I’m Not Sure But…

Undergraduate Women’s Confidence in the Elite University Setting

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This work is dedicated to the women
who so generously and openly shared
their lives with me:

You are fiercer than you know.
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Introduction

It was nearly the end of sophomore year as my friends and I walked to dinner discussing our summer plans. I had recently changed my summer research project, foregoing anthropological research in South East Asia for a topic a lot closer to home. Over the past year, I had become increasingly concerned about undergraduate women’s confidence in the university setting. The university women I was surrounded by were passionate, intelligent and ambitious yet seemed to struggle with deep-set feelings of inadequacy. They lacked confidence. I wanted to use my research to better understand why and how women’s confidence crashed on elite university campuses. As we walked my friends and I joked about how my research could maybe perhaps be a senior thesis one day. The conversation shifted and we reflected, thinking about how nearly half our college experience had gone by. We were laughing about our overly ambitious high school selves when suddenly one of my friends said, “Wait! Did you know that Tierney came first in her entire state for a subject in her senior year?” I smiled awkwardly and said, “Yes but it was a pretty easy subject and I had an amazing teacher and there just aren’t that many people in my state back home compared to in the United States.” My friends stopped walking and stared at me. “Seriously? Tierney! Did you just hear yourself? Oh my God...you’re totally doing the thing.”

In this moment, although I could not know it at the time, I epitomized the very problem that my research would later unveil on elite college campuses in the United States. The “thing” I came to learn was two-pronged. First it was the way that intelligent and highly competent women at elite universities find themselves operating within an institution that systematically disempowers them. Secondly, and most interestingly, while these women often understand how patriarchal powers, institutions and proscriptive socio-cultural norms undermined them, they find themselves complicit in and contributing to the very same system
and ideology that oppresses them. Women in the elite university system find themselves in a bind: their confidence is undermined from without and within.

**Questions and Positioning**

The driving question of this thesis is why do some of the most intelligent and accomplished young women in the United States experience a decrease rather than an increase in confidence over their four years at an elite university?

To begin to understand how this confidence crash manifests itself, we must understand what makes the elite university in the United States a unique setting. In the United States elite universities are lauded, considered the pinnacle of status and prestige. Admission into these institutions is incredibly competitive, as elite universities accept fewer than 10 percent of students who apply to undergraduate degrees.¹ Students have often spent their high-school lives in a process of credentialism, desperately trying to delineate themselves as “special” enough to gain admission to these hallowed grounds. Consequently, the rhetoric that surrounds these spaces is incredibly elitist and classist. From the moment students step onto campus they are told they are the “world’s best”. The institutions boast that they attract the “best and brightest” students from throughout the country and world, a rhetoric that Karen Ho in her ethnographic analysis of Wall Street, *Liquidated*, argues reflects a culture of elitist, hegemonic “smartness”. Ho’s analysis of workers on Wall Street (many of whom attended the same elite institutions where I conducted my research) reflects the pressure students feel to reproduce hegemonic excellence in these elite institutions.

“The best”, “the greatest” and “the brightest” minds in the world are sorted and recognized through a credentialing process that is crucially bolstered by image and performance. In other words, smartness must be represented and reinforced by a specific appearance and bodily technique that dominantly signals that impressiveness,” (Ho 2009, 41).

For the first-time students find themselves in an environment where everyone is the “best” and feel diminished by comparison. The elite university can therefore be seen as a hyper-competitive, pressurized bubble within which students live, constantly comparing themselves to their highly-accomplished peers. Conceptualizing the elite university as a unique setting, which I will later expand upon, was crucial to my understanding of women’s confidence. Thus, while my leading research question was why women experienced a decline in confidence in the university setting, I also aimed to explore how the crash manifested within this unique environment. To answer these questions, I focused on three primary areas: the problem (confidence), the setting (elite universities) and the people (university women). My definition and investigation of these areas has been shaped by literature and theory, primarily in the fields of anthropology, gender and feminist studies, psychology and education.

**Literature Review**

Common questions I received throughout the course of my research were: “What is confidence?” and “Why does it matter?” Interest in confidence is not new, psychologists and other investigators have been researching it for decades (Cheng and Furnham, 2002: Carol Dweck, 2006: Kröner, 2007: Benabou and Triole, 1999: Möbius et al. 2011: Lenney, 1977: Lundeberg et al. 1994). However, the relationship between women and confidence has only recently gained popular attention as books such as Lean In, Thrive, Nice Girls Don’t Get the Corner Office, Feminist Fight Club and Wonder Woman saturate the popular literature.
market exposing that women still today feel less confident, accomplished and adept than their male counterparts. Despite this surge in popular knowledge, through my research it became apparent that confidence is something difficult to define. Most people understand it as a feeling but not as a concept.

Katty Kay and Claire Shipman’s *The Confidence Code* (2014) provided me with a useful framework through which to understand and define confidence. Kay and Shipman argue that “Confidence Cousins”: Self-Esteem, Optimism, Self-Compassion and Self-Efficacy intersect, shape and inform what constitutes confidence. Kay and Shipman also highlight that authenticity is crucial to confidence. Most significantly they call confidence *life’s enabler*, “the characteristic that distinguishes those who imagine from those who do” (Kay and Shipman 2014, 54). I argue then that confidence is living life with a genuine, authentic sense of worthiness, self-compassion, self-esteem and self-efficacy that enables individuals to act and believe in the validity and possibility of their actions and contributions. Thus, my answer to the second question “Why does it matter?” is simple. If confidence is life’s enabler and some of the brightest, most ambitious and best socially positioned young women lack it, they lose out and we lose out on their potential.

In framing this issue of confidence, it is crucial to highlight that perfectionism is inextricably tied to the problem of confidence, and I found it interwove itself throughout my research. The concept of ‘effortless perfection’ first coined in a 2003 Duke University Women’s Initiative Study of women’s experiences on campus refers to the pressure to be “smart, accomplished, fit, beautiful and popular…. without visible effort” (Duke University Women’s Initiative Report, 2003, 14). Socially and culturally we often see perfectionism as a positive trait: a motivator and marker of excellence. However, perfectionism can take many forms; the two main types are known as “adaptive” (positive) and “maladaptive” (negative). Interestingly, “The most contemporary and prolific perfectionism researchers understand all
components of perfectionism as maladaptive” (Andres, 2008, 25). Dr. Alexis Andres in her research on perfectionism in college women highlights the problems of maladaptive perfectionism:

“…perfectionism is consistently associated with self-criticism and fear of failure, the inability to be satisfied with performance, unrealistic and irrational standards for performance, the perception that performance and standards will never align.” (Andres 2008, 25.)

Perfectionism thrives in the hyper-competitive elite university setting. Students in these spaces often see it as a path to excellence. While it may have enabled them to succeed in the past, the intensity of this new environment does not lend itself well to productive perfectionism. Perfectionism’s reliance on intense self-criticism, fear of failure, impossibly high standards and a constant cycle of feeling “not enough,” is fundamentally at odds with the development of a confident self. This disjuncture between the perfect self and the confident self is important to keep in mind throughout this thesis. In my research, the women I spoke with all displayed perfectionistic tendencies and/or admitted to perfectionism. Notably, 100 percent of them also said they wished they were more confident.

The focus of my thesis -- confidence in young women in the elite university setting -- is also not a new topic in the social sciences. The gendered nature of educational institutions has been a site of research since the 1970s, with works by the likes of Myra P Sadker (1994), Helen A. Moore (2011) and Peggy Orenstein (1994), exposing and critiquing how the educational system perpetuates gender norms and disadvantages women. These works, however, focus on girls in primary and secondary schools, not on women in higher education. Dorothy C. Holland and Margaret Eisenhart’s Educated in Romance (1990) and Mirra Komarovsky’s Women in College (1985) are exceptions. These both provided me with a valuable lens through which to understand undergraduate women’s place and experience
within the university setting. *Educated in Romance* examines how women at universities participate in a secondary education – an education in romance -- that they see as more important than their academic education. The authors argue that women in these settings are primarily valued and judged on their looks and ability to secure a desirable male partner. They rely on men to leverage their social standing and employ a series of tactics and strategies to make themselves desirable. *Women in College* highlights how women as they progress throughout college change their self-conception and goals, lowering their ambitions as time passes. Thus, these texts highlight that women in these settings were more likely to base their self-worth on their image and men’s attention. They also were likely to become academically discouraged throughout their undergraduate years, opting out of their previously ambitious academic goals.

While these texts powerfully illustrate women’s experiences in the university setting, they are dated. None of my subjects thought that romance, or securing a partner, was the most important goal of their higher education. However, remarkably and sadly, the pressure to achieve high levels of beauty, desirability, and social status has not changed. What is different, as I demonstrate in this thesis, is that today’s university women feel compelled to attain these forms of cultural capital *whilst* still achieving high academic goals. This of course puts more pressure on them. Apart from Andres’ work *Perfectionism and her Sisters* there are no comparable, comprehensive recent works that explore women in the university setting. There are even fewer substantial anthropological works that examine young women today. Although works by anthropologists like Margaret Mead (1928) and Ruth Benedict (1934) paved the way for both female anthropologists and the anthropology of women, contemporary anthropology has left the question of women at “home” largely untouched. As such, my research and analysis contributes to the field by providing a contemporary account and analysis of women’s experiences in higher education today.
Understanding gender as a social and cultural construct is fundamental to my work. West and Zimmerman’s influential text *Doing Gender* (1987) articulates the distinction between biological sex and gender. Sex, they argue “is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as males or females”, whereas gender “is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (West & Zimmerman 1987, 127). In other words, sex is biologically determined at birth defined by reproductive organs, whereas gender is the socially constructed and learnt way individuals act, shaped by social behavioral expectations. Over time, West and Zimmerman argue, these constructed gender norms have come to be seen as natural, which leads to fixed ideas about what different sexes “should” be like (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Anthropologists Louise Lamphere and Michelle Rosaldo in *Women, Culture and Society* (1974) refine this understanding by focusing on women. They highlight how sociocultural constructs of gender have systematically denigrated and disadvantaged women by positioning them as weaker and inferior to men. This learnt and taught subordination is crucial to my work as it helps explain why the women in my research are oftentimes both treated as, and feel inadequate and inferior to, their male counterparts.

Furthermore, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity fundamentally informed my approach. Butler argues that gender is performative and ritualized: “As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (Butler 1999, 178). Thus, gender is not inherent, it is learned and continually reproduced through ritualized performance. I use Butler’s theory to explain how, in the university setting, gender norms are reproduced and performed in a way that makes these highly constructed and performative
behaviors seem normal while they continually, yet often invisibly, contribute to women’s decline in confidence. I add to this conversation by arguing that women’s performance of gender is continually reinforced and reproduced by their interactions not only with men but also with other women. Women’s performance of gender is subjected to intense scrutiny, evaluation and policing by other women. The normalization of gender constructs means that, even if women are aware of the way they have been socialized, they continue to participate in the performance, encouraging and embodying gendered behaviors yet feeling conflicted and frustrated by the way in which these constructs work against them.

As previously mentioned my project requires me to consider how a particular setting, the elite university, impacts women’s confidence. Eric Margolis’ The Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education (2001) positions the elite university as more than merely an educational tool but as a powerful socializing force. Higher education, Margolis argues, has a hidden curriculum that socializes and teaches its students very fixed and specific ideas about race, class and gender that reinforce norms. This curriculum often goes unquestioned or unproblematic precisely because it is hidden; “in most cases it is plainly in sight, and functions effortlessly.” (Margolis 2001, 22) The idea of the hidden curriculum informs my understanding of universities as sites that teach students gender norms that, both inside and outside the classroom, are to women’s detriment.

William Deresiewicz’s Excellent Sheep (2015) informed my critique of the often-homogenous elite university and provides a useful contemporary portrait of this setting. He argues that these settings are hyper-competitive, discourage risk-taking and failure, and privilege the development of the presentation of a perfect self over an authentic self. “The system manufactures students who are smart and talented and driven, yes, but also anxious, timid, and lost, with little intellectual curiosity and a stunted sense of purpose: trapped in a bubble of privilege, heading meekly in the same direction, great at what they’re doing but
with no idea why they’re doing it” (Deresiewicz 2015, 3) Fear of inadequacy reigns on these campuses.

Deresiewicz describes the university as a unique space, calling it “an opportunity to stand outside the world for a few years, between the orthodoxy of your family and the exigencies of career, and contemplate things from a distance” (Deresiewicz 2014, 81) Thus, although he never directly defines it as such, Deresiewicz contextualizes the elite university setting as, in the words of anthropologist Victor Turner, a “liminal” space of “betwixt and between” (Turner 2008, 359) No longer children, but not yet adults (what psychologist Jeffrey Arnett would call “emerging adulthood”), college students live in the “university bubble” (Arnett 2000, 469). This bubble is both removed from the obligations and stresses of adult life, yet also a pressure cooker of competition where students continually and desperately seek achievement, within a very particular framework of success.

To this conversation, my work brings the approach of Benedict Anderson’s theory of nation states (Anderson 1983, 48-49) this idea has enabled me to conceptualize the elite university as its own nation state, defined by both real and conceptual borders. According to Anderson, the nation is “an imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” The university, which turns over its student population every four years, and is subject to its own regulations and norms is in fact an imagined community. In the “imagined community” of the university members believe they are a part of one group despite never meeting every other member in person. I use Anderson’s theory to articulate how, within the “imagined community” of the elite university, particular behaviors, values and regulations become normalized for the university’s “citizens”.

Finally, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital and Michel de Certeau’s concept of strategies and tactics crucially informed my understanding and explanation of how women navigate the elite university setting. Bourdieu argues that social “capital” can be accrued by
an individual as a means by which to elevate their status in society. I use Bourdieu’s theory to explain how in the elite university setting cultural capital, deemed crucial to success, is desperately sought by both women and men. Women, however, feel compelled to accumulate cultural capital from various arenas: aesthetic, social, academic and sexual. Beauty becomes an especially salient form of capital. I argue that the quest for cultural capital is ultimately destructive because it reinforces prescriptive gender norms and compels women to seek perfection. This frustrates them as they realize they are participating in behaviors that undermine their confidence yet continue to contribute to the gendered social narrative. Capital isn’t the only thing women use to position themselves favorably in this setting. Women, I argue, also use tactics to navigate and try and succeed in the elite university setting. Tactics, according to de Certeau, are how a subaltern can maneuver and create opportunities for themselves within the context of a broader, powerful structure. Thus, women, I argue, employ a variety of tactics to delineate themselves as worthy and valuable in this environment. The problem, however, is that oftentimes these tactics rely on the reproduction and embodiment of gender norms meaning that they are ultimately destructive to women’s confidence.

I use these theories to formulate my argument that women in these settings are subject to a patriarchal and misogynistic culture that perpetuates a series of ritualized and gendered social norms. Women’s gender performativity then leaves them feeling inadequate as they continually chase idealized femininity. However, women also participate and contribute to the very same patterns and norms that oppress them, and judge other women by these standards. The women in my research often realized this and felt even more unconfident as they questioned their intelligence, agency and ability to feel truly empowered.
Field Site

When I conceived of this project three years ago, I planned to do a comparative study of women’s confidence at elite universities in Australia, England and the United States. After conducting my research, I decided to focus my analysis on the United States because there were not enough cultural differences to warrant a comparative study, and the issues I was interested in were most intense in the United States. Why? Because the United States has the most elite universities in the world making up 25 of the top 50 universities world-wide according to the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2015-2016* list.\(^2\) As a result there is a more dominant elitist cultural climate. Furthermore, there is a strong live-in culture on campus which fosters a competitive and comparative environment and these universities are host to social systems like that of fraternities and sororities that perpetuate comparison and exclusion. Elite universities in the United States are a rare beast. Besides the characteristics noted above, elite U.S universities thrive off competition as they seek to continually maintain or increase their status and ranking among the nation’s and the world’s best. The elite university in its attempt to continually reproduce success also inadvertently and deliberately reproduces hegemonic ideologies that reinforce normalized and prescriptive ideas about gender, sexuality, class and race to the detriment of all its students but especially those whose identities are marginalized and undervalued in this setting (Deresiewicz 2015).

In thinking about the elite university setting as a field site, it is important to acknowledge the departure from “traditional” anthropology. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson in *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* define how traditionally the “real” field worker has been defined, one who has: “worked for a long time in an isolated area, with people who speak a non-European language, lived in a

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“community,” preferably small, in authentic ‘local dwellings’” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 13).

As James Faubion and George Marcus say, “fieldwork is not what it used to be” (Faubion and Marcus 2009, 1). I argue that my project and my field site reflect this change. While a departure from the “traditional” Malinowskian model of going to a foreign and rural region, my project nevertheless reflects the anthropological principles of cultural immersion, curiosity, and close observation. As I immersed myself as a student on different campuses, closely examined settings, rituals and behaviors closely and curiously I made the familiar unfamiliar and became not merely a participant but also an observer.

My field site is also unique in that it conflates “home” and the “field”. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson in Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science define how anthropology traditionally thinks about these two spaces:

“The distinction between ‘the field’ and ‘home’ rests on their spatial separation. This separation is manifested in two central anthropological contrasts. The first differentiates the site where data are collected from the place where analysis is conducted and the ethnography is ‘written up’” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 12).

Given that I am a student at an elite university, and lived on or just off campus during my data collection and write up period, my home and field are not spatially delineated. Furthermore, my research isn’t so much concerned with the field as “that taken-for-granted space in which an “Other” culture of society lies waiting to be observed and written” but on understanding, problematizing and making what seems “normal” a point of worthy study (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 2). While Gupta and Ferguson note that “working in the United States has long had a low status in the field, even a certain stigma attached to it,” I argue that my research and field site contributes valuably to a “new” anthropology (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 14). The fascination with the “Other” I believe can sometimes come at the cost of critically analyzing and engaging with one’s own context. I echo Gupta and Ferguson’s
sentiments as they say, “What we object to is not the leaving of “home,” but the uncritical mapping of “difference” onto exotic sites (as if “home,” however defined, were not also a site of difference)” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 14).

Thus, I argue that the elite university setting an anthropological field site, just not a “traditional” one. While my research may conflate “home” and the “field” and forego the “other” in favor of familiar faces I believe that it contributes valuably to not only contemporary anthropological research but also to new understandings and redefinition of what the “field” and “fieldwork” looks like.

**Methodology**

I formally began my research at the end of my sophomore year, Spring/Summer 2015. Under the mentorship of Franca Alphin, Director of Nutrition Services, and with funding and guidance from the Robertson Scholars Leadership Program at Duke University, I traveled to elite universities in the United States, Australia and England. I spent between several full days to over a week on these campuses observing and participating in campus life. I conducted semi-structured interviews with three types of interlocutors: university women, faculty and administration, and socio-support staff such as psychologists, counselors, nutritionists and staff from women’s centers. By the conclusion of my research, including post-summer research, I had conducted 60 interviews and surveyed 110 women. I also spoke informally with dozens of other women as well as faculty and socio-support staff in the years following the summer of 2015. I produced extensive field notes from my times on these campuses and supplemented my research with academic study and literature. To analyze my results, I transcribed all my interviews and cross-referenced them with my field notes to determine predominant themes and issues.
This research was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). It is important to note that, per my IRB protocol, all my interviews were conducted anonymously and the universities I conducted my research at were also promised anonymity. As such no universities are explicitly referenced by name with the occasional exception of Duke University, as a student in this setting, much of my fieldwork and observation, especially for Greek life, has come from spaces on this campus which I otherwise would not have had access to. Per this protocol, I also was not able to maintain contact with any of my interlocutors and thus was not able to conduct several in-depth case studies, something I would consider for future research. In order to protect my interlocutors’ identities, I have given them all pseudonyms and have omitted any non-essential identifiers.

Limitations of the Study

The exclusive nature of the elite university with its highly competitive admission requirements; exorbitant fees and privilege of a connected social elite leads to these universities being disproportionately filled with white students of high socio-economic status. Given this base population, and the fact that I could only interview students who opted into my research, I am acutely aware that my research reflects a predominantly white- middle and upper-class, heterosexual narrative. I did my utmost to ensure that the broadest range of individuals heard about and were invited to my study. I sent out my survey and interview requests to every club and organization on campuses that represented historically marginalized identities and reached out personally to the heads of those organizations. I also encouraged interlocutors to share the invitation to participate in my research with friends, colleagues and individuals and asked university administrators and department heads to send
my research invitation to a broad range of students. Despite this, most of my respondents were white middle-and upper-class women.

My position as a female student in the elite university setting greatly assisted me during this research as it enabled me to gain access to particular spaces and gain women’s trust. I blended into my field site and many of my interlocutors could relate to me and therefore were willing to be vulnerable and honest in interviews. However, I do believe that my identity as a white, middle-class, cis-gender woman also was isolating to many individuals who might have felt I couldn’t understand or reflect their experiences. The impact of my identity on my results is important to keep in mind in the context of my research and when considering further research on this topic. In the absence of certain voices in my research I have used other’s works to supplement and expand my findings. I cannot categorically say how women with historically marginalized identities experience confidence differently in this setting but it does raise the question, if middle class and affluent white, heterosexual women who benefit from the privilege of their class, race and sexuality everyday feel so unconfident, what can be said for the women who are continually socially disenfranchised?

Finally, my research was not comparative by nature and as such, men’s voices and their confidence in this setting is not explored at length. However, while I wholeheartedly believe that men also suffer in the pressure-cooker of elite universities, I maintain that the environment is particularly destructive to women because of the disproportionate pressures, judgement and policing of women that occurs in these patriarchal and misogynistic spaces. In thinking about these limitations, I hope that future scholarship may be able to provide a more nuanced, intersectional and inclusive picture.
Chapter Progression

Throughout my thesis, I explore why women experience a decrease in confidence and how this decrease manifests itself in the elite university setting. I argue that women’s confidence is undermined from both without and within as they find themselves in a process of double-shaming. They are subject to scrutiny, regulation and pressure from an inherently patriarchal and socially prescriptive environment yet also contribute to the same culture that systematically disempowers them, which leaves them feeling frustrated at themselves.

In Chapter One I examine women’s voices in the university setting analyzing both discursive and material voice and non-verbal “voices”. What women are saying, what they are not saying and how they are saying it is telling. I argue that in listening to women’s voices we can understand not only how unconfident they feel in the academic setting but also in their senses of self and worthiness. I furthermore posit that women’s silenced and doubtful voices not only reflect a lack of confidence but perpetuate it by limiting women’s authentic expression and reducing their agency in many settings on campus.

In Chapter Two I argue that beauty is a powerful form of capital on these campuses and that women feel pressured to embody an unrealistic ideal, continually seeking a perfect aesthetic that can never be attained. I furthermore highlight that because beauty is a very visible and somewhat controllable form of capital, it tends to dominate this setting where individuals are constantly surrounded by and being compared to their peers. Beauty is performative and the ritualized performance of beauty undermines women’s confidence because it demands an unrealistic ideal and promotes unhealthy habits and behaviors. Women contribute to their own disempowerment by performing beauty and judging women against these impossible standards. Thus, the performance of beauty on campus and women’s participation in this system serves to undermine their confidence as they feel both inadequate and frustrated at themselves for their complicity in the system.
In Chapter Three I analyze the Greek System focusing on sororities. I use the Greek system as a lens through which to understand how the destruction of women’s confidence is reinforced by formal sanctioned institutions and systems on campus. I reiterate the double-bind that women find themselves in: they are oppressed and disempowered by a system that leaves them unconfident as it regulates, policies and commodifies them, yet these women simultaneously participate and contribute to this system thus participating in their own oppression.

In Chapter Four I analyze sexual culture on campuses arguing that hook-up culture regulates and polices women’s sexuality, encourages the commodification of women as sexual objects and marginalizes many individuals. I go on to argue that the culture of sexual assault and aggressive male sexuality on campus cultivates a climate of fear for women and puts the onus on them to navigate these often threatening and uncertain spaces. Thus, women in this space feel unconfident in their own ability to express themselves sexually or navigate the social scene safely.
Chapter One:

Shh…Women’s Silenced and Doubtful Voices

Glossy-screened Macs lined the tables that bordered the room, humming softly. Strewn across the cluster of tables in the middle were backpacks and laptops. A pile of books on museums sat in front of one woman and a tennis racquet in front of another. One of the men was gazing at his laptop screen, its lid covered in colorful stickers, while another sent messages to his fraternity GroupMe. None of us really wanted to be here. For most of us this was meant to be a way to get our quantitative science general education requirement out of the way as painlessly as possible. Very few had any background in computing, coding or web design. Our T.A, a softly spoken, patient man, asked a question about different forms of information transfer.

“I’m not sure but ….” preaced one woman.

“I’m probably wrong,” punctuated another woman’s answer.

“This might be stupid,” responded a third.

“Sorry”, “maybe”, “just wondering” scattered the answers of other women.

The men, who also weren’t sure, gave their answers.

“I was thinking that…”

“Would it be fair to say that…?”

“In my opinion, I…”

They put forth their opinion without apologizing nor prefacing its dubious correctness. Rather than questioning themselves, they put the question, the onus of being right, back on the T.A, the expert in this situation.

None of us knew the answer. We weren’t expected to.

We were just expected to give our imperfect guesses.
Introduction

Listen to any classroom discussion at elite universities and you will hear this sort of gendered rhetoric play out. This one classroom example is representative of women, across disciplines, year, and institutions, consistently devaluing and silencing their voices in academic spheres. In my field work I noted how often women’s voices were asserted much less frequently, boldly and unapologetically in the classroom than men’s. Given that men and women at elite universities enter these settings with similar achievement records it stands to reason that women are equally intellectually capable of fully participating in discussion. However, time and time again this is not what I observed. Women I interviewed were aware of this phenomenon, many cited Hufffington Post articles or books like Lean In that had made them conscious of how their pattern of speech was gendered and disempowering. However, knowing about these patterns didn’t mean that women didn’t still conform to them. Women’s voices in the classroom and in discussion of the self are characterized by hesitancy, doubt, self-deprecation and euphemisms. In this chapter, I will look at how women’s voices in their material and discursive natures both reflect and perpetuate a lack of confidence. I furthermore argue that women’s silenced and doubtful voices are both a self-preservation mechanism and tactic by which women attempt to navigate a society which calls for compliancy over assertiveness. However, this tactic, like the quest for beauty ultimately undermines women’s confidence. It limits assertive and genuine expressions of the self and others, in response to their voices, share in their doubt and underestimate their abilities. Thus, through women’s voices we are better able to understand women’s lack of confidence and how internalization and reproduction of gender norms have led to the destruction of their confidence.
Theory of Voice

When we speak of voice, we are speaking about one of our most defining human characteristics. In many ways our voices are uniquely ours; mothers say they can recognize their newborn’s cry amidst all the other wailing babies in the maternity ward. However, voices are complex in that from infancy, we both learn to use them but also have them shaped by the world around us. Our voices are both material and discursive, meaning that they are formed by what we say but also how we sound. As we age and learn to use them our voices are often mimetic, shaped by the culture, norms and behaviors of those around us. Languages, accents, cadences and figures of speech emerge as a result. With time we learn not only to speak but to express desires, values, opinions and doubt; we learn the importance of having our “voices” heard. However, our culture does not value all voices equally and minority groups often find their voices silenced, learn that they are unvalued or are forced to adapt them to suit dominant rhetoric or norms.

Although each of our voices is sonically unique, we often share vocal characteristics with a group we are a part of based on kinship, gender, race or class. When thinking about an individual’s sex there are biological factors that impact the sonic quality of person’s voice. However, as Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones in *Embodied Voices* elucidate, sex differences do not determine an individual’s “voice”.

“Since both language and society are structured by codes of sexual difference, both the body and its voice are inescapably gendered. This is not to say that voices possess intrinsically masculine or feminine qualities… Rather vocal gendering appears to be the product of a complex interplay between anatomical differences [and] socialization into culturally prescribed gender roles…. In other words, the acoustic and expressive qualities of the voice are as much shaped by an individual’s cultural formation as is her or his use of language” (Dunn and Jones 1994, 2-3).
There is nothing natural about the way that our voices become gendered. In fact, communication expert Deborah Tannen says, “The reason ways of talking, like other ways of conducting our daily lives, come to seem natural is that the behaviors that make up our lives are ritualized” (Tannen 1984, 15). If we consider the ritualization of voice in light of Butler’s (1990) argument about how gender performativity we can understand voice as something learned, constructed and performed.

Thus, when analyzing voice, it is crucial that we understand its complex dimensionality. We cannot understand voice merely sonically, nor can we understand it merely discursively. It is only when we consider these two elements in tandem, what is being said and how we sound, that we can come to comprehend and fully appreciate what we can learn from voices.

Material Voice

When considering the concept of voice, it is crucial that we consider its sonic, material and phonetic elements and don’t merely focus on “voice” as a concept. Dunn and Jones argue that to do so would be to dismiss the significant amount of insight our voices can provide us:

Feminists have used the word “voice” to refer to a wide range of aspirations…. In this context, “voice” has become a metaphor for textual authority, and alludes to the efforts of women to reclaim their own experience…This metaphor has become so pervasive, so intrinsic to feminist discourse that it makes us too easily forget (or repress) the concrete physical dimension of the female voice… (Dunn and Jones 1990, 1).

Our voices, therefore, are a worthy point of study, regardless of what is being said. Voices are made up of many complex features, timbre, register, pitch, volume, rhythm, that require bodily effort to produce. As Amanda Weidman in *keywords in sound* says, “Voices
are not only sonic phenomena; they are material in the sense that they are produced through bodily actions” (Weidman 2015, 235). Thus, our voices are intrinsically tied to our physical as well as our epistemological selves.

While we know that the language we speak is most often determined by our cultural upbringing, we often fail to recognize just how much the material elements of our voices are also externally influenced. We often assume our voices are natural because they are so easily differentiated. As Alessandro Duranti in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology* notes:

“The ability to differentiate one voice from another, the ability to recognize that each and every voice is different, the ability to hear oneself at the same time as hearing others, the ability to silently hear oneself within, the ability to imagine the voice of another in the absence of their immediate vocalic presence – these are all fundamental human capacities” (Duranti 2004, 341)

However, we are not born with a predetermined material voice that develops separately from the context in which we live. In fact, as anthropologist Weidman highlights, our voices develop in specific environments: “The material, sonic experience of voice — learning to gurgle, laugh, scream, speak, sing, and to listen to others doing so — seems to be natural and universal. But such experiences occur within culturally and historically specific contexts,” (Weidman 2015, 232).

Therefore, although our voices may have unique qualities, we often share many material and sonic characteristics with those whom we share space, connection, culture, history or kinship with. This is why women in the elite university setting share certain vocal characteristics.

Vocal fry and up speak are two material qualities consistently heard in women’s voices on campus. Vocal fry, according to Francesca Shaw and Victoria Crocker, is a specific positioning of the vocal cords so that they vibrate only at the anterior end: “The resulting slow vibrations create a low ‘creaking’ sound with the apparent strain on the voice resulting
in this quality being known as glottal or vocal ‘fry’” (Shaw and Crocker 2015, 21). Up speak/talk is almost the opposite, rather than a low and creaky voice there is an intonational rise at the end. Linguist Robin Lakoff in her analysis of up speak says it “has the rising inflection typical of a yes–no question in addition to being especially hesitant” (Lakoff 1975: 55). In effect, up speak turns every statement into a question making the speaker sound hesitant or unsure. These may seem like minute details but analysis of voice is telling. As Weidman argues, “paying attention to voices in their sonic materiality can deepen our understanding of classic anthropological concerns with power and representation, yielding insight into the affective and embodied dimensions of modern sociopolitical formations” (Weidman 2015, 233). I will later highlight how sonic qualities like vocal fry and up-speak reflect and impact women’s confidence in the university setting.

**Discursive Voice**

Having established the importance of the material voice, let us now turn to the discursive voice, or in other words, what is being articulated (or not). When we consider the voice as a concept in anthropology, we are considering how the individual exists, is represented and heard within a larger social and cultural context. As Ronald Wardhaugh and Janet Fuller highlight in *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*: “In learning how to speak we are also learning to communicate in ways appropriate to the group in which we are doing that learning” (Wardhaugh and Fuller 2015, 231). Therefore, voice is learnt, often implicitly, in a manner that reflects and fits the cultural and social context in which the individual exists.

If voices, as I have argued, are culturally and contextually informed it is impossible then, when analyzing women’s voices, not to consider their historic subordination. Women, in the United States still live in a society that prefers women to be demure and passive over
assertive. While it is often thought that women talk more than men, it is in fact men’s voices that dominate public settings (Tannen 1990, 110-111). However, as Weidman argues, women have begun to reclaim the notion of voice. “In much anthropological and feminist scholarship, the voice, although not always explicitly thematised, has been identified as a vehicle of empowerment, self-representation, self-expression, authentic knowledge, and agency,” (Weidman 2015, 195). Voices then come to represent more than a communicative tool they also embody history, identity and agency.

As such, our analysis of voice must look closely at what is being said and what is left unspoken. Vocabulary is often telling, especially when looking at gendered speech patterns at elite universities. Women on campuses consistently use what Lakoff calls “Women’s Language”, that is hedge words such as “a little” and “a bit”, deferential or self-deprecating speech, low-modality words, apology and excessive politeness (Lakoff 1975, 8). This pattern of speaking Lakoff argues, “submerges a woman’s personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly,” (Lakoff 1975, 7). At other times women’s voices aren’t heard at all, they remain silent. If voices, as Feld et al. argue are “a key representational trope for identity, power, conflict, social position, and agency,” I argue that women’s doubtful and silenced voices are indicative of their lack of power and agency in the elite university setting (Feld et al. 2006, 341).

It is clear therefore that we must consider both voice’s material and discursive elements. In doing so, we may glean insight into individual’s experiences and the context and group that shapes this experience. As Lakoff argues, “If it is indeed true that our feelings about the world color our expression of our thoughts, then we can use our linguistic behavior as a diagnostic of our hidden feelings about things” (Lakoff 1975, 39). Thus, I argue, in analyzing women’s voices in the university setting we are able to understand both how confident women feel and how a lack of confidence manifests in this space.
The Good Girl

Women’s voices on elite campuses can be authoritative and confident, but oftentimes silenced, hesitant and doubtful voices are more common. Though women in these settings may be aware of how men and women express themselves differently they often don’t realize how often their voices portray gendered patterns of doubt and hesitancy. Sometimes they do realize but find it difficult to change their normalized speaking habits in a culture that reinforces these behaviors. I argue that women’s speaking patterns are the result of ritualization since childhood in a society that encourages little girls to downplay assertiveness and boldness and exemplify demure, quiet and compliant behavior. This adoption of “feminine” speech is a hallmark of the “Good Girl Syndrome”. The Good Girl Syndrome, coined by William Fezler and Eleanor Field refers to how women, from a young age, are taught to be good and kind and sweet to be liked (Fezler and Field, 1988). Jill Taylor, Carol Gilligan and Amy Sullivan in Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationships describes this as “the cultural pressure to conform to the dominant, conventional image of the ideal, perfect girl – who is always nice and good, who never hurts other people’s feelings….and who contains her feelings, especially anger” (Taylor et al. 1995, 25). This is obviously destructive as it requires the suppression of the authentic self that I argue is crucial to women’s confidence. Women at elite universities are particularly susceptible to the pressure to be a “Good Girl” because most often this embodiment of the rule-abiding, diligent and “perfect” girl has gotten them the good grades, recommendations and leadership positions that, in many ways, led to their admission to the elite university. While these women are aware that their diligence has in many ways enabled their success they often don’t realize that they are conforming to the “Good Girl” image because, given their intellect and ambition, they aren’t as passive, demure or subordinate as they envisage “Good Girls” to be.
However, although passivity and acquiescence are some markers of the Good Girl, they are not the only ones. Good Girls also seek external validation as they embody and present perfection and likeability. As Elizabeth Bell and Kim Golombisky argue the “Good Girl” identity is in fact a performance. Good Girls seek external validation as they embody and perform perfection and likeability (Bell and Golombisky 2004, 296). As Lexie told me, “I think I went into a lot of social situations as a freshman and a sophomore wanting everyone, everyone regardless of their morals, characters whatever, I just wanted everyone to not only like me but love me.” The high-achieving woman in the elite college setting therefore reflects the mindset of her school girl self. However, while women may see their performance of the Good Girl as a tactic for success, in reality “…the classroom never taught us that self-effacing obedience and silent industriousness might work against us as women. Working conscientiously and earning good grades are not necessarily preparation for success outside the classroom,” (Bell and Golombisky 2004, 298).

The “Good Girl” tactic I argue doesn’t translate well to the elite university setting as the markers by which women have defined their worth become harder to achieve and the need for genuine confidence and self-development over blind obedience peaks. “Individually Good Girls ask, ‘What do I have to do to make an A?’ Those A’s represent the bedrock of their ‘goodness’. Too long rewarded for being ‘good’ in educational settings—that is following the rules – Good Girls are at a loss when the rules for earning A’s become nebulous and open-ended in the college classroom.” (Bell & Golombisky 2004: 300). Thus, the “Good Girl” may have consciously or unconsciously defined women in the elite university setting’s identity throughout their academic trajectory. While tactically it can have merits the Good Girl, I argue, is ultimately destructive as in an attempt to continually be perfect, unobtrusive and likeable women undermine their own agency, authority and power. The unwillingness to be seen as aggressive (the antithesis to the Good Girl) means women
are often overly unassertive in their speech and delivery. This obviously leads to a great deal of hesitancy, doubt and low self-worth, which is not only reflected but reinforced by the hesitancy and silence in these women’s voices.

**Women’s Academic Voice**

The women who attend elite university campuses are intelligent, motivated and ambitious. They pride themselves on their intellect, their ability to succeed and their place in this privileged academic space. However, in my interviews many of them expressed feelings of underachievement and inadequacy, that they had dropped the ball in college. They defined themselves, half-jokingly, as the “over-achiever in high school, the straight-A student who was involved in a million clubs.” Once they entered the college classroom, however, that identity was called into question. As Mary said, “I think a lot of the people who come to [University X] are people who have consistently succeeded in everything they have tried to do even if that’s not the thing they are best at you know…. you were still able to get an A or a B and then you come here and you literally can’t pass.” The shift from being the best to being in a pool of the best leads to a lot of insecurity and uncertainty that is reflected in women’s voices in the classroom.

In the elite college classroom women are more reticent in giving authoritative answers. This is especially interesting given that in these spaces intelligence is seen as an asset, a status point, unlike high-school and middle-school where oftentimes intelligent and hard-working students are teased and seen as “uncool”. Women at elite universities are just as competent as their male counterparts. In fact, on average women throughout elementary, middle and high-school have outperformed men, and women on average graduate high-school with higher G.P.As then men (Duckworth and Seligman 2006, 198). Why then if
women are equally or more competent than men and in a setting which supposedly privileges intelligence are their voices marked by hesitancy and doubt? I believe it is largely because women lack confidence in these settings and often are subject to “Imposter Syndrome” which Valerie Young in *Secret Thoughts of Successful Women* says “refers to people who have a persistent belief in their lack of intelligence, skills, or competence. They are convinced that other people’s praise of their accomplishments is undeserved….Unable to internalize or feel deserving of their success, they continually doubt their ability to repeat past successes. When they do succeed they feel relief rather than joy,” (Young 16-17).

Many studies have focused on imposter syndrome in the traditionally male dominated STEM fields (Simmons 2016; Stout et al. 2011: Sekaquaptewa 2011). However, while STEM fields are problematically gendered which can heighten the imposter syndrome, research has indicated that male voices dominate classrooms in other settings as well. For example, a study at Harvard Law school revealed that men were 50 percent more likely than women to speak voluntarily at least once and 144 percent more likely to offer three or more comments. Other research from kindergarten to graduate school indicates that teachers are more likely to call on male students than female students even when female students also have their hands raised (Sadker 513, Hall and Sandler 5-9, Sandler et al. 10-14). In my research I found that women across a variety of disciplines, interest areas, institutions and year groups expressed feelings of fraudulence and inadequacy.

Although there are many areas where imposter syndrome can rear its head, I argue that the elite competitive university facilitates it, particularly because of its academic focus. Student’s success or worthiness is highly quantifiable within this space where grades, G.P.As and class ranks reign. Many of the women I spoke with, like first-year student Jenny, said they always felt like they were less outstanding than their peers. Jenny said she looks around at people and, “You know they’ve got their life together and are doing amazing things and
you can compare yourself to that and think I’m doing nothing and I’m being lame.” In spite of all of their accomplishments and ambition, women told me that they felt as if they didn’t deserve their place, that one day someone was going to reveal them as an unworthy fraud. “Everyone here is so qualified and so intelligent... I feel all my friends are better than me at just about everything,” said Jordan.

I argue that the imposter syndrome is inextricably tied to a lack of self-confidence which can be heard in the hesitancy and doubt heard in women’s voices in the classroom. As I will now explore, these doubtful voices not only expose a lack of confidence but also cause a decrease in confidence.

*Women’s Academic Voice: Vocabulary*

Women’s voices betray this lack of confidence and feeling of fraudulence as they pepper their answers with doubtful qualifiers. Many begin their answers by saying, “I’m not sure but...” and “I’m probably wrong but...” followed by what is often a correct or valid response. I observed many women who, clearly enjoying a class and, with readings full of notes, would shoot their hand in the air and enthusiastically answer only to have that enthusiasm drain away as they spoke. Their instinctive academic zest would be tempered and their voice would get timider, their vocabulary less declarative until they ended with, “Anyway that’s just my opinion”. This little word “just” manages to slip into so many of these women’s responses, usually in reference to themselves: “It’s just my thought”, “I was just wondering,” “I’m just a little confused”. Former Google executive Ellen Petry Leanse
says, that *just* is a “‘permission’ word, in a way — a warm-up to a request, an apology for interrupting,” one that granted the other person “more authority and control”\(^3\).

The word *sorry* also features prominently in women’s speech in the classroom, usually when women open their mouths to say, “Sorry, I don’t understand.” This is unsurprising. Women’s overuse and misuse of the word *sorry* has gained particular attention in recent years even featuring in a popular Pantene advertisement which showed women apologizing everywhere from work to home (Tannen 2001: Schumann and Ross 2010: Henderson 2004: Sandberg: Kay and Shipman 2014). Deborah Tannen argues that what we see as apologizing is sometimes a ritualized means of restoring balance to a situation: “In other words, ‘I’m sorry’ can be an expression of understanding – and caring – about the other person’s feelings rather than an apology” (Tannen, 46). However, she highlights that women say “sorry” much more than men possible because “apologizing is seen as a sign of weakness. This explains why more men than women might resist apologizing, since most boys learn early on that their peers will take advantage of them if they appear weak,” (Tannen 1996, 2). I argue that women’s routinized use of sorry in the classroom reflects an insecurity with being imperfect and a fear of being perceived as aggressive. I therefore also posit that women sometimes use sorry-speak and qualifiers to soften their statements and therefore avoid the risk of being branded as bossy, aggressive or bitchy. I believe this softening is often unintentional, a learned pattern that reflects women’s implicit understanding of gender roles and expectations. In considering women’s hesitant and apologetic speech patterns in the classroom, their lack of confidence becomes clear.

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Women’s Academic Voice: Speech Style and Non-Verbal Cues

Analyzing women’s non-verbal expression and silenced voices, not merely what they are saying, is crucial to understanding how confident women feel. Upon entering a classroom, many women sit towards the middle or back of the room. They sit with their legs crossed, arms folded often leaning their chest inwards, taking up very little space, while the men around them spread out their books, sit with their legs apart or even sometimes on the chair in front of them or lean back and swing. When men raise their hands to answer a question, they thrust it into the air, palm open or fist clenched clearly visible. The women on the other hand oftentimes slowly put their hands up, halfway, one finger pointing up and sometimes even keeping their elbow on the desk. Some women put their hands up and then when not immediately called on, make out as if they are fixing their hair or slowly and quietly put it back down. When answering a question, women often speak quietly or raise their pitch and speak quickly and breathily using their “little girl voice” as if they were five, not eighteen. They also often use up-speak, finishing sentences with an inflection. Lakoff describes the phenomenon: “The effect is as though one were seeking confirmation, though at the time the speaker may be the only one who has the requisite information (Lakoff 1975: 39). Women’s consistent use of up speak undermines the authority of what they are saying because they seem to be constantly questioning the validity of their own thought, seeking approval or acceptance from the professor. Women also speak in voices heavily laden with vocal fry. Research from Rindy Anderson and Casey Klofstad indicated that vocal fry can be associated with masculine assertion and dominance given its low and drawn out register (Anderson and Klofstad 2012, 1-2). However, Ikuko Yuasa’s study highlights that women who use vocal fry are seen as “educated, informal, genuine, and nonaggressive” as well as “hesitant” and less “confident” (Yuasa 317, 330). I noticed in my study that women would often use vocal fry when they were answering a question or explaining a concept in a class,
drawing and dragging out their sound in a way that made them seem to care less about whether they were correct or not. They were distancing themselves sonically from their opinion. Thus, I argue that while women (usually reflexively) can use vocal fry as a tactic to present themselves as imperturbable and unthreatening vocal fry can represent an underlying insecurity and be interpreted by others as evidence of low-confidence or hesitant. Vocal fry therefore doesn’t only reflect a lack of confidence but can cause others to lose confidence in an individual’s opinion as they associate its sonic qualities with a lack of security.

It is important, moreover, to take note of when women’s voices are not there; they are silenced. One could argue that a silent voice is no voice at all. I disagree. Women’s silent voices are vitally important in this context, as they reveal women’s insecurity in their own positionality and voice in the elite classroom. In my research I noted that in many classroom settings when a professor asked a question the majority of women would stay silent until called on. Though some women would respond instantly the majority would often wait for men to answer first. Women’s silence became especially confusing and troubling when a female professor would ask an all-female class (even in a women’s studies class!) a question only to be met by silence for a significant amount of time. “Come on, I don’t bite” sighed a professor exasperated one day. If women are silent even in contexts where they are overrepresented what does this say about their inherent confidence? Moreover, the absence of their voice is furthermore problematic because it causes women to lose authority and agency in this setting which is only more detrimental to their confidence as they get increasingly sidelined as professors and peers assume they have nothing of value to contribute.

Thus, before we even register what the woman is saying, the material quality of her voice has made her seem unassertive, uncertain and uninformed. None of these qualities projects confidence nor inspires confidence from others. Not all women’s voices reflect this pattern; there are women who sit front and center with their hands raised and voices clear.
However, a good majority of women in my research did at least a combination of these gendered patterns: eagerly answering a question but pepper ing the answer with “sorry” and hedge words or sitting at the front of the class but silently taking notes, occasionally half-heartedly raising a hand only to put it down before the professor could notice. Can we say these patterns are merely habit with and don’t reflect or impact women’s confidence? I say no as in my research women consistently spoke about how they often felt like a fraud in the elite setting, not good enough…an imposter.

**Women’s Voices and Worth**

What we can learn from women’s voices isn’t limited to the classroom. As previously mentioned, most of the women I interviewed were perfectionists. Their quest for impossible perfection was obviously always unsatisfying as they never reached their idealistic standards. This left them often feeling defeated, inadequate and vulnerable. As I will highlight in the following chapter, beauty is a particularly personal and salient issue for these young women. Listening to how women spoke about themselves and their physical appearance was very telling. What can be heard in this often self-critical and judgmental speech is a fundamental lack of self-compassion and worthiness. Their voices continually echo a sense of being “not good enough”. I met with a young woman over coffee who wanted to speak to me about issues she was having with her body image. She sat cupping her drink in her hand and shared her struggle with me. Her words spoke of diets and fat, insecurity and poor self-image, her beautiful friends and her “overweight” self. But her voice? It was full of pain and hurt and most of all deep shame and unworthiness. I asked her what her life would look like if she genuinely didn’t care what she looked like, and she stared at me, her mouth dropped open, and she shook her head. “I can’t even imagine that…. I just…. it’s meant to be easy: You lose
weight, you eat healthily and you exercise. I don’t know why I can’t do it. I just feel pathetic and stupid. No one else struggles like me… I just know I can’t be happy with myself until I’m there.” Another woman I spoke with was struggling with severe anxiety and depression but was resisting help because she didn’t want anyone to see how “pathetic and weak” she was as she always felt she was “completely and utterly failing to come through.” These women’s voices, along with many other women I’ve spoken to, reflected their lack of self-worth. They truly seemed to believe until they looked a certain way or achieved a certain thing then they were unworthy of love, compassion and kindness. Their sense of self-loathing runs so deep that they cannot even imagine an existence without it.

These voices are usually the silent ones on campus, very rarely heard. The deep-set sense of unworthiness coupled with a paralyzing fear of judgement and desperate need to present an “effortlessly perfect” image means that this authentic emotion and fear is usually internalized. This is often to these women’s detriment. Women I spoke with often felt very isolated in their experience, believing that no one could understand much less share in their suffering. In reality, I heard countless women voice the same sense of unworthiness, shame, and suffering. But because these voices remain silent due to a fear of seeming anything less than “effortlessly perfect,” there is no shared experience, no mutual uplifting or commiseration, just silence. As Deresiewicz says about elite college students, “Everybody thinks that they’re the only one who’s suffering, so nobody says anything, so everybody suffers” (Deresiewicz 2014, 10). Thus, when considering women’s confidence on campus, it is important to contemplate how much we are not hearing, how much goes unsaid, how many voices remain silent and how this impacts women’s confidence.

Although not uncommon, these examples are extreme cases of self-doubt and unworthiness. They are important to hear, but it is also important to acknowledge how readily doubt features even in minute and fleeting interactions. What also struck me during my
research was how little women valued their own voices and opinions. After concluding interviews and sending them a message thanking them for their time, dozens of women wrote back to me apologizing or worrying that “they hadn’t been helpful,” or that they had “wasted my time.” As someone who was the recipient of a favor, I found this exceedingly puzzling and concerning. I didn’t have a single interview where I left feeling as though my time had been wasted, but I took time and often emotional energy away from women who were studying for finals, heading on break, working and living their lives. What was even more concerning was the fact that it wasn’t merely university women, but that it was women my own age, expressing sincere doubts about the value of their contribution but incredibly prominent women who were faculty members, researchers, administrators and psychologists who usually bill by the hour. These women had all done me a favor by giving me their time, expertise, thoughts and honesty, and yet they felt as if their contribution was insignificant or even disadvantageous to me. Once again, women’s voices reflect a lack of assertion of their own worth and value and therefore also reveal a scarcity in self-confidence.

Women’s Voices and Struggle

In many ways we own our voice because we choose what words we speak and to whom. However, as I have argued, oftentimes our voice isn’t a deliberately honest portrayal of the self but rather a reflection of deeper underlying feelings and thoughts that often are heavily socially and culturally determined. Voice can be a way for us to take ownership or command of our identity and its portrayal, or conversely our speech may reflect a lack of ownership over our voices and experiences. I have highlighted that women’s voices in the university setting are doubtful, hesitant and sometimes highly self-critical but that they are also silenced. This silence can be externally imposed as women feel their voices aren’t valued
in the classroom or other institutional settings or personally imposed to protect or hide one’s self from others. However, I noticed that these voices are also silenced when women fail to take ownership over their own struggle and pain. Women aren’t only silencing their voices to others, they are muting them for themselves.

When speaking about some of their struggles with confidence throughout college, women often struggled to articulate themselves. I initially thought that I was the problem, that the interview setting and topic made them uncomfortable, which to a degree it did. However, several women hastened to assure me that they always found speaking about their problems difficult, even in their own head. I originally dwelled little on it, but as time passed I began to pay closer attention to not only how women spoke about themselves, be it their body or their grades, but also their experiences, their struggle. In private conversations I overheard on campuses, in how my friends spoke about their hardship and how I spoke about mine I heard similar patterns. I went back to my interviews and listened once more for these women’s voices. What I found in those interviews and in my participant-observation was women’s profound lack of ownership of their struggle and pain. Women spoke about “eating stuff”, doing “silly things to lose weight” or “being a bit too skinny” when they really meant, and clarified when asked, that they had had or were struggling with an eating disorder. They mentioned being “just a bit of an anxious person,” or not “feeling that great” or being “a bit sad” when they were speaking about dealing with anxiety disorders or depression. Even the way they spoke about situations that were clearly painful - a broken heart, a mental illness, a significant failure, a difficult parental relationship – did not reflect how they felt. Their voices became affected. Many of them smiled, spoke in perky bubbly tones, laughed and used self-deprecating humor or dismissed what they were saying with a wave of their hand and a “anyway sorry that was morbid/depressing/a lot.” Very few women actually articulated the
extent of their struggle clearly without further specific questioning and even those who did
often used language and tone that didn’t reflect the severity of the problem.

Instead of owning their voice and their experience, these women dodged and
euphemized, dismissed and giggled, played down severity and made jokes. It wasn’t because
these hardships didn’t impact them; they did—in fact after being pressed further many
women became quite emotional. It was that they felt they couldn’t or shouldn’t embrace and
present their authentic and vulnerable selves to anyone, not even themselves. Many of the
women admitted to me that they didn’t really think about some of the issues that were being
brought up because they were too difficult. They didn’t have time to process them, or they
didn’t want to feel as though they weren’t “put together” and that admitting or embracing
these realities scared them.

When women are too afraid, too unwilling to take ownership over their own voice in
relation to their personal struggles, what can we say about their confidence? Confidence is
something inherently internal and personal, the inner sense of having value regardless of
external measures of worth. If women cannot take ownership over their own voice in relation
to their own struggle, there is something profoundly lacking internally. These women appear
to be missing that intrinsic voice that validates and accepts themselves, struggle and all. Mary
Blenkey et al. in Women’s Ways of Knowing argue that women often fail to find their own
voice because they let others define them, “Believing that truth comes from others, they still
their own voices to hear the voices of others,”(Blenkey et al. 1986, 37) There can be no
authentic voice, no true ownership of self in this circumstance because, “If one can see the
self only as mirrored in the eyes of others, the urgency is great to live up to others’
expectations, in the hope of preventing others from forming a dim view” (Blenkey et al.
1986, 48). These women’s desire to be likeable and perfect in the eyes of others, I believe, is
so strong that it has infiltrated their inner being. Flaws or weaknesses in their mind make
them unlikeable to others, but also to themselves. Therefore, women silence their voice that perhaps is telling them that they are not okay, preferring to ignore their pain and struggle in the hopes of maintaining for themselves the well-adjusted, put-together identity they so desperately want but which isn’t realistic or sustainable. This invalidates their own experiences, leaving them less confident in their identity as they try to suppress and ignore its complex reality, which simultaneously further decreases their confidence as they feel unable to admit to the insecurity and fear that leads to this silencing in the first place. Thus, a painful cycle of silence and suppression is created within the self that eats away at women’s confidence.

**Women’s Voices and Self-Protection**

I have argued that women’s doubtful and silenced voices indicate an inherent insecurity with their place in the elite academic setting, a lack of self-compassion and an inability to own their struggle. However, there is another element to be considered in the evaluation of women’s voices in relation to confidence, that of self-preservation. Women at elite universities also sometimes use their doubtful voices as a protector, a self-constructed safety net. The hesitant voice sometimes becomes an unconscious tactic for these women as they navigate the academy, which so stigmatizes failure. These women’s lack of assertiveness means that they can never be wrong because they never have completely invested in or claimed ownership over their opinions. They have preemptively cushioned the blow of failure, removed its sting before it has even got a chance to harm them. Although I would argue that women’s aren’t systematically and deliberately employing a hesitant voice, it is more of a learned or reflexive behavior, it does enable them protection in an often-unforgiving environment. If they cannot be wrong, they cannot fail. Perfectionism plays a
significant role here; as Deresiewicz argues, the elite college student’s quest for perfect results in “a violent aversion to risk. You have no margin for error so you avoid the possibility that you will ever make an error” (Deresiewicz 2014, 22). Therefore, for