi-generational householding strategies have become a popular subject of media commentary since the Great Recession. Headlines like "Goodbye, empty nest: Millennials staying longer with parents" (Schoen 2016) or "Millennials may never get out of their parents' homes" (Horowitz 2017) are part of mass of public commentary on the phenomena as studies (Pew Research 2017; Zillow Research 2018) find that the rate of adult children living at home in the United States has risen since the financial crisis of 2008. With some commentators elevating this issue to the level of "crisis" (Oyedele 2017, 1), it is clear that these household arrangements penetrate at deeply-held cultural values within the United States. Leaving the home appears to be a key index of adulthood.

Given the apparent cultural significance of staying in the parental home, one might expect that those participants would have particularly fraught understandings of their own adulthood—that they would feel the most "behind." Yet, my study found that those participants who lived in their parent home had some of the most positive attitudes toward their own adulthood status and relationship with their family. Participants like Kasey were more likely to report positive relationships with their parents and optimism about their own futures. They also

[96]In my sample, 6 people lived in their parents' home, about 14%.

tended to see themselves as more “adult-like” and report less ambivalence about their living situation.

What might explain this finding? Admittedly, my sample size is too small for any scientifically-generalizable conclusions. Nevertheless, it is possible to glean some insights from the patterning in my case data. Turning to Kasey, the precise nature of the financial exchanges between parent and child were quite different from Dan’s “saving account” form of dependency. The primary support that Kasey received from her parents was not monetary transfers, but, rather, continued housing in her childhood bedroom, which saved her from spending what would probably equal approximately forty percent of her income on rent. Otherwise, she paid all her own bills each month, in addition to putting $100 away into a savings account. During our visit, her parents confirmed this.

Rather than incidental moments of exchange, Kasey shared in the more stable fecundity of her parent’s shelter, and this seemed to make a difference. Multiple members of the family shared the central subsistence benefit of the home, and she contributed to the household in small, but regular ways, like helping with home maintenance and cooking dinner each week. This mode of agency prompted fewer feelings of regret and shame than those I observed among other participants. The communal common sense of shared housing appeared to outflank misgivings about her own individual autonomy. In fact, Kasey insisted that living with her parents, though still undesirable, was the primary path that she had to achieve kind of long-term autonomy that, like Dan and my other participants, she desired. While expressing occasional embarrassment about her living situation, Kasey expressed far more certainty than Dan about her trajectory to being “a real adult.” As she proudly showcased her shrinking loan balance, the satisfaction that she felt when her loan balance went down each month “far outweighs,” she said, the shame of

living at home. “If I’m subsidized by my parents,” she told when we discussed the term “subsidized adulthood, “at least it’s going somewhere.”

Household 3: The “Nuclear” Option

By the end of my fieldwork, of all the unmarried people in my sample,[97] Michael was one of the closest to marriage despite his chaotic living situation—between his sister’s home in downtown Minneapolis, his girlfriend’s home in St. Paul, and ultimately his father’s home in the suburbs. His story is characteristic of many of the budding nuclear families that I observed among the underemployed, as they chose to live together at least partly because they wanted to escape the parental safety net. His story also demonstrates the tensions that emerged in these relationships as instrumentalist concerns about daily subsistence clashed with underlying ideals of individualism and the “love marriage”[98] that defined an “adult” relationship. Were they partners on the road to marriage? Or were they just a variation on roommates or primarily together to save money? This was a tension that, in Michael’s case, persisted throughout the course of my research.

At first glance, Michael’s living situation mirrored that of Dan. Both men lived with their girlfriends, who they had moved in with, in part, to reduce their financial dependence on their parents. Both relied on what I have termed a parental “savings account” of incidental financial assistance in emergencies. From the beginning, however, Michael’s relationship was more serious and moved much more quickly toward marriage and (in the absence of roommates)

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[97] Only three individuals in my sample were married. Of these married individuals, two had children.

[98]See Ahearn (2001) for a discussion of this shift from arranged to chosen marriages in the case of Nepal. See Hirsch and Wardlow (2006) for the definitive anthropological collection on modern marital practices and ideals.

resembled something like a nuclear family household structure. Therefore, I have chosen his case to highlight the somewhat more traditional strategy of starting a nuclear family in order to mitigate dependency on parents. Although near-term concerns about marriage were relatively rare in my sample, his case nonetheless constitutes a crucial counter-example of the prevailing trend and warrants closer examination.

For precarious couples like Michael and his girlfriend, moving in together was almost always driven in some part by the lure of saving money on living expenses and escaping from dependency on their parents. This fact would hardly be surprising to most anthropologists; marriage ties have long been a pragmatic strategy for alliance building and preserving social and economic capital.[99] Yet, these kinds of economic calculations clashed with two prevailing assumptions about the ideal, so-called "adult" marriage among this group: 1) the marriage should be driven by love and 2) both partners should be independent people that do not "need" each other.[100] When the realities of precarity and mutual need clashed with my participants' deep values of individualism, it created tensions among the partners and impacted their assessments of how "adult" their relationships (and they, themselves) really were.

This conflict was clear from the beginning in Michael's narrative of the relationship, when within one month of dating, he and his co-worker begin to share rent and officially live together:

> When I started paying part of her rent, my parents were like, "Is this going to work out," and, honestly, I didn't know for sure. I knew that, financially, it made the most sense. I was already over there all the time anyway. I couldn't afford to

[99] The most famous example of anthropological theories of marriage comes from Claude Levi-Strauss in *Elementary Structures of Kinship (1969).* In his studies of kinship, Levi-Strauss analyzes marriage as a form of reciprocal exchange that links together social groups through the exchange of women. This school of thought is sometimes referred to as "alliance theory."
[100] See Footnote 1 on the related concept of codependency.

> get my own place with my new job. Otherwise, I was driving an hour out to my dad's on my days off and sleeping on my sister's couch when I had to work.

Like other participants, Michael imagined an "ideal situation" where he could make decisions about his relationship without the background noise of financial precarity. He envisioned the ideal relationship as one based on mutual respect and autonomy. This individualist view of intimacy sat uncomfortably with his current situation, where decisions like moving in together were not made from a place of autonomous security, but from a place of mutual need, financial and otherwise.

Michael also told me that he had persistent "hang-ups" with his upbringing and was highly ambivalent about the kind of secure, middle class household he grew up in. This ambivalence was part of how he explained his migratory existence between multiple homes. Growing up, he lived in a secure, nuclear family household. Yet, as he struggled to start a career after college, his memories of home sparked feelings of doubt and guilt. He blamed his childhood for:

> …making me lazy. I never really learned what it is work. My mom took care of everything for me. I didn't have to do any real chores. Food, laundry, those things were just there for me…I had a complete disconnect between effort and results. [I] never had to contribute…My privilege, as "the kids" say these days, basically made me get used to "sitting on my laurels," and here I am: a single, thirty-year-old, overeducated barista who rents a shitty studio.

Nevertheless, he expressed a deep sense of longing for a home life that resembled his childhood:

> That's what being middle class feels like: freedom, not being stressed, not having to work *all the time*, not having to worry *all the time*…to have time to fully realize who you are. To come home to a normal house and a normal family.

He imagined the middle class home as both a font of immoral laziness and, yet, also a utopia of self-actualization. His understanding of underemployment and its effects on his life were inextricably tied up with the (nuclear) household, as an object of both disgust and desire.

When Michael first moved out of his apartment and lived at his father's home, he often voiced that he was "not comfortable" with moving back into the "lazy" suburban lifestyle that Kasey enjoyed. The idea of living permanently with his parents was something that he told me he deeply feared, and he made me promise not to tell any of our mutual friends. Nor when he started dating his girlfriend did he want to entirely move into her home and make the kind of relationship commitment that he felt that would require. To him, it did not feel right to base that kind of decision on economic need rather than personal commitment and love. Ultimately, his *ad hoc* solution at the beginning was to continue circulating between his family members' homes, while spending much of the week with his girlfriend. Not quite in the natal household, but not quite starting his own.

Over the course of my research, however, this arrangement became quickly unsustainable. "I had to decide," Michael told me, "between a 'real' life, and this batshit homelessness I've been pursuing." Committing to his girlfriend and starting a nuclear family of his own emerged as the best solution to breaking out of dependence on his father. However traditional commitment might have seemed from within the young, hard-living service industry milieu, it constituted a robust pathway—a form of interdependency distinct from his relationship with his father— through which Michael could exert his own agency.

By the spring, Michael had moved many of his things into his girlfriend's home and was living there almost full-time. They were talking about buying a house through the State of

Minnesota's first-time homebuyer's program, and Michael was busy lobbying his father for money toward a down payment. He was cheered by the fact that a marriage to his girlfriend might bring him closer to some semblance of what he imagined his adult life to be ten years ago, even if they were not yet financially independent of their families. He remained underemployed but was starting to get used to "the fact that I may have a real home someday," he wrote to me. Like Dan and Kasey, Michael's situation of underemployment had forced him to give up on an ideal of a heroic individual journey toward an independent, "unsubsidized" adulthood. In fact, it was precisely within these structures of dependency that he found an outlet for agency, including the opportunity to own his own home. Like the others, he surrendered to a kin-based interdependency that has, to some extent, been a reality of American middle class prosperity all along, regardless of deep individualist myths that suggest otherwise.

I will now shift my discussion to another householding strategy that presented unique congruencies and challenges to deep individualism. This structure rejected parent-child hierarchical dependency in favor of kinship based on individual choice. It was what my participants referred to variably as the "chosen" or "intentional" family.

AN ALTERNATIVE: THE "INTENTIONAL" FAMILY

Maia, 31, is a former server who now works on contract at a social justice non-profit based in Minneapolis. She lives in a three-bedroom house with her boyfriend and two roommates in a gentrifying neighborhood of Minneapolis. He is a chef and continues to work long hours in the service industry with hopes to eventually quit. She has only recently "gotten out" of service after getting a favorable contract for more hours from this non-profit. She has a degree in environmental studies from a reputable college in the area and was underemployed for over five

years before her non-profit gig started to pay enough for her to quit her service industry job. So far, she is a "tentative" success story, as she terms it, hoping that eventually her contract work will become a long-term, full-time position.

Maia and her boyfriend live in the top floor of a Victorian house. They are in what she calls a "consensual, non-monogamous" relationship and live with another non-monogamous, heterosexual couple, who they each are also dating. We are sitting in the living room she and her boyfriend share with this couple, its walls covered in tapestries from her college studies abroad to places in Asia and South America. She asks me about halfway through our interview, "I'm sure you mainly want to hear about the polyamory, right?" I had heard about polyamory in the press and from friends. They often referred to it as "group" marriage or "open" marriage in which the partners can date multiple people. The practice had sparked several long-form articles in publications like the *Atlantic*[101] and the *New York Times* "Modern Love"[102] section in recent years, as commentators made sense of the modern dating landscape. In these articles, it was often lumped in with online dating and "hook up" culture as part of a wave of dating shifts ushered in by Millennials.

Maia takes issue with that description and "all of the crazy press that says we're doing 'open marriages,'" she says. She tells me that polyamory it about "building an intentional community that rejects Christian morality." I ask her to elaborate:

> In our home, each member of our community has freely consented to being in a relationship where we make space to love more than one person. That's basically how I would define it. Each person gets permission before their partner starts dating anyone else, but we aren't tied to this false idea that you should only be

[101] See Khazan (2014): https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/07/multiple-lovers-no-jealousy/374697/
[102] See Weiss (2018): https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/23/style/modern-love-first-try-the-pastrami-then-the-polyamory.html

> with one person your whole life…In the case of my roommates, we decided that living together and building a kind of family makes sense. We [she and her boyfriend] had been living together for a couple years…I was definitely still dating around. When we got close with Jenny and Michael[103], we were pretty stoked to meet another couple who lived our lifestyle, and we decided to try it out after a couple months.

"Is it awkward," I ask her, "to live with a woman that is also dating your boyfriend?" She laughs,

> Yes, it can be awkward at first. But I trust him and know that I'm his main partner. He'll always be open with me and ask permission before dating someone else…It's really about what's best for your partner, loving them more than your own vanity.

Maia tells me that, for a polyamorous relationship to work, it must be "open" and "transparent." "Everybody really has to consent to this and be on board," she adds, going on to describe the "family" that her household has formed, as they eat meals together, share household costs, and have set duties and chores. "We *are* a family," she insists, gesturing to the home around her, "but it's a family that I actually chose."

During my research, I sometimes encountered this phrase: the "chosen" or "intentional" family. Participants used this term to describe household arrangements in which multiple adults lived together, pooled money, and engaged in more structured communal activities in the household than an average household of roommates. Participants that referred to their households with this language were more likely to have elaborated social rituals (nightly dinners, chores, grocery shopping trips) that resembled the rituals of a nuclear family. They might buy a car together or hold house meetings. They also might spend holidays together instead of going home to see their natal families. What differentiated them from the typical household

[103] As with all the names in this dissertation, these have been changed for the sake of confidentiality.

arrangement of unrelated roommates who pooled money for rent and perhaps engaged in sporadic, unstructured socializing was a clear sense of collective identity— that their household was a "community" or "family." The members had specific responsibilities to each other and shared a kind of fictive kinship[104] defined by individual "choice." Maia summed up the idea as we walked through their living room and into her dining room. She ran her hand along the length of a wooden dining room table, "This is our intentional family, the people that we choose to sit down and have dinner with every day."

In some cases, intentional families, like Maia's, were polyamorous. While this evolving term is defined in multiple ways in the media and by polyamorous individuals themselves,[105] the relationships that I observed were distinctive from other non-monogamous forms of dating in that the polyamorous individuals in my study saw this style of relationship as a conscious moral-ethical stance to which all parties, importantly, "consented."[106] Polyamorous individuals in my sample often had a primary romantic partnership, but dated others with their partners' knowledge. Although the polyamorous individuals in my sample were all heterosexual and cis-gender, I was often told that the norm of the polyamorous household was usually more varied, commonly with members who were bisexual and gender fluid. Often, multiple "primary" couples would live together alongside other people that they were more casually dating. Although many

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[104] Fictive kinship is a long-standing anthropological and legal term that describes relationships between people who are not related by blood or marriage but are culturally-recognized as family. Recent work on fictive kinship has focused on fictive kinship migrant worker communities. See Ebaugh and Curry (2000).

[105] For a helpful discussion of what polyamory means, see Stevens (2013): https://www.huffingtonpost.com/angi-becker-stevens/polyamorous-relationships_b_4370026.html. In this article, the author (who is polyamorous) refers to the simplest definition as "loving more than one." This mirrors Maia's definition in our interview.

[106] Obadia (2016) has analyzed polyamorous relationships in the context of contemporary liberalism, sketching how these interdependencies are managed through traditionally masculinist, market technologies, such as contracts.

polyamorous couples are legally married to a primary partner, in my sample it was more common to encounter committed long-term partners who were not married and perhaps even explicitly rejected the institution of marriage. Kinship, for these groups, was defined not so much by consanguinity or the rituals of the state, but by their personal "choice" to be a family. Within this framework, if any partner revoked their "consent" and wanted to leave the family, they should be allowed to do so.

In these intentional family households, whether polyamorous or otherwise, my participants' deep individualism collided with the pragmatism of communal living to create a household arrangement that hearkened to 1960's New Age communalism yet felt distinctly of the post-recession moment. Rather than rely on their parents to support them through the vagaries of underemployment, these participants pooled their money and built communal households with fictive, chosen kin. Many specifically lived in this way to avoid reliance on their parents or, in the case of Maia and her boyfriend, because their parents simply could not afford to help them. They created organized systems (codified on white boards and *Google Docs* spreadsheets) to split chores and costs equally, often with careful accounting and aided by technology like *Venmo*. Distinct from roommate households that did not mark themselves out in this way, these intentional household members also often shared a concern for issues of environmental sustainability, and participants often argued to me that their living system was more carbon-neutral compared to the suburban, nuclear family households they grew up in. Ultimately, for these participants, the intentional household presented an alternative to blood kin dependencies that, as with Dan, Michael, and Kasey, provoked ambivalence.

Why exactly was interdependency with other unrelated adults more palatable than with consanguineous kin? When I asked Maia this question, she said "It's something about relying on

your parents for everything, like your privilege…We work together in this house to get by and live in a sustainable home." Like Maia, participants described the intentional household as more "horizontal," without the hierarchies of wealthy and authority they felt were embedded in the parent-child relationship. Maia also emphasized the sense of "working together" rather than passively relying on "privilege" to subsist. Emphasizing the symmetry of exchange relations in the intentional household, participants often described how economic relationships were more "equal" in their homes and that they liked how household members worked "together" to "get by" rather than relying on wealth from any one person. Describing her own feelings about how she used to rely on her parents for rent and car insurance money:

> For those of us who were lucky enough to have grown up with some money, our parents just had more than us. They've propped up our generation and I…at least feel like I really feel like we owe them. But they are also screwing us…We need to learn to go it on our own.

Her statement is reminiscent of Emily's remark at the beginning of this chapter that being an adult means being "on your own"—that, as a person ages past schooling, the parent-child dependency relationship shifts from a healthy and normal relationship to one that is pathological and abnormal. Unlike Emily, however, Maia does not feel she needs to totally "go it on her own." Instead, she relies on her chosen family to make ends meet.

Maia's view showcases the deep individualism characteristic of the American middle classes. In this ordering of the world, economic forms predicated by an individualist view of personhood emerge more virtuous than others. In the case of the intentional household, balanced exchange and egalitarian, peer-to-peer relationships were elevated over the hierarchical dependency of intergenerational blood ties. Communalist labor arrangements where "everyone

has to contribute equally," as another participant described, were morally preferable to wealth gained simply through one's parentage.

Intentional bonds ultimately carried a fundamentally different moral color and meaning than those of the parental, consanguineous bond. Parent-child interdependency was hierarchical, one-sided, and something of which to be ashamed. Relying on money and other "subsidies" from your parents was the stuff of unearned "privilege." It was something to be hidden or avoided, if possible. Chosen kinship represented a morally and practically viable alternative to intergenerational dependency and the moral stain of what they viewed as unearned, inherited wealth. Interdependencies on more equal ground between partners, peers, and friends who they individually "chose" as kin were not shameful and could even be understood as a more virtuous, "sustainable" kind of household. Faced with the quandary of how to survive "on your own" in the face of underemployment, these participants "chose" their family and, through this act of choosing, they endowed familiar roommate households with organization and meaning that gave them the independence they craved from their natal families. Here was a new kind of adult household, adapted to precarious times.

CONCLUSION

This chapter described some of the household forms that developed out of conditions of underemployment, as my participants creatively struggled to build some semblance of an affluent domestic life despite lacking many of the key cultural markers for adulthood. It considered the deep individualism that underpinned my participants' adulthood stories and then examined some of the forms of collective association that were possible under such a cultural ordering, focusing closely on the most common dynamic that I observed: hierarchical dependency with parents.

Whether living under their parents' roof or on their own, the underemployed cultivated linkages to parental resources that provided the financial stability they desperately needed. These dependencies made certain paths of action possible as workers—sometimes eager, sometimes reluctant— relied on kinship networks to outfit their homes and lives with at least some of the material trappings of middle class adulthood. Haunted by a self-defeating social mythology of individualism, however, these relationships also produced feelings of shame, ambivalence, and stunted adulthood. Faced with this stigma, some sought out alternative dependencies that conformed more closely to an individualist moral order, whether by building a nuclear family of their own or undertaking communalist household arrangements with chosen kin.

While rarely articulated as such in my interviews, adulthood emerged in these household practices as deeply relational. It necessitated a fundamental shift in the parent-child relationship, from one of reciprocity and hierarchical redistribution to one of egalitarian, balanced exchange. It follows that not all household interdependencies were morally equivalent among the underemployed; inter-household parental dependency emerged as the most common and most stigmatized relationship of all. As young people aged past college, the interdependencies so vital to the parent-child relationship reemerged as inappropriate and morally suspect. Yet, as participants like Maia showed, being "on your own" did not have to mean having a spouse or a nuclear family. It could also mean relying on your intentional family, roommates, or partner. Emerging forms of association such as these constitute the vanguard of what is possible at a historical moment of both great precarity and stubborn individualism.

Regardless of what household solutions my participants reached, in all the cases outlined in this chapter, deep individualism yielded to the practical challenges of underemployment. These households were adaptive forms, old in the sense that they resembled long enduring bonds

of human kinship, yet new in the sense that they were cobbled out of the eroding liberalism of the early twentieth-first century, populated by young people who found their own meritocratic, individualist values challenged by their biographies and the world they saw around them. While all of my participants held on to at least some element of their individualist "first language" when considering their status as adults, they made use of the cultural resources available to them and improvised. In these *ad hoc* solutions, new kinds of middle class households emerged.

I will now shift my discussion from the household relationalities that undergirded my participants' adulthood struggles to the practices that they used to act out and display adulthood despite their perceived deficits. These digital enactments, crystallized in the popular neologism "adulting," flourished out of the age of the Internet as the underemployed improvised "how to adult" and broadcasted their success and failures through the megaphones of *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and *Twitter*.

CHAPTER FIVE: LEARNING HOW TO #ADULT – DIGITAL ENACTMENTS OF THE LIFE COURSE

This chapter examines some of the ways that the underemployed improvised adulthood despite their perceived deficits in wealth and career prestige. I focus on the cluster of social practices emerging around the popular neologism "adulting." Born of the playful humor of the Internet meme, the noun-turned-verb connotes the activity of doing adult-like, often mundane activities like visiting the dentist, paying a parking ticket, settling a cable company dispute, or purchasing a bed frame. As it quickly became the subject of social media posts documenting the multitude of ways that young people "do" adulthood, the term catapulted from obscure meme and hashtag to the shortlist for *Oxford Dictionary* "Word of the Year" in 2016.

I describe the contexts in which my participants used the term adulting and consider the central role of digital infrastructures. I then analyze the practices clustering around the term as enactments of social maturity, emerging as young people improvise ways to publicly mark "adulthood" amid shifting understandings of the life course. I argue that this neologism is a unique product of the present historical moment, capturing the partial, in-progress quality of adulthood as it is lived in the contemporary United States. For these downwardly-mobile college graduates, reaching adulthood was anything but a linear journey with a clear, guaranteed arrival time. Rather, my participants dealt practically with the problem of becoming adults, picking up various cultural detritus along the way—the *IKEA* headboard, the Fordist family dinner table, the 1960's commune, or the *Instagram* filter. To "adult" was not to authoritatively inhabit a life stage or status. It was—however incompletely, however poorly—to *do* it, in spite of the disorder. Such a term is especially fitting for the experiences of the underemployed, but has a generational

resonance that extends further, reflecting the fundamental incoherence that greets many young Americans as they make sense of how to reach maturity in today's world.

A SHORT HISTORY OF #ADULTING

In 2016, the *Oxford Dictionary* shortlisted[107] the noun-turned-verb-turned-gerund, "adulting," for its Word of the Year designation. *Oxford* defined adulting as, "the practice of behaving in a way characteristic of a responsible adult, especially the accomplishment of mundane but necessary tasks" (1). The designation capped off a banner year for the term, with no-less-than the *Washington Post* launching a weekly "How to Adult"[108] segment on *You Tube*, and major news media covering the opening of an "Adulting School"[109] in Maine. Adulting, whether in its verb form (i.e. "I just bought my own car for the first time! I'm *adulting* so hard right now!") or gerund form (i.e. "I have to go to the DMV today. *Adulting* is the worst!"), has clearly catapulted from the world of internet meme into the mainstream linguistic repertoire. What might its ubiquity tell us about the state of social adulthood in the United States?

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[107] See the press release: https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/press/news/2016/12/11/WOTY-16
[108] See the *Washington Post's* How to Adult series on *You Tube* at: *https*://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8QBkS_wk32W4lbxt7_gvADpF_zANx3SG
[109] See coverage on *National Public Radio*: https://www.npr.org/2017/02/21/510554718/adulting-school-teaches-young-adults-grown-up-skills

Figure 1: Example of internet meme featuring the neologism, adulting. Source: Know Your Meme (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/adulting)

Figure 2: Example of internet meme featuring the neologism, adulting. Source: Know Your Meme (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/adulting)

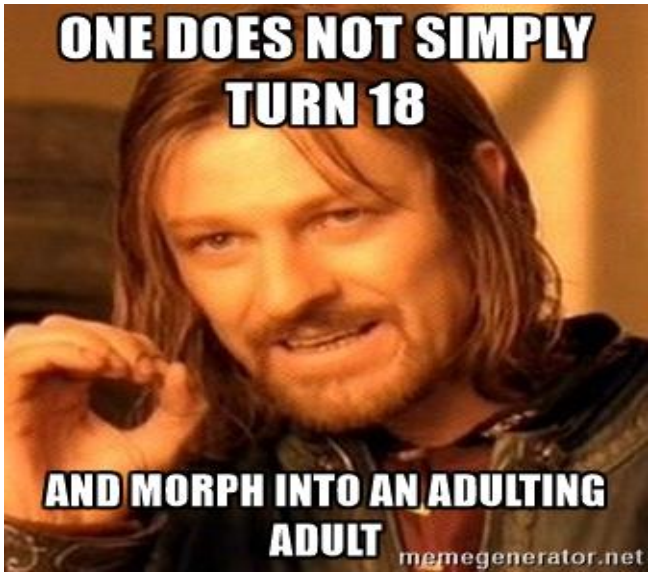

Figure 3: Example of internet meme featuring the neologism, adulting. Source: Know Your Meme (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/adulting)

Figure 4: Example of internet meme featuring the neologism, adulting. Source: Know Your Meme (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/adulting)

Where did the term adulting come from? In their introduction, *Oxford* is unable to determine the exact origin of the word. Instead, they remark that it, "seems to have begun to appear on social media in 2008."[110] The popular blog *Grammar Girl* cites a 2010 "tweet"[111] as one of the first examples of the term associated with a *Twitter*[112] hashtag. The tweet reads, "Tonight @queenbroadway really made me feel like an adult. #adulting." *Grammar Girl* also cites Kelly Williams Brown, who started a popular self-help blog in 2011 called "AdultingBlog.com" and later adapted it into a 2013 *New York Times* best-selling book titled *Adulting: How to Become a Grown-up in 468 Easy(ish) Steps.* Marketed in the language of self-help, the book's back material reads:

> If you graduated from college but still feel like a student . . . if you wear a business suit to job interviews but pajamas to the grocery store . . . if you have your own apartment but no idea how to cook or clean . . . it's OK. But it doesn't have to be this way. Just because you don't feel like an adult doesn't mean you can't act like one. And it all begins with this funny, wise, and useful book. Based on Kelly Williams Brown's popular blog, ADULTING, makes the scary, confusing "real world" approachable, manageable--and even conquerable. This guide will help you to navigate the stormy Sea of Adulthood so that you may find safe harbor in Not Running Out of Toilet Paper Bay.[113]

The book promises to be a "comprehensive handbook" for "aspiring grown-ups of all ages." Ultimately a product of the 280-character phantasmagoria of *Twitter,* the term's origins reside somewhere in the fuzzy history of social media hashtags and comments. Yet, Brown is probably

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[110] See *Oxford's* definition of adulting : https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/adulting
[111] For a screenshot of the tweet, see *Grammar Girl* (Fogarty 2014): https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/2014-word-of-the-year-adulting
[112] *Twitter* is a popular social networking site in which users communicate in 280-character messages, called "tweets." Users can include metadata tags, such as the hashtag (#) in their tweets. These tags make it easy to find other posts on a given topic.
[113] See Kelly Williams Brown's official website for her summary of the book: https://www.kellywilliamsbrown.com/adulting/

the first person to use the word in a major publication. While the content of the book clearly falls into the long-standing genre of self-help, it is telling that the first published book on adulting sets aside questions related to whether readers *are* adults in favor of pragmatic how-to advice for how they can *practice* adulthood. Perhaps most importantly, her proposition that one can "act" like an adult despite not "feeling" like one provides the earliest distillation of the self-deprecation and insecurity that has become a central contextual feature of the adulting term

.In the aftermath of Brown's publication, use of the term increased on social media, rising to a peak that has held since 2017.[114] Thousands of social media users, whether through *Twitter*, *Instagram*,[115] or *Facebook*,[116] started associating "adult-like" activities with a hashtag, whether they were cooking dinner, signing a lease, or buying a car. Other users ironically highlighted "un-adult" like activities that they done throughout the day with the hashtag—for example, heating up pizza for breakfast or spending work time circulating videos of baby animals to family and friends. This social media popularity began to bleed into marketing campaigns and consumer products, with phrases like "Can't adult today" appearing on t-shirts[117] and "Coffee Because Adulting Is Hard" appearing on coffee mugs."[118] A particularly popular meme derived

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[114] A cursory search in the analytics tool Google Trends show a steep spike in the use of "adulting" as a search term starting in 2014. See the following: https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=adulting

[115] *Instagram* is a video and photo-sharing social networking site service, in which users can edit and post videos using various forms of editing technology, including photographic filters that can give photos a stylized appearance. In 2012, it was bought by *Facebook.*

[116] *Facebook* is a social networking service in which users have personal profiles and can post content to their page, including pictures, website links, and written messages.

[117] For examples, see Amazon.com: https://www.amazon.com/I-Cant-Adult-Today-Shirt/dp/B016H6PCK8

[118] A Google Image search with the terms "adulting" and "coffee mug" will produce these options and many others. See Figure 5 for an example from an online store called Muggies (https://muggies-store.myshopify.com/collections/all).

from the term simply states, "I'm Done Adulting. Let's Be Mermaids."[119] Online retailers continue to monetize this meme into wine glasses, t-shirts, coffee mugs, and cell phone covers.[120]

Figure 5: "COFFEE. Because adulting is HARD. Source: Muggies Store (https://muggies-store.myshopify.com/collections/all)

[119]See Figure 6. Like most memes, the original authorship is sketchy. However, an early poster of the meme is Sarah Prout (@lovesarahprout). See the image on her *Facebook* page: https://www.facebook.com/lovesarahprout/photos/a.462043780717/10153431508775718/?type=3&theater.

[120] For more examples, see the "adulting" section at this online merchandise retailer: https://www.teepublic.com/gifts-and-merchandise/adulting

Figure 6: "I'm done adulting. Let's be mermaids." Source: Sarah Prout (https://www.facebook.com/lovesarahprout/)

Adulting's rapid spike in popularity has sparked numerous op-eds debating the term, its meanings, and what it says about the so-called "Millennial" generation.[121] While some authors argue that the term reflects the unique financial and social precarity of this cohort (Steinmetz 2016), others argue that is a sign of "entitlement" and that social media users should "kindly shut the hell up about it" (Tullo 2016). This perspective is captured pithily in this headline from feminist blog *Jezebel*: "You're Not 'Adulting,' You're Acting Your Fucking Age."[122] Some

[121] The term Millennial Generation is commonly used in public discourse to describe the cohort born approximately from the 1980's through the turn of the millennium. Pew Research Center (2012) defines the "millennial generation" as encompassing any person born before 1997. This cohort is sometimes referred to an example of a "lost generation" affected adversely by large-scale calamitous events (in this case, the financial crisis of 2008). See Casselman and Walker (2013) in the *Wall Street Journal* for an example of this argument: https://www.wsj.com/articles/wanted-jobs-for-the-new-lost-generation-1379117803. See Pew Research Center (2012) for a detailed description of the issues with defining this generation (and cohorts in general) and some of the characteristics of this group: http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/millennials/.

[122] See Davies (2015): https://jezebel.com/youre-not-adulting-youre-acting-your-fucking-age-1746878718

have gone as far as to argue that the term itself is fundamentally sexist and self-infantilizing (Grose 2017).[123] Linguists, for their part, (Zimmer, Solomon, and Carson 2016) have argued that the term is merely another example of the "verbing" of nouns, a common feature throughout the history of the English language. They cite the term "parenting" as a similar verb that appeared in the twentieth century (1).

Clearly, the neologism adulting is a product of digital worlds,[124] birthed as a meme and popularized through the aggregating logic of *Twitter* and the hashtag (Juris 2012; Bonilla and Rosa 2015). The term, nevertheless, links to practices and social identities that transcend the digital and cross what Boellstorff (2012) has termed as the "inter-indexical" gap between the "virtual" and the "actual (52)."[125] Through the megaphone of social media, the term re-signifies every day, banal activities like doing the dishes or giving oneself a facial treatment into public signs of social maturity. It creates space for young people to enact an adult identity, however incompletely and ironically, by creatively displaying their lives for public consumption and judgement. Through social media, these material forms can then circulate across the often much wider and more expedient reach of an individual's virtual social networks.

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[123] See: https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/05/09/the-word-adulting-is-gross-its-also-sexist/?utm_term=.9b9d099786ef

[124] I use the term "digital" here as it is defined by Miller and Horst (2012): "All that which can be ultimately reduced to binary code but which produces a further proliferation of particularity and difference" (1). In their introduction to the growing subfield of digital anthropology, Miller and Horst (2012) lay out the foundations for an anthropological approach to the digital. Among their central principles is the materiality of digital worlds, "which are neither more nor less material than the worlds that preceded them" (4).

[125] Here Boellstorff is arguing against conceptions of the digital that theorize a "blurring" of the boundaries between online and offline worlds. He argues that the virtual and the actual should not be conflated; rather, they are distinct yet connected, pointing toward each other across an "inter-indexical gap" (52). Put another way, they refer to each other within a particular social context, following Peirce (1992).

Social networking sites like *Instagram* are uniquely positioned to invest these enactments of adulthood, largely fleeting or private in the "actual" world, with a robust materiality, whether through an artfully filtered photo and or a pithy phrase transformed into a meme or tweet. Writing about personhood in their introduction to the field of digital anthropology, Miller and Horst (2012) state that, for many people, it is only on the internet that they can become real—or who "they feel they really are" (15). For many of my participants, I found that it was primarily through the internet that they could finally become adults. In videos, photos, and tweets aggregated through #adulting, a user's adult-ness emerges as more socially visible, and, in a sense, "real" to participants. The verbal structure of adulting, however, speaks to the instability of today's life course norms, as social maturity appears not as a robust state to be achieved, but rather an incomplete, precarious process (thus, adult*ing* rather than adulthood). Analogous to this linguistic shift from noun to verb, we see normative ideas of social maturity shifting from form to process. Social maturity surfaces as a matter of *ad hoc*, everyday practice rather than a well-defined stage buttressed by clear cultural landmarks.

I will now focus on the practices that accompanied this digital activity by describing four clusters of activities that my participants set apart on social networking sites as examples of adulting. Through the platforms of *Instagram*, *Twitter*, and *Facebook*, they transformed these everyday activities into public displays that, across the span of an individual's social networking feed, constituted a kind of mosaic of social maturity. These four clusters include: 1) bureaucratic miscellanea, 2) activities around consumption, 3) rituals of "self-care," and 4) dinner parties or other organized gatherings with friends. I argue that, taken together, this digital phantasmagoria constitutes a new material culture of the life course.

#ADULTING AND BUREAUCRATIC MISCELLANEA

To my surprise, the underemployed in my sample most commonly referenced mundane interactions with bureaucracies as adulting on their social media feeds, closely followed by practices of consumption.[126] Based on the volume of these posts, it appeared that the boring, seemingly pointless minutiae of bureaucracy were an essential part of social maturity. These activities were, as one participant said, "the stuff your parents used to do for you." Filling out paperwork, sitting in a waiting room for hours, and navigating the tax code were just some of the activities that #adulting helped transformed into signals of life course development. While these forms of bureaucratic miscellanea were rarely at the center of how the underemployed narrated their own stories of adulthood, they nonetheless found their way into #adulting posts on social networking sites where a black-and-white filter layered over a photo on *Instagram* might transform them into something newly artful and significant. Through this digitized process, the underemployed transformed the banal into emotional, aesthetically marked, and newly meaningful signals of life course development.

One of the first times that I encountered the term adulting occurred before my field research, at the Department of Motor Vehicles in a suburb of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I was

[126] Of my pool of 42 participants, I was able to connect with (i.e. friend or follow) all of the approximately 38 (20 women, 18 men) who reported having social media accounts (limited to *Twitter*, *Facebook*, or *Instagram*). Across a time frame that ranged from one year to two months, depending on the participant, I observed 32 posts with content dealing with adulthood or featuring the adulting hashtag, a little under one post per account on average. The highest number of adulting posts by an individual during fieldwork was six posts, with four individuals posting more than two times about adulting (2 men, 2 women). Overall, men and women posted at similar rates (approx. 50%). Through content analysis, I established the following four subject area categories for these adulthood posts: bureaucracy and paperwork (n=11), consumer products and activities around consumption (n=10), "self-care" (n=7), dinner parties or organized gatherings with friends (n=3), and household chores (n=1). Nearly all the 32 posts contain photos or other identifying information about the participants, so I have not included visual examples of posts to protect their privacy.

sitting with a new acquaintance, both of us holding white paper slips printed with our number in line. As we waited, paperwork in hand, she pulled out her phone, took a few photographs of the paper slip, and a discrete "selfie"[127] with her phone tilted upward in her lap. She started to create a post on *Twitter* as I peered over her shoulder. "Adulting!" she said in an exaggerated, self-mocking tone, typing the hash tagged term into the caption box.

Her utterance conveyed some of the characteristic irony that I would later observe as an essential feature of #adulting posts. The vocal modulation that she used was imitating what linguists have termed "vocal fry."[128] It is often associated with a stereotype of a vapid Millennial consumed with taking selfies, cultivating their online image, and growing their number of *Instagram* followers. With her exaggerated tone, she mocked this social-media obsessed figure while at the same time knowingly engaging in these stereotyped behaviors. The very idea that sitting in line at the DMV was a measure of legitimate adulthood emerged in her post as a kind of ironic joke. As one participant described it, "We're calling what we're doing 'adulting' but we're aware that obviously we're not very legitimate adults in most ways." In a gray area between humor and seriousness, she enacted a partial, almost laughable adulthood through the transformation of bureaucratic practice into digital utterance.

Three years later, I find myself at a tax preparer's office with Kasey. She has a day off, and I have travelled to the suburbs to observe and participate with her in her everyday outside-of-work activities. As we pull into *H & R Block*, she remarks to me that this is her "least favorite

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[127] "Selfie" is the English colloquial term for a picture that a person takes of themselves.
[128] "Vocal fry" is defined by Wolk et al. (2012) as a distinct form of phonation "associated with creaky, harsh, or rough voice qualities." It has traditionally been understood as a vocal disorder, but in their study of vocal fry among speakers of Standard American English, they found that is increasingly common among normal populations, especially among women. In media outlets like *This American Life* and *The Atlantic*, the speaking style has emerged as a subject of pop culture pieces deriding the style. See Reynolds (2015) for an overview of the controversy.

errand of the year," getting her taxes done. Although many of her friends had moved on from in-person tax preparers to online resources like *Turbo Tax*, she prefers sitting down with a tax professional and having them walk her through the process.

That afternoon, we spend much of our time in a waiting room swamped by last minute filers, and as I found at the DMV, this waiting room time constituted a prime opportunity for social media browsing and posting. Not fifteen minutes into our wait, I observe Kasey awkwardly holding a full to-go cup of coffee above her knee, where she has artfully draped a copy of her *W-2* tax form from the restaurant. In her other hand, she precarious holds and then clicks the digital shutter of the camera on her phone. She shifts the tax form slightly (to exclude sensitive personal information, as I later found out) and takes another photo. Clicking on her photo library, she reviews the image and appears satisfied with one of them. Shortly, I see the cursive scrawl of the *Instagram* application header appear on her phone, and she begins creating a post. After a minute, she sees me watching her and asks me which filter I think looks best. We select a subdued sepia that reminds me of the kind of heavily-edited wedding photography commonly found on *Pinterest*.[129] She then captions the photo, "#Adulting is getting your taxes done on April 15," referencing how she has waited until days before the deadline to get them filed. As I sit in the reception room while she finishes, I watch on my phone as a steady onslaught of likes and comments flood in.

Some months later, Michael calls me. He and his girlfriend have decided to forego re-signing the lease on her studio and want to buy a home. Through a friend at work, he has heard about the State of Minnesota's down payment assistance program. They have asked their parents

[129] Pinterest is a website and mobile app for gathering media from across the internet. Users "pin" different images onto "boards" and can share them with a network of followers.

for a $3,000 loan for the down payment and are now looking for houses in qualifying neighborhoods of Minneapolis. They ask if I would like to come along on one of their open house visits, as this seemed to them a very "adult" activity.

That weekend, they pick me up in his girlfriend's beaten up sedan on a Sunday morning, and we head toward one of the gentrifying northern areas of Minneapolis, eventually parking in front of a ranch home. We get out of the car and walk into the one-bedroom, one-bathroom structure. It smells of Lysol, and there is haphazard array of staging furniture scattered throughout. In the next twenty minutes, as the couple surveys the home, greets the realtor, and hears her pitch about how this home is a "perfect starter home," at least four potential buyers have already walked in. Michael likes the home. Despite the small size and old appliances, it has hardwood floors like all his previous rentals. There is also a basement, which he hopes they can rent as a second bedroom. He looks nervously around as other thirty-something's stroll in, commanding the attention of the realtor. He mumbles to me, "We've got competition." Armed with notepads and other miscellaneous documents that Michael has never heard of, these people look more prepared.

Michael did not end up buying this home. Within the day, someone with cash had already made an offer. Later that night, however, I see an *Instagram* post on his girlfriend's feed. It is an angularly cropped picture of the front yard's wooden fence. The fence is captured as it casts a shadow, and the photograph is filtered in black and white. The caption reads, "Home shopping today. Does this mean we're adults?" As I inspect the post, I wonder how something as minimal as a color filter can give such gravitas to such a shabby object. A photo of a rickety, peeling fence shifts what was ultimately a boring day of house browsing into a moment of life

transformation. “Does this mean we’re adults?” she asks in the post. The question mark leaves the answer ambiguous.

One month later, another post comes across my *Instagram* feed, this time from Michael’s account. It is a photo of home closing documents—a deed, a cashier’s check, a pile of other paperwork. He and his girlfriend are smiling and holding pens over the pile. This post has an orange tone reminiscent of a 1970’s *Polaroid*; the wash of color reminds me of a *Beach Boys* album cover. The caption reads, “#Adulting hard today! Looks like were [sic] homeowners!” I find out later that they bought another ranch down the street from the original home that I had toured with them. “There were so many documents I thought my hand was going to fall off,” Michael writes me later. They had finally moved out of their old rental.

Closing on a home, filing taxes—these are some of the most document-heavy events of a person’s life. In the case of a home closing, the varied bureaucracies of government, banking, insurance, and realty come together as ownership passes from one party to another. In the process of filing taxes, the underemployed engage with the machinery of the federal and state government, hoping to come away with a healthy return. Documents must be signed, scanned, and filed away, rarely to be looked at again. His hand poised over a pile of papers, Michael told me that at his closing he, “felt like he was really doing it [adulthood].” He wanted to document the “milestone,” and so he asked his girlfriend to grab a pen. They quickly posed. A few clicks later, and they circulated this moment in vintage hues for his friends to see. Kasey told me after our afternoon at the tax filer that she was just “bored, honestly,” and felt “kind of proud” of getting the taxes done herself after years of filing with her parents’ accountant. Perhaps motivated by a mixture of boredom and pride, they projected these moments online.

Whatever their reasons, however, when Michael posted his about-to-sign moment or when Kasey photographed her precariously balanced *W-2*, they transmuted bureaucratic practice into something artful and significant, part of a larger tableau of adulting material displayed on their social media feeds. Through the digital infrastructure of *Instagram*, paperwork emerged as something aesthetically marked and public, and as was often the case in my participants' social media networks, their parents were the first to notice. "My mom liked the post right away," Michael joked as we discussed the post, "She's always the first person to go crazy for this stuff." Kasey's mother commented on her daughter's post, "They grow up so fast ;)" Social media provided the tools to materialize the process of "doing adulthood" and display it for recognition.

Despite all this talk of adulting, however, Michael told me at our last meeting that "I still don't think I'm an adult, really." For him, adulting did not mean that he had fully entered some stage. Taking a photo of mortgage documents might garner "likes" from his parents and comments from friends, but ultimately it did not make him an adult. Rather these posts were artifacts of what was really an incomplete process. Social media posts might give material weight and temporal durability to fleeting bureaucratic moments, encoding them within a schema of the life course. But they did not change the ultimate confusion that Michael felt about his own adulthood. As he remarked,

> Honestly, it's hard to know. What does it even mean to be an adult, anymore? I have this feeling like I don't have the stuff...or do the stuff that I should…that my parents did. I feel like we're still pretty much children in this world. The adulting thing is kind of fun, kind of a joke, but I think it does make her [his girlfriend] feel like we're making some progress in life. Maybe our parents will see this stuff and think we're not deadbeats.

Through posting, he might be acting out adulthood, but he was under no illusions that he was "really" an adult. For Michael and my other participants, adulting was tongue-in-cheek and

humorous. It was an *ad hoc* process that was largely futile. They did not expect posting online to somehow resolve internal or societal conflicts about adulthood. It was, as Kasey said, "pretty much a joke."

Yet, these practices and their digital residues created novel opportunities for recognition and meaning-making. In one sense, my participants' social media posts and accompanying hashtags functioned not so differently from non-digital utterances, as public symbols projecting social maturity to others. These posts re-signified and re-enchanted bureaucratic practices like signing one's name on a mortgage document or filing taxes, creating opportunities for the underemployed to garner recognition of life course milestones among their family and friends. In another sense, however, these posts were distinct from older symbolic forms. With the hashtag, they tapped into emerging technologies of aggregation fostered by the Internet. The hashtag pulled my participants into a broader stream of digitally-mediated discourse that transcended traditional boundaries of time and space. Anthropology has primarily addressed hashtag phenomenon through the lens of social movement studies with Juris (2012) connecting the hashtag to an "emerging logic of aggregation" within global movements for justice seeking to assemble "masses of individuals from diverse backgrounds within physical spaces" (1). Bonilla and Rose (2015), in their study of the Ferguson protests describe the hashtag as "an indexing system in both the clerical and semiotic sense," meaning that "similar to the coding systems employed by anthropologists, hashtags allow users to not simply 'file' their comments, but to performatively frame what these comments are 'really about' " (5). These authors primarily speak to the tactical usefulness of the hashtag for amplifying activist causes in the public sphere. For my participants, the hashtag fostered something quite different—a cultural practice of

recognition, too loosely structured to rise to the level of ritual yet offering singular opportunities for enacting social maturity in today's world.

Alongside photos of tax returns and DMV visits, practices of consumption were almost as commonly featured in #adulting posts. Most of these posts, however, did not highlight large purchases, like a home, that were out of reach for many. Instead, many underemployed people turned to smaller purchases like a handbag, bed frame, or stand mixer to digitally project adulthood. Starting with one of Michael's earliest household purchases, over a year prior to the summer when he purchased his first home, I now turn to these enactments.

THE BED FRAME AND THE "GROWN UP PURSE": THE MATERIAL ACCOUTREMENTS OF #ADULTING

"I'm getting a bed frame today," Michael tells me one evening as we sit awkwardly on his mattress, which rests directly on the floor. Since he moved out of his parent's home the summer after college, he has slept this way. It is the very beginning of my fieldwork, and Michael still lives with five roommates in a dilapidated, thinly furnished rental. He sometimes brags to me about his spartan sleeping arrangement, telling me that he might just buy a thinner mattress from Japan that unrolls directly onto the floor. He has developed an interest in all things Japanese during his time working as a tea barista in Minneapolis. But he is almost 30 now, and yesterday one of his five roommates informed him that a mouse was roaming around the house. "It's time," he says, with faux seriousness. The day has finally arrived. We are going to *IKEA*.

Among my participants, the Swedish retailer *IKEA* was the place where you bought your furniture and housewares if you could not find something cheaper in the online classified ads. Upon move-in, roommates made the obligatory drive to Bloomington, in the shadow of the

famed *Mall of America*, to roam the aisles and admire the various domestic dreamscapes that *IKEA*'s visual merchandisers had created. There they would look for cheap and relatively stylish furniture that fit easily into tight, awkward spaces. Roaming through the immaculately minimalist labyrinth of a kitchen/studio bedroom, shoppers would admire a cleverly stowed knife set here or an underbed storage unit there. A section of buildable wardrobes offered the solution to so many closet-less bedrooms. A $5 set of six red wine glasses beckoned despite almost always breaking within a year.

While visually stimulating, visiting *IKEA* was almost always an angst-filled experience. Most of my participants could not afford most of the store's elaborate furniture tableaus. Instead, they had to pick-and-choose, checking the dreams that such consumerist landscapes provoked with what they could buy. They might not be able to spend $300 on the entertainment center that *IKEA's* merchandisers had artfully assembled in their living room display, but maybe the $100 lower attachment would work. The $8 wine glass set might last longer, but the $5 set that regularly broke in the dish washer was the right price. Roommates made careful calculations on smart phone calculators while lounging on couch displays, and those who had regular financial support from their parents used this time to justify a few charges on their parents' credit card. "It's a 'safe place' for me to charge things," as one participant told me, indicating that her parents were less likely to get angry with her for making charges to *IKEA* than for drinks at a bar. Some took their parents along on their shopping trips to hopefully "plant the seeds," as one participant described it, for them to buy some furniture for them. Some, like Michael, charged their purchases to their own credit card hoping that next weekend's tips might pay for it.

We pull into the enormous parking garage in Michael's hatchback and head through *IKEA's* sliding doors, up to the showroom on the second floor, and past the labyrinth of sofas,

desks, and shelves to the bedroom area. Here they are: rows of mattresses resting on platforms ranging from the basic two-by-four combinations to stylish four poster platforms. Some have drawers; others are barely more than a row of perilously thin wood slats stretched over a frame and bound by linen strips. After a discussion with a sales representative, we determine that Michael does not need a box spring for his mattress. The slats for $50 might just work. Michael picks up a bound pack of slats leaning against the display and slings them over his shoulder with a triumphant smile. "I think you need more than that for a bed," I tell him. Sure enough, after another talk with the salesperson we write down the number of an additional bed piece we would need to pick up from the warehouse on the first floor. "Everything's separate," another customer remarks to us sympathetically as we type the frame's item number into Michael's phone, "Honestly, I'm not even sure you save money." Twenty minutes and $200 dollars later, and we are carting a giant, unwieldy box of wooden frames out of the store and lugging the purchases into the SUV.

The bed does not actually get constructed for three weeks. *IKEA*'s no frill approach to furniture means that it is up to the purchaser to put all the pieces together with the aid of an instruction sheet and online videos. Some of my participants, despite being hungry and tired from several hours at the store, would put their pieces together immediately upon getting home. Others waited for weeks and months. When we return to Michael's apartment, he rips open the bed frame box, takes a look at the inscrutable cartoon instructions, and immediately says, "Nope." I come back for a visit a week later, and the box and slats are still piled in a corner. His bed is still on the floor. Another week later, and he texts me, "It's time." It takes three hours and a six pack of beers, but we manage to put the bed together with only a few mistakes. We lift his mattress, which had been leaning against the wall, and lower it on to the frame. "Guys," Michael

yells to his roommates with exaggerated enthusiasm, “Guys, come look! I’ve got a bed!” Several people wander into the room and look on as Michael takes the bed for a “test drive” and flops back onto the mattress. To my relief, it does not collapse. “Welcome to middle age, man,” one of his roommates remarks dryly, slapping Michael on the back and walking out of the room.

After the room clears, Michael meanders to his phone. He opens his *Twitter* account and posts, “#adulting when you finally stop sleeping on the floor.” I note the post and assume that this will probably be the only time during my research when bed frame shopping will factor into my data collection. Seven months later, however, an acquaintance of a participant’s is also heading to *IKEA* for a bedframe. He documents the trip in an *Instagram* post of himself pushing a full shopping cart through the parking lot, “Just got my first real bed! #adulting” Here was the bed, yet again.

At the *Mall of America*, not far from where Michael bought his bed, Zoe is making an “adult” purchase of her own. She works as a sale representative at a high-end department store and serves in a suburban restaurant on her days off. She majored in communications at a large public university in the Dakotas and moved to Minneapolis after college, hoping to write for a fashion website or company. She was thrilled to move to Minneapolis, a city that, for her, seemed like a bastion of culture, art, and tolerance compared to her sleepy hometown. Unable to find a paying job within the first months of her arrival, however, she took a position in sales at the department store to pay her bills and, as she tells me, “stay in the fashion scene.” She had never planned to work at the department store for long; the hours are haphazard and difficult. The commission-only pay structure causes her such stress that she says she is losing hair because of it. She loves the employee discount she receives on the store’s array of luxury commodities but finds herself overspending each month on the store credit card. Because of this spending

habit, she supplements her wages with work in the food service industry. Between these two jobs, she rarely has time to network beyond the doors of her department store. Five years have passed, and she is still working in service.

One day around the holidays each year, Zoe's department store offers an increased discount to employees, spinning this benefit as an end-of-year bonus. As a sale representative, she would only receive a 20% discount normally, but on this special day, she will receive the manager-level discount: 33% off. Zoe has been "scouting" for a month around the store, trying to decide what she will buy with her discount that year. In addition to the usual Christmas gifts for her family, she decides on a "grown-up purse," as she calls it, an expensive designer bag that is a "serious step up," from the purses she carried in college. In our discussions on adulthood, Zoe tells me that purse might make her "feel a little better" about herself, that it might help her feel that she has "her life together." A few days in advance, Zoe decides on a $300 black leather tote from the designer Tory Burch. She has regularly "visited" the bag during her breaks at the department store and, after a lot of debate about whether the bag is too "basic,"[130] she decides to buy it. She loves the leather tassel embellishment and the subtle logo embedded on the front. "It's just part of that uniform," she tells me, referencing the successful, well-to-do clients that she serves at the store. She will now have a handbag, "better than a lot of them."

Shortly after buying it, she posts a picture of herself holding the bag with an animated smile. The picture is captioned, "When you finally can afford that bag you always wanted. Thanks [name of store]! #adultpurse #blessed #comeshopwithme." Six months later, Zoe decides to move back to her home in the Dakotas. She is giving up on fashion and has decided to take

[130] "Basic" is American English slang for middle class white culture, an evolution of the term "main stream." See Crum (2017): https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/06/basic-dictionary-word_n_7215002.html

classes to eventually go to nursing school. She will live with her parents for a while until she gets "back on her feet." She still carries the handbag, though, as I note the last time that I see her. We laugh about it at our last meeting, and she tells me, "Honestly, it's the best thing I got out of that job."

Despite their limited means, consumption, whether of beds, purses, or other commodities, was a key tactic for enacting adulthood among the underemployed.[131] Like the *IKEA* bed frame, the "grown-up purse" was part of an emerging material culture of the life course, fostered by the digital infrastructure of social media. These posts lived in that liminal space between crowd-sourced marketing and personal expression that has made *Instagram, Twitter*, and other social media sites a magnet for new, less conspicuous forms of marketing, including sponsored posts from *Instagram* "influencers" who are paid by companies to create *Instagram* content around their product.[132] In these posts, my participants brought an array of commodities, from the more mundane (like a bed frame) to the luxurious (like a designer purse) into their enactments of

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[131] There is an enormous social science literature on consumption that spans numerous subfields, including anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, communications, economics, and applied fields like consumer studies. For a review of this field of work, see Miller (1995). For a review of commoditization theory, see Applbaum (2000). For critical takes on consumption, see Carrier and Heyman (1997); Schor (2007); and Graeber (2011).

[132] The marketing industry has been enormously influential in this social media ecosystem. Marketing not only drives the bottom line of social networking companies who sell ad space and consumer data to corporations. The idioms of advertising, found in pithy hashtags that resemble ad copy or shiny, product-centered photography, are also ubiquitous in user posts. Applbaum (1998; 2003; 2004; 2008) has described the field of marketing as a "total provisioning system" based on "a culturally particularistic set of practices that surfaced as an adjunct to the affluent circumstances of Western society in the past century and a half" (2003, 235). This marketing concept is underpinned by a concept of the human as boundlessly desiring (1998, 326); the charter of the marketer (and the corporation) is to discover and satisfy those needs (2003, 13). In recent years, *Instagram* has emerged as a new frontier for marketing as companies sponsor posts from popular, well-followed users and adapt viral memes into marketing campaigns. This mutually influencing flow between grassroots social media trends and the machinery of marketing is a particularly clear example of the dual agencies of the marketer and consumer as they co-participate in the social constitution of the market (Applbaum 2003, 11).

adulthood. The objects indexed life course stage, referencing more than just the item's cost or material qualities, but also pointed to a specific category of person who might own them and the ecosystem of other commodities that might also populate this person's life—the accoutrements of adulthood.[133] As in Baudrillard's (1981) famous reworking of "commodity fetishism,"[134] purses and beds emerge not just as objects to be used or exchanged, but as "signs," signifiers of life course stage.

The objects that my participants brought into these enactments also reflected a particular imaginary of what adulthood looked and felt like, whether that was the firm support of a well-made bed frame or the soft leather of a designer bag over one's shoulder. Michael channeled that world through a bed frame. Before he moved out of his parents' home after college, he never thought about what was actually needed to create an "adult" bed. Referencing the linens that line the bottom of a well-appointed bed, he said "You can put a bed skirt in that pile of stuff I never knew about either." As he got older, however, he said he felt nostalgia for the "put-together" home his parents had kept, with its bed skirts and bed frames, and, "at a certain point, I just got tired of being on the floor…on the fucking floor," he remarked, "Like I'm old. I need to have a

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[133] Bourdieu's (1984) concept of lifestyle as a "unitary set of distinctive preferences" is of relevance in this discussion (173). The objects that my participants brought into their adulting efforts index an entire world of preferences—objects, tastes, and habits— that distinguish groups of people within social space. As Applbaum (1998) states, marketers also have a concept of lifestyle and, as a matter of course, intervene in these preferences in order to anticipate, satisfy, and shape consumer desire (335).

[134] One of the founding insights of the anthropology of consumption is the notion that contemporary identity is largely constituted through consumption (Isherwood and Douglas 1979; Baudrillard 1981; Bourdieu 1989; Miller 1995). Extending Marx, Baudrillard (1981) argued that modern consumption constituted a new kind of "commodity fetishism," as commodities no longer just possessed use or exchange values, but also symbolic values, indexing luxury, power, and lifestyle. Within the cultural logic of modern marketing, this idea of identity through consumption is normative. Informed by the deep individualism of liberalism, marketers emphasize the freedom of the modern consumer to curate their identity through purchases (Applbaum 1998, 336).

real bed." His *IKEA* bed frame evoked nostalgia for the put-together home of his comfortable childhood.

Zoe's adult world required beautiful, well-made bags. Whatever their price, what was important was that these bags came from retailers that were different from where she had bought her handbags in college and high school. Products from *Walmar*t or *Target* could not be considered "grown-up." To have an "adult purse" meant that you had the time and money to look beyond the sale bin at big box retailers. Her purchase was a departure precisely from the *ad hoc,* price-driven purchases of one's youth. This bag required research, planning, and, often, a credit card. It hearkened back to the kind of "put together woman like my grandma," she said, that had "'pieces' rather than just stuff." Through their purchases, my participants conjured up a surprisingly traditional vision of adulthood, steeped in nostalgia for the domestic worlds of mid-century America.

In one of the foundational texts on middle class domestic aesthetics in the anthropological literature, Frykman and Lofgren (1987) describe the emergence of bourgeois culture in industrial-era Europe, focusing on the case of Sweden. They argue that the home was one of the building blocks of the bourgeois family, a private retreat that also functioned as a showcase for the family's status and wealth. Frykman writes:

> For the bourgeoisie, the home was both a showcase for the world and shelter against it. The family home became the stage on which the family paraded its wealth and displayed its social standing, an important function in this period of rapidly changing class boundaries. Yet at the same time there was a development that stressed the significance of the home as a private domain and haven. The same economic class that administered the new production system under capitalism also created a compensatory world of intimacy, coziness, and warmth (127).

The bourgeois home was both "sanctuary and stage," a medium for displaying one's wealth yet also a place to escape from the blistering rationalism of industrial capitalism. In her famous case study of "American Kitchens" in Hungary, Fehérváry (2002) describes how these bourgeoise domestic ideals played out under state socialism, as Hungarians carved out what they envisioned as a "normal" life for themselves by painstakingly provisioning their homes with objects like a dishwasher that they associated with Western living standards. More recently, Chin (2016) analyzes her own emotional connection to the material objects like nail polish or kitchen knobs that populate her life and the tension between this consumerism and the leftist politics she espouses. In these case studies, the bourgeois home emerges as something both public and private—a shelter from the vagaries of the outside world yet also a medium for articulating identity, personhood, and status.

My participants aspired to classic bourgeois ideals within their homes and their wardrobes. Zoe desired a one-of-kind "piece" rather than a bag off the fast-fashion assembly line to carry her possessions. Michael wanted an "adult" bed, with all its superfluous, cozy accessories, rather than just a mattress on the floor. Clearly, these acts of consumption enacted not just adulthood for my participants, but a *classed* adulthood. Here was life course stage envisioned, in part, as a lifestyle—a state of Fordist material comfort. By finally lifting his mattress off the floor, Michael improvised his own fleeting, partial adulthood. Zoe channeled the life of a "put together woman" through her Tory Burch bag.

Yet, these acts of consumer adulting were always partial and sometimes even seemed self-defeating. Michael might have a bed, but his household arrangement was starting to fall apart because roommates were moving away. He would have to move out of his apartment in the few months. Zoe might have a designer handbag, but she would have to work an additional

twenty hours that month to pay for her shopping habit. Both drained their already-small bank accounts through these purchases. Adulting as consumption clearly sparked visceral satisfaction for them, and they documented these moments through social media, displaying their purchases as evidence of maturity. Yet, in their on-going fixation on adulthood, it was clear to adulting did not really bridge the gap between their lives and the materially-rich adulthood of their imaginations.

In Greenfield's (2018) documentary *Generation Wealth*, journalist Chris Hedges remarks about the decline of social mobility in the United States coupled with the celebration of consumption on television and in social media feeds:

> We hold out the illusion of the American dream, but not only can we and our children not attain what generations had before, but things are getting worse. When there is no social mobility, the only social mobility you have is fictitious. The presentation that you give to the rest of the world denies your own reality.

Hedges' remark evokes Baudrillard's (1981) idea of the "simulacrum," an imitation of a reality that overtakes the reality itself, such that it is "hyperreal" (6). For the underemployed, social media tools like *Instagram* functioned as imperfect factories for simulacra, providing the infrastructure for them to cobble together stylized and, at times, convincing imitations of affluent adulthood through #adulting. In the moments when crafting a favorable account of their lives on their digital feeds mattered more to them than managing the impoverished realities of the actual, adulting did indeed feel like a hyperreality of a sort. As I heard in various iterations from my most enthusiastic #adulting posters, "If it isn't on social media, it didn't happen."

Yet, in the insecurities and obsession with adulthood that dogged my participants, I found that adulting through consumption never quite satisfied them. Perhaps it was never intended to be permanent solution to their social mobility woes. As one participant told me:

> My life looks great on *Instagram,* but I mean everybody knows it's kind of bullshit. Like, look I just bought a new car! The reality is…well… the true test will be when I can't pay my phone bill. Then it will be like, *Instagram* meet reality. See you later, followers. Surprise! I'm actually broke and can't afford my phone.

Or as another participant said matter-of-factly when discussing posts related to consumption, "Of course it's not real. It's a big, transparent scam, but it's better than nothing. Sometimes it makes you just feel better." Now I turn to adulting practices that focused on precisely on this sort of embodied feeling of well-being: rituals of self-care.

SHEET MASKING: #ADULTING AND RITUALS OF "SELF-CARE"

Among the practices that were marked as adulting among my sample, the trend of "self-care" stands out. It puts care work at the center of doing adulthood, but perhaps not the kind of care work that has traditionally been associated with adulthood (i.e. the work of parenting). Rather, this was care work directed toward the self.

The idea of "self-care" in the American context has its origins in deep cultural themes of self-reliance and individualism that date to the colonial era.[135] In the twentieth century, the idea of self-care emerged in tandem with the growing rationalization of healing practices in the twentieth century and the institutional consolidation of American medicine. Among groups of nurses and other practitioners, self-care surfaced as a counter-philosophy geared toward giving the elderly and disabled more autonomy in their own care. In the mid-twentieth century, feminist and civil rights activists took up the idea of self-care, advocating for alternatives to a medical system that they judged as paternalistic, misogynist, and racist. In the 1980's, this activist posture

[135] See Chapter 4 for a brief review of individualism in the American cultural context.

reached its full apotheosis in feminist African-American author Audre Lorde's (1988) famous declaration that, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."

Self-care has exploded in recent years as a trending topic on social media, with celebrities and other influential figures posting photographs of themselves, among other things, doing at-home facials, drinking coffee on a Saturday night, or going to yoga class. These iterations go beyond the sphere of medicine and encompass a much broader array of practices that might better fit under the term "wellness."[136] Self-care also continues to hold associations with activism, especially anti-racist and anti-misogynist movements in the aftermath of Donald Trump's election. Yet, as op-ed pieces have argued in publications such as *The Baffler* or the *New Yorker*,[137] practices of self-care are easily co-opted into naked consumerism, including sponsored advertising on *Instagram* for health or beauty products. These critics argue that self-care is just another iteration of neoliberalism, focusing activity on consumption rather than collective, institution-level action.

Among my participants, self-care spawned social media posts often (though not exclusively) among women. The posts primarily clustered around beauty-related practices done in the home. Of the seven self-care posts that I observed among participants during my fieldwork, six related to at-home beauty and spa treatments. Five of these beauty-related posts featured a consumer product that vaulted to popularity during the year of my fieldwork: the Korean face sheet mask.

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[136]For an overview of the history of "wellness" as a concept, see Petrzela (2015).
[137]See Kisner (2017) and Tokumitsu (2017).

Korean sheet masks are one-time-use, face-shaped cotton pads treated with essential oils or other ingredients to affect some benefit on the skin.[138] Users apply the mask to the skin, leave it on for several minutes, and then remove. Their popularity emerges alongside recent exponential growth in the American beauty industry, especially among the 18-34-year-old demographic. Fueled by celebrity endorsements on social media, American demand for Korean beauty products has grown, with certain brands reaching what marketing executives term "cult-like" status.[139] Sheet masks are among the most popular of the Korean-imported products, with stores like *Target* and *Walmart* introducing their own spin-off versions.

Among my participants, the typical sheet masking social media post featured a picture of the user, eyes peering out from holes in the white cotton mask. One of Kasey's self-care posts depicted herself and a friend at her parent's house on a Saturday night, both wearing sheet masks. The post was captioned, "Sheet masking like pros on a Saturday #adulting." A similar post from another participant read, "What a Friday night looks like at age 32 #adulting". One participant went so far as to post a picture of herself sheet-masking to a *Facebook* post that I created announcing an article that I had published on adulting. Her comment on the picture read: "Just read this while self-caring like an adult would."

Captured through the filters of *Instagram*, my participants draped their faces in masks colored from clear pink to shimmery gold and framed these self-care activities in the language of

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[138] For examples of sheet masks, see a review of the 15 "best sheet masks" in *Elle Magazine* (2018): https://www.elle.com/uk/beauty/skin/g31707/best-sheet-masks-face/

[139] Analysts estimated that the American "prestige" beauty industry saw six percent growth overall in 2017 (NPD 2018), with skincare seeing the fastest gains. In 2015, Korean beauty product imports to the US grew by 59% (Euromonitor International 2018). Many analysts attribute this growth to the impact of social media, as celebrities promote Korean products among their followers. See the NPD report: https://www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/press-releases/2018/us-prestige-beauty-industry-sales-rise-6-percent-in-2017-reports-the-npd-group/

adulthood. These posts, however, conveyed more than just a life course-centered reading of self-care. With their awkward colors and fit, the masks brought together themes of humor and spectacle, creating an opportunity to gawk and make fun of the act of adulting itself. "There is something absurd about the whole thing," one participant wrote me, as we discussed her sheet mask post, "…this idea that what essentially is a wet piece of cotton can make you more mature." Kasey described her own post as "supposed to kind of make fun of the whole thing—sheet masking, staying home." Another participant told me that she "was well aware," that her sheet masking post was "free advertising for the capitalist powers that be," but chose not to think about that, "when faced with the ridiculously good smell of my *Peach & Lily* cucumber mask." In the joking spectacle of the sheet mask post, the self-deprecating humor of adulting came into sharper focus. These were knowingly partial attempts at adulthood. They were meant as funny, or even ridiculous, to my participants when juxtaposed with a securely occupied status of adulthood. Their own experience did not approach that kind of security. Rather, adulting was a never-quite-complete process buttressed by all the humor and spectacle—the filters, emojis, hashtags, and memes— that digital infrastructures made possible.

Importantly, self-care, like the "grown-up purse," had a gendered resonance in my sample, perhaps highlighting some of the particularities of how women approached the problem of becoming adults despite being underemployed. In my sample, men and women primarily adulted through bureaucratic rituals and consumer consumption and posted about #adulting with similar frequency. Women in my sample, however, made up almost all of the participants who created adulting posts using the language of self-care. Among posts about consumer products, women were also more likely to incorporate non-beauty products (like a designer purse or a

North Face coat) into the language of self-care, by, for example, using the popular phrase "treat yourself" in their posts.[140]

This gendered patterning is unsurprising for several reasons. First, the term is rooted in mid-century feminist activism; its directive to take care of oneself speaks to the concerns of women who, as Thorpe (2016) remarks, "have historically been carers, not self-carers." Secondly, this "self-care" language has also been taken up by powerful marketing initiatives within the beauty industry that, until very recently, have focused almost entirely on women.[141] These initiatives utilize self-care as a vehicle for commoditization, transforming a quiet night at home or a moment of self-reflection into an opportunity to purchase beauty products. Indeed, my participants' posts did not make any references to activist causes. Rather, these posts more closely resembled the sponsored Instagram posts of celebrities. Clearly, the idea of care directed toward the self resonated with the women in my sample as they considered what adulthood meant; in "self-care," they found a ready language through which to cast their own maturity. Yet, this gendered variety of adulting appeared to be more explicitly shaped by the machinery of consumer marketing then social justice activism.

Adulting, however, was not always just a matter of consumption. Nor was it always focused entirely on the self. A small group of posts within my sample referenced social traditions with other people. Through #adulting, some participants documented celebrations and

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[140] "Treat yourself" is a phrase that, according to most commentators (see Bloom 2015), has its origins in marketing initiatives encouraging Americans to spend money on luxurious, seemingly unnecessary consumer products. It is the language of self-care fully absorbed into the prerogatives of the marketing industry.

[141] See Simon (2018) for a discussion of shifting trends in beauty marketing as the industry features more gender neutral products after years of focus on women: https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gender-neutral-beauty-rise-trend-unisex-brands-grooming-marketing-diversity-stereotypes-a8325026.html

community gatherings in the language of the life course. I will now turn to these practices.

"FRIENDSGIVING": #ADULTING AND THE DINNER PARTY

In the service industry, Thanksgiving is that rare holiday when many workers get at least some time off. If you work at a bar, you might get the morning and afternoon. If you work at a restaurant, you might get an entire twenty-four hours. This small moment of respite, however, is buttressed by two of the highest volume days of the year: "Black Friday" (the infamous shopping day after Thanksgiving) and its lesser-known prelude "Black Wednesday"[142] (the day before Thanksgiving).

I had never heard of Black Wednesday before I worked in the service industry. One participant from Milwaukee defined it as, "the night you get 'black-out' drunk with your high school friends before you have to deal with your crazy uncle the next day." From another participant: "It's an opportunity to get drunk and hook up with old flames who are back in town for Thanksgiving." The consensus was that it was a heavy-drinking night when people took advantage of the Thanksgiving holiday to recreate with friends. Pinned between these two "black-out" days (which only a few people could request off) service industry workers who lived away from their families often found themselves unable to return home for Thanksgiving. They would almost always have to work on Wednesday or Friday. Enter "Friendsgiving."

One late fall day, I receive a mass text message from Dan: "Friendsgiving planning is underway and you're invited! Don't miss out on organic turkey and cranberry Manhattans! See link for details." I click on a link embedded in the message, which takes me to a *Facebook* event invitation. Dan and his roommates are hosting a Thanksgiving dinner for "those lonely service

[142] Black Wednesday is also sometimes referred to as "Blackout Wednesday" or "Drinksgiving."

industry hearts who can't make it home." The page displays pictures from previous years: a table set for twelve, groups of service industry workers smiling and holding glasses of champagne, a professional looking Thanksgiving spread with stuffing spilling out of a turkey. Over the past two years, Dan has prepared a full Thanksgiving meal and hosted colleagues wherever he was living. Dinner would be held in their brownstone two-bedroom this year. Dan would cook the entire meal in his tiny, ill-equipped kitchen. Guests were encouraged to bring their own drinks to supplement the "festive cocktails" that he always created in advance.

Commentators have debated the origins of "Friendsgiving," with some citing a 1994 Thanksgiving episode of the popular television show *Friends* and others crediting a 2011 *Bailey's Original Irish Cream* advertising campaign titled "Friendsgiving with *Bailey's*" for popularizing the term.[143] *Merriam Webster* dates the word to a crop of "Friendsgiving" mentions on *Twitter* in 2007.[144] Regardless of its origins, "Friendsgiving" is a now a common term used to describe Thanksgiving celebrations held with friends rather than family. These celebrations often take place either before Thanksgiving with family or in lieu of the family dinner altogether. Dan's celebration is the latter, an opportunity for service industry employees to celebrate Thanksgiving even if the working conditions of the industry made travel nearly impossible.

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[143] See this overview of the holiday in a *Real Simple* guide to modern entertaining: https://www.realsimple.com/holidays-entertaining/holidays/thanksgiving/what-is-friendsgiving. See also this 2018 article in *The Atlantic* that describes how the Emily Post Institute, historically the authority on American entertaining and etiquette, has seen an increase in interest in the holiday. This article discusses Friendsgiving primarily as a holiday that Millennials host for their friends in advance of Thanksgiving with their family. Among my service industry participants, Friendsgiving was on Thanksgiving Day, reflecting the particularities of labor conditions in their field: https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/11/millennials-friendsgiving-history/575941/

[144] See *Merriam Webster*'s definition: https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/friendsgiving-meaning

The night before Thanksgiving, after we have both spent a hard-won day shift on our feet, I am helping Dan put together his final preparations for Friendsgiving. We are pre-making batches of cranberry Manhattans for the dinner. Dan has brought home several large glass bottles from his restaurant and, with an ad hoc funnel made from a rolled magazine, we are measuring and pouring cups of vermouth and rye whiskey into the bottles. After we have measured out the correct portions, Dan measures out five shots of a cranberry simple syrup he made early in the week out of sugar and raw cranberries and pours five into each bottle. He inserts a long bar spoon into one of the bottles and stirs. "Okay," he says handing me the spoon, "Stir and into the fridge." With the long spoon, I swirl the brown liquid in the bottles and then pop the caps back on. I open the fridge to put the bottles away and pause as a I encounter the chaos of the pre-Friendsgiving stockpile of food. A shelf had been removed, a giant turkey takes up about half of the space, and a menagerie of vegetables, beer, and other essentials occupy the rest.

I wedge the bottles into the remaining shelf and retreat into the dining room to help Dan begin preparations for the dining area. He is putting together a bar on a vintage cart that he bought on *Craigslist* two years ago and has used for the party every year. We gather the essentials: a $20 jar of high-end bar cherries, an ice bucket, a cocktail shaker, a bar tools set, seven bottles of high-end liquor from his collection, and a haphazard collection of glasses that he has accumulated during his career. Dan's girlfriend arranges the assortment, lining the back of the cart with the bottles and filling the lower shelf with the glasses. A few minutes later, and it is starting to look like a display out of a 1950's *Sears* catalog. "Very *Mad Men*," she remarks, referring to the *AMC* drama set in midcentury New York.[145] She takes a photograph and rolls the

[145] *AMC*'s *Mad Men*, which follows the career of a mid-century advertising executive in New York, is a common inspiration for nostalgic parties. The 1950's drink cart (which the executives in *Mad Men* regular used at home and in the office) especially resonated in my sample.

cart to its space in the living room, where they will host a cocktail hour before dinner starts.

Next, we start on the "tablescape," as Dan's girlfriend coins it. Dan had piled two card tables and six folding chairs borrowed from his parents into the dining room. Pushed next to his normal dining room table, the arrangement seats about twelve. He pulls out a plastic tub from the closet and unfurls a long lace table cloth. His girlfriend grimaces, "Needs ironing," and takes the cloth into the bedroom as Dan pulls out a menagerie of items: white taper candles, gold candle holders, and pumpkin-shaped nametags. Guided by Dan's girlfriend, we arrange the items, and the final product comes into view. I have brought a few decorative gourds as a gift and, wedged between the candle sticks and pumpkins, they complete the fall tablescape. By the end of the night, the appetizers and sides are prepped, the turkey is brining, and the dining room looks like a "*Crate and Barrel* ad," Dan remarks with a satisfied clap of his hands. They are ready for Friendsgiving.

The day arrives, and by 3 p.m. Dan has posted a collection of photos on *Instagram*: "Its [sic] that time again. #friendsgiving #serviceindustrylife #adult." The collection of photos includes a picture of the immaculately prepped table, the drink cart, cocktail hour with friends sipping cranberry Manhattans, and, of course, a picture of the giant turkey as he pulls it out of the oven. Three women stand in their wood-floored living room in cocktail dresses and heels. Dan is wearing black-rimmed *Ray Ban* eye glasses and holding a glass of Scotch. "You all look very adult," someone writes in the comments under his post. Filtered in shades of brown and yellow, the photos look artificially old, like something one might find in photo albums from the 1960's. The retro filter is well-suited to the content of the photography—men with scotches, women in heels and sequins. For all its twenty-first century roots, Dan's version of Friendsgiving is strikingly nostalgic. It reminds me of the well-to-do, suburban life that my grandparents lived,

with its narrowly defined gender roles and affluent facade. As I fall asleep on the couch after my own meal at a friend's house, my phone buzzes as comments keep coming in.

Dan's Friendsgiving party showcases how adulting was not always a matter of self-focused care or consumption. Rather, adulting could also be a practice of hospitality; it could mean cultivating a social network. Through dinner parties, game nights, and other organized gatherings, my participants "adulted" via social rituals that strengthened relationships with their colleagues, and over time, some of these gathering became traditions. These activities offered a rare opportunity for workers who were unable to see their families because of their uniquely challenging working conditions to gather together. They also facilitated community and consciousness-building around the unique positionality of service industry workers, as Dan's hash tag #serviceindustrylife referenced.

Yet, Dan's dinner did not look like a union gathering. Rather, it resembled the *Mad Men* world that Dan's girlfriend referenced, a mid-twentieth century party in a well-to-do suburb. It was an "adult party," as Dan described to me later, "with all the stuff—the cocktail bar, the table cloth." Through a practice of hospitality, Dan conjured up a simulacrum of affluent leisure, even if only for a day. On Black Friday, Dan would go back to his job at the restaurant, wearing his apron and sauce-splattered dress shoes, but on Friendsgiving, he and his friends fashioned a moment of middle class normalcy, a version of what a wealthy couple's Thanksgiving might look like, complete with the martinis, lace, and perfectly-cooked turkey.

Adulting, in this case, surfaced as social ritual, but these rituals sprung from a particular imaginary of the past— nostalgia for precisely the kind of secure, middle class life that the underemployed found elusive. Adulthood, in this case, indexed not just class, but also a specific time in history, namely the post-WWII era when broad-based American prosperity first emerged

as a possibility. Out of the precarity of the present, Dan looked to the Fordist past to "do" adulthood, and the era he evoked did not reflect that of his parents' cohort, but of his grandparents before them. These nostalgia-driven events were the perfect fodder for the visual spectacle fueled by *Instagram* as retro filters reenchanted his mismatched card tables and hand-me-down martini glasses.

After the spectacle, however, the reality of downwardly mobility returned. Dan was broke again, having spent much of his paycheck on ingredients for the party. He would have to pick up some double shifts on the weekend to make up for it. There would be no party on Christmas. He told me that he planned to work the late shift at a hotel bar his friend managed, as he had for the past two years. As he returned to his normal routine, he knew he would never become the adult he wanted to be merely by adulting. Though perhaps that was not really the point. "It's just a time to forget about things," he wrote to me, referring to Friendsgiving. "We actually get to be normal." He continued: "It was worth it." As with my other participants, adulting was what could be done now to help him "forget about things." It was he could do while his bigger ambitions, and the middle class life he was hoping for, waited.

CONCLUSION: #ADULTING AS DIGITAL ENACTMENTS OF THE LIFECOURSE

Faced with perceived deficits in career and cash, the underemployed were left with little choice but to devise ways, however incompletely, to "adult." These acts of adulthood were eclectic and tactical; like Levi-Strauss' (1962) *bricoleur,*[146] my participants "made do" with the

[146] In *The Savage Mind* (1962), Levi-Strauss uses the concept of the *bricoleur*, or "jack of all trades," to describe how mythical thought rearranges old cultural material to make new combinations (11). The *bricoleur* creatively "makes due" with what's around them, using an *ad hoc* logic, or a "science of the concrete" (17).

available elements of the cultural material around them to construct a meaningful whole. They re-signified activities such as waiting at the DMV, signing mortgage paperwork, purchasing a bedframe, or hosting a dinner party into enactments of adulthood that indexed some its key culturally-driven markers—most notably wealth and independence. Such enactments were surprisingly traditional, drawing on a range of cultural material from the Fordist past and, in particular, its domestic worlds. Ranging from bureaucratic miscellanea, to consumer consumption, self-care, and party hosting, the underemployed cobbled together haphazard approximations of adulthood— the drink cart, the "starter" home, the bed frame, the sheet mask, the dinner party—and incorporated them into an *ad hoc* practice of social maturity.

Social networking sites emerged as well-suited vehicles for this process, as the underemployed turned to digital infrastructures to give material and social life to their precarious enactments. Social media invested these moments of adulting with all the weight and social reach of *Instagram* feeds and *Twitter* posts. With the power of the aggregating hashtag, participants contributed to a digital phantasmagoria of *ad hoc* adulthood. Their enactments became part of an on-going spectacle of the life course, made possible through a digital architecture of 0's and 1's. They sparked opportunities for social recognition, however fleeting, through comments and "likes." Faced with incoherent and out-of-reach norms of adulthood, my participants embraced social media and, through its digital architecture, a new material culture of adulthood flourished among them.

The #adulting phenomenon, however, is about more than just my participant's precarity or the possibilities of the digital. It speaks to broader cultural shifts among the American middle classes, driven by the uncertainties of the post-recession economy. For the middle class, coming of age may have once meant a career, affluence, and, ultimately, independence, especially from

one's parents. For my participants, to be an adult was, indeed, to embody that deep cultural value—individualism. Yet, faced with the vagaries of the contemporary economy, such norms have quickly become the stuff of anachronism for many—out-of-reach ideals from a short-lived era. Adulting speaks to this broader economic shift; it suggests an adaptive alternative to adulthood lurking in the disorderly aftermath of Fordism. Perhaps this linguistic turn from noun to verb augurs an analogous shift in understandings of adulthood, in which social maturity is understood not as a robust state but, rather, as an indeterminate process—something uncertain and always in-progress

The life course concept is particularly apt for the "waiting room" world of the underemployed people who I studied, as they improvised social adulthood with a creativity driven by precarity. Ultimately, adulting was not adulthood. A purse could not conjure up the upward social mobility that their grandparents enjoyed. A dinner party could not elevate a server to a high-flying New York executive suite. One hour of sheet masking at home did not make up for the eleven other hours week that Kasey had worked that day. That was not really the point. From the cultural rubble around them, my participants practiced adulthood despite their downward mobility, molding their tactics to the architectures of the digital. They laughed at themselves, embracing the spectacle of social media, and, most importantly, they made do with what was around, finding paths for agency among paperwork, consumer products, and parties. In the progress, they also began remaking social maturity in their own image.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

This dissertation explored some of the intimate features of our late capitalist moment—how underemployment insinuates itself into a person's worldview and identity. To study these effects, I looked to the artisanal restaurant industry, a growing corner of the food and beverage sector where I found college-educated workers serving hand-crafted food and drink for America's urban elite. These were young, white-collar hopefuls, the children of public servants, teachers, professors, attorneys, doctors, and middle managers. They grew up with a vision of the future that looked quite different from where they found themselves. Caught in what many considered a career "detour," they struggled to reconcile their childhood imaginaries of post-college life with the realities of the contemporary economy.

The life course emerged at the center of this inquiry, as my participants turned to maturity—as both an idea and a practice—to make sense of themselves and the world. My participants were preoccupied with their own social maturity. They insisted that they did not "feel" like adults; they were "stuck," as many put it, not only in their careers, but in their development. Early in my research, a participant posed me a rhetorical question: "How do I even become an adult without a good job?" This study took that question, articulated in a moment of frank despair, and re-surfaced it as an ethnographic puzzle: for these downwardly-mobile children of the middle classes, how *does* one become an adult without the pay and prestige that has defined middle stratum adulthood for prior generations?

Ultimately, I found that underemployment fostered a kind of liminal subjectivity—a waiting room, as some called it—for wealth, self-actualization, and adulthood. In the waiting room, workers dealt practically with the problem of becoming adults despite deficits in prestige, income, and ultimately, independence. To be an adult was to be have your life "in order" and to

be “on your own,” as the underemployed often framed it. Entangled in relationships with parents, partners, and roommates, very little about their lives felt independent or orderly. Instead, my participants adopted partial tactics, crystallized in the neologism adulting, to enact adulthood. These practices ranged from doing at-home facials to purchasing bed frames to hosting nostalgic dinner parties—all captured and circulated through the digital infrastructure of social media. Out of these efforts to “do” adulthood rather than “be” adults, my participants improvised an alternative practice of social maturity, formed by the experience of contemporary downward mobility yet driven by nostalgia for bygone Fordist affluence. Adulthood ultimately appeared here as a generative starting point for workers to critique the contemporary economy and fashion their own *ad hoc* paths for agency. In the process, I argue, my participants are reshaping American adulthood in their own image.

The study, however, also speaks more broadly to the evolving economic and cultural contours of capitalism nearly forty years after Harvey (1989) proclaimed the emergence of a new, post-Fordist order. What lies beyond Fordism, post-Fordism, and the more recent vocabularies that we rely on to grapple with the present? My participants were convinced that they lived in an “upside-down” world, as one participant termed it. Here was the oft-maligned restaurant industry, emerging as the steady stalwart of the labor market, supporting the livelihoods of trained lawyers, journalists, and teachers stuck. As contract work consolidates its reach into the structure of the labor market, there is little to suggest that our current economy will not continue to produce a significant segment of underemployed or otherwise precariously-situated workers, lacking the legal protections and benefits of traditional employment. While poor labor conditions in certain sectors may ultimately deter college students from pursuing these fields, current estimates suggest that within a decade, freelance and contract workers could

make up half of the American work force (Noguchi 2018, 1). As one participant told me in exasperation when recalling his education, "I want into law because it was supposed to be a SURE THING, a good job, for Christ's sake." Long term, there may be very few "sure things" in the labor market, even for the privileged few with a college degree.

Underemployment, now largely understood as a marked, anomalous condition, may simply become the status quo for many as the "good job" becomes more elusive in white collar sectors. And while the service industry served as a kind of economic life boat for my participants, it is hard to say whether contracting or automation may yet transform the traditional employment arrangements that currently predominate in the restaurant industry, rendering it as just another "gig" field among many. Ultimately, considered against the arc of economic history in the United States, my participants are coming of age at the tail end of a near miraculous period of growth and collective prosperity in the United States. Perhaps their current state of precarity and underemployment is simply a return to what has long been the normal state of affairs under capitalism, especially for minority communities and first-generation immigrants.

Meanwhile, the young underemployed worker has become a fixture of contemporary political rhetoric, haunting the platforms of both political parties. I recall watching the Republican National Convention in 2012, as former Speaker of the House Paul Ryan appealed to the tragedy of today's college graduate in his remarks:

> College graduates should not have to live out their 20s in their childhood bedrooms, staring up at fading Obama posters and wondering when they can move out and get going with life.[147]

[147] See a full transcript of Ryan's speech at *National Public Radio's* archives: https://www.npr.org/2012/08/29/160282031/transcript-rep-paul-ryans-convention-speech

Hillary Clinton made similar references in remarks at a private event during her 2016 presidential campaign:

> They're children of the Great Recession. And they are living in their parents' basement. They feel they got their education and the jobs that are available to them are not at all what they envisioned for themselves. And they don't see much of a future."[148]

From the Beltway to the campaign trail, one finds the figure of the underemployed worker, harbinger of crisis and symptom of some greater societal sickness, evoked by some of the very politicians who have abetted the worst excesses of our late capitalist economy.

This study attempted to go beyond political rhetoric and stereotype to provide an account of some of the actual lived experiences of the young and underemployed. In the process, what I observed is the coming-of-age of a kind of post-middle class, a precariat as other authors have termed it, with a set of expectations about the world passed to them from beneficiaries of a different, exceptional era in American history. They confront a world where educational credentials—that tenuous hallmark of the middle classes—do not necessarily lead to a good job and a good life as it may have been understood in the past. In fact, a good job, as their grandparents experienced it, (with a pension, union protections, and affordable, quality health insurance), may hardly exist at all in large swaths of the labor market.

Social maturity, as anthropologists have long understood it, is about becoming a full participant in a society, a full actor in the productive and reproductive processes of a community. For my participants, this manifested as a kind of lonely quest toward a job, the good kind of job

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[148] Hear a recording of Clinton's remarks at *The Intercept*'s audio archive on *Soundcloud*: https://soundcloud.com/the-intercept/hillary-clinton-audio and coverage of the remarks in *GQ* by Moore (2016): https://www.gq.com/story/heres-what-hillary-clinton-actually-said-about-millennials

that could bring them enough wealth and prestige to, ironically, no longer need anyone at all. For them, adulthood was, in part, the denial of society. It was about achieving, at least in theory, liberation from the demands of human dependency in exchange for the demands (and rewards) of capital. Needing others was child-like, immature. It was something to be exchanged for the easeful desire of the affluent consumer.

They were haunted by a strikingly traditionalist imaginary of former prosperity—an almost utopic past when people like them grew up to homeownership, a lucrative career, and a life of independence and material plenty earned through their own merits, not links of kinship. Yet, they looked around them and saw a world very different from this utopia and following none of its rules. Faced with long-term underemployment, they relied on forms of association that contradicted some of their deepest held beliefs about what it meant to be an adult—to be "on your own." Out of this web of contradictions, the waiting room subjectivity flourished, with its ambivalent affect and digitally-mediated modes of agency. It offered them a space for both despair and improvisation.

My participants described a world of stasis, where they felt separated from their families by new chasms of class and life course stage. A bartender from Milwaukee gave me a characteristic account of this feeling of isolation:

> None of my family really understands. The fact is…I don't have a life like them anymore. I don't get holidays. I don't get all the nice shit. I'm not going to be like them. This is it. How did I get here? I mean, ya, I don't know. When you work sixty hour weeks behind a bar, it goes by fast. I can say for sure that it wasn't as fucking easy for me as it was for them. You don't just walk into a job anymore…My dad got his job [at a newspaper] by walking into the front door, handing them a resume, and they were like, 'Ok.' It doesn't work like that anymore… And my mom had the nerve to say to me the other day, 'You started with a drinking problem, and I guess you made a job out of it.' I just wanted to die then. Honestly.

It was a place where my participants felt disconnected from their families, yet ambivalently clung to them for the support they needed to afford some semblance of the life that they had grown accustomed. It led some to addiction problems as they found solace in the numbing effects of alcohol and other substances. Some already felt the physical toll of service industry labor as their bodies, pushed along by the biological clock, aged in spite of them.

Yet, the waiting room could also bring moments of unexpected joy and contentment, as some participants opened themselves to new pathways toward a good life. They began to critique and look beyond their parents' and grandparents' measures of success. "I don't want to be my dad anymore," a participant told me during one of our last meetings, as he was taking a break between double shifts:

> Doing the 9-5, saving up all my money, being a "responsible" human, and then basically sitting around in retirement…I don't need that and I'm not sure why we all wanted it, anyway. Like, I know a lot of people who have that stuff who aren't happy. One of my oldest friends checked all those boxes. He's out in Seattle doing the programmer thing. He's got money and a condo and stuff, but he called me two months ago just fucking miserable. This dude has got to take meds just to feel like getting up in the morning

He then discusses his own parents:

> Like, look at my dad. He fucking did all that stuff, and he's pretty miserable. They [his parents] go out sometimes, but I'm pretty sure they mainly sit at home and complain about Donald Trump on *Facebook.* At least I go to work every day, and I like the people work with…The job sucks, but we're in it together…At some point we just have to give up on this whole idea of what success is.

His nostalgia for a past he had never really witnessed, his deep individualism, his idea of work as the path to self-actualization—these were bending in the face of a busy, precarious, utterly full life. As he considers the results of his parents' retirement, intergenerational envy yields to familiar themes of filial mocking. He begins to question whether success as it had been defined in the past was even worth pursuing.

Another participant turned to global climate change to make sense of her own downward mobility:

> Look, that whole life is why we're in this situation [the warming climate] to begin with. Maybe we can't all have cars and houses and big vacations. Maybe people need to live more like we do already, with a bunch of roommates, with neighbors everywhere, with fewer stuff…the McMansion life's great. My parents live it every day. But it's kind of killing us now. If we're going to survive this, everybody is going to have adjust their expectations of what adulthood is really going to be.

In her account, the specter of a warming planet finally appears, perhaps the gravest threat facing her generation. Despite the wide-ranging scope of our conversations, the underemployed only rarely discussed climate change, usually as a backdrop to more general discussions about sustainability. Here, global warming re-emerges as a phenomenon that is truly generational in scope, an existential peril that transcends boundaries of culture, class, and continent. Against such a backdrop, she recasts consumer luxuries of the past as vehicles of ecological calamity. The crowded life of the underemployed renter resurfaces as a modest, but viable alternative. Creating a new practice of adulthood appears not as a forced concession of downward mobility but, rather, as an imperative for generational survival.

Ultimately, the waiting room emerged among these participants as a product of our historical moment—one refraction of what may indeed be a generational subject. Where might such improvisations lead? From the "chosen" family to adulting, this dissertation documents some early possibilities. Yet, in the United States, what we can see is that, even among the meritocratic ranks of the middle class, deep individualism is being tested by economic events that have been generational in their impact. The American middle class—whether it holds its current, shrinking ranks or dissolves into a blip in history—may (and probably must) transform

into something quite different in the coming decades. Perhaps the underemployed are showing us one possible future.

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Wolk, Lesley, Nassima Abdelli-Beruh, and Dianne Slavin. 2012. "The Habitual Use of Vocal Fry in Young Adult Female Speakers." *Journal of Voice* 25: 111-116.

Yanagisako, Sylvia. 2013 "Transnational Family Capitalism: Producing 'Made in Italy' in China." In Vital Relations: Modernity and the Persistent Life of Kinship, edited by Susan McKinnon and Fenella Cannell, 63-84. Santa Fe: SAR Press.

Yanagisako, Sylvia. 2015. "Kinship: Still at the Core." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic* Theory 5: 489-494.

Zaloom, Caitlin. 2009. *Out of the Pits: Traders and Technology from Chicago to London.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zaloom, Caitlin. 2018. "How will we pay? Projective fictions and regimes of foresight in US college finance." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8.

Zaloom, Caitlin. 2018. "Does the U.S. Still Have a Middle Class?" *The Atlantic*, November 4, 2018. Accessed March 4, 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/what-does-middle-class-really-mean/574534/

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Zimmer, Benjamin, Charles Carson, and Jane Solomon. 2016. "Seventy-Five Years Among the New Words." *American Speech* 91: 472-512.

CURRICULUM VITAE

SUSAN E. HILL

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University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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EDUCATION

2019 (expected) PhD, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Department of Anthropology
Dissertation Title: "The Waiting Room: Remaking Adulthood Among America's Underemployed"
Areas: North America, Postsocialist Europe

2012 MA, Central European University, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology
Thesis: "Business at the Intersection of Tourism and Culture: An Ethnography of Alternative Tourism in Budapest, Hungary"
Committee Members: Judit Bodnár, Violetta Zentai

2009 BA, Saint Olaf College, Music and Sociology/Anthropology
Departmental Distinction, Department of Sociology/Anthropology
Summa cum laude
Phi Beta Kappa

ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

2015-2016 Lecturer, Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2014-2015 Distinguished Graduate Student Fellow, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2013-2014 Teaching Assistant, Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee
2007-2009 Latin Language Tutor, Academic Support Center, St. Olaf College

Classes Taught

"Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology." Introductory lecture and discussion course for majors
[taught discussion sections fall 2013, spring 2014]

"Lifeways in Different Cultures: A Survey of World Societies." Introductory lecture for non-majors
[solo lectured fall 2015, spring 2016]

PUBLICATIONS

Books

2017 *Alternative Tourism in Budapest: Class, Culture, and Identity in a Postsocialist City*. Rowman and Littlefield/Lexington Books, Anthropology of Tourism: Heritage, Mobility, and Society, co-edited by Noel Salazar and Michael Di Giovine.

Refereed Journal Articles

2014 "Beyond Occupy Wall Street: A Case Study of Strike Debt's Rolling Jubilee as an Emergent Form of Political Action." *Field Notes: A Journal of Collegiate Anthropology* 6(1):1- 15. .

Public Scholarship

2018 "#Adulting and the Disordered State of American Adulthood." *Anthropology News*, Society for Linguistic Anthropology, April 2, 2018. http://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2018/04/02/adulting-and-the-disordered-state-of-american-adulthood/

AWARDS, GRANTS, AND FELLOWSHIPS

2018 R1 Distinguished Dissertator Fellowship, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2016 Graduate Student Travel Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2015 Preliminary Dissertation Research Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2015 Tourism and Heritage Student Paper Competition Finalist, Society for Applied Anthropology
2014 Graduate Student Travel Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2014 Distinguished Graduate Student Fellowship, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2014 Best Paper Award, Anthropology Student Union Conference, UW-Milwaukee
2014 Educational Loan Award, P.E.O.
2013 Chancellor's Graduate Student Scholarship, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2012 Graduate Thesis Research Grant, Central European University
2011 Full Graduate Fellowship, Central European University
2010 Ambassadorial Scholar Post-Baccalaureate Fellowship, Rotary International
2009 Departmental Distinction, Sociology/Anthropology, St. Olaf College
2009 Phi Beta Kappa Inductee, St. Olaf College

CONFERENCE ACTIVITY

Panels Organized

2016 "Disordered Work and the Late Liberal Household." American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting 2016; Minneapolis, MN, November 18-21. Discussant: Dr. Carrie Lane.

Papers Presented

2017 "The Gig Economy and its Entanglements: Contract Work and 'Shadow Careers' in the Minneapolis-St. Paul Service Industry" In *The Gig Economy in the United States* (Invited Panel – Society for the Anthropology of Work). American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting 2017: Washington, D.C., November 30-December 3.

2017 "Ordering Disordered Careers: Narratives of Adulthood among America's Young Underemployed." In *The Narratives That Catch Us*. American Ethnological Association Annual Meeting 2017: Palo Alto, CA, March 29-30.

2016 "Late Liberal Dilemmas: The Challenges of Studying Disordered Work." In *Disordered Work and the Late Liberal Household.* American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting 2016: Minneapolis, MN, November 18-20. Discussant: Dr. Carrie Lane.

2015 " 'Killing Time' in Walker's Wisconsin: Affect, Temporality, and Emerging Neoliberal Subjectivities Among Underemployed Service Workers in Milwaukee." In *Morality in Economic Life.* American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, Denver, CO November 18-21.

2015 "Class Distinction among Alternative Tourism Companies in Budapest, Hungary." In *New Scholars Changing the Field: The Winning Papers of the 2015 SfAA Tourism and Heritage TIG Student Paper Competition.* Society for Applied Anthropology Annual Meeting, Pittsburgh, March 24-28.

2014 "(Re?) "Keying" Budapest through the Luxury Walking Tour: Cultural Production and Class Distinction Among Alternative Tourism Companies in Budapest, Hungary," In *Heritage and Place-making*, American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., December 3-7.

2014 "(Re?) Keying Budapest: Cultural Production Among Alternative Tourism Companies in Budapest, Hungary," UW-Milwaukee Anthropology Student Union Annual Conference

2009 "So Close But So Far Away: Comparing Intimacy Levels in Long Distance and Geographically Close Relationships Among College Students," American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA.

2009 "So Close But So Far Away: Comparing Intimacy Levels in Long Distance and Geographically Close Relationships Among College Students," Midwest Sociological Society Annual Meeting, Des Moines, IA.

Invited Roundtables

2017 *Field Stories: An Ethnographic Round Table.* American Studies Association Annual Meeting 2017: Chicago, IL, November 8-11.

APPLIED RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

2017-present Prospect Researcher, Advancement Services, St. Olaf College
2016 Graduate Intern, International Labor Affairs, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C.
2014-2015 Research Intern, Urban Anthropology, Inc., Milwaukee, WI
2010-2011 Program Evaluation Analyst, Habitat for Humanity of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN

SERVICE TO PROFESSION AND COMMUNITY

Organization and Section Leadership

Student Councilor, Society for Urban, National, and Trans-national/ Global Anthropology, 2015-2017

Manuscript Reviewer

Field Notes: A Journal of Collegiate Anthropology

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD RESEARCH

Minneapolis, Minnesota (2016-present): dissertation research; ethnographic study of underemployment and shifting ideas of adulthood among young adults with college degrees working in the service industry

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA (2015-2016): Multi-site, preliminary ethnographic research on labor precarity and class subjectivity among college interns

Virginia and St. Cloud, Minnesota, USA (2010-2011): Program evaluation on the efficacy of Habitat for Humanity of Minnesota programs in rural settings

Budapest, Hungary (2009-2010, 2011-2012): Research on labor precarity and cultural production in the burgeoning alternative tourism industry, focus on tourism workers and business owners.

LANGUAGES

English (Native), field language
Spanish (Good)
Hungarian (Conversational), field language
French (can read with dictionary)

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS AND AFFILIATIONS

American Anthropological Association
American Ethnological Society
Society for Applied Anthropology
Society for Cultural Anthropology
Society for Urban, National, and Transnational/Global Anthropology
Society for the Anthropology of Work
Society of the Anthropology of North America
Anthropology of Tourism Interest Group
Phi Beta Kappa
Lambda Alpha Honor Society for Achievement in Anthropology
Kappa Alpha Delta for Achievement in Sociology
Eta Sigma Phi Honor Society for Achievement in Classics
Pi Kappa Lambda Society for Achievement in Music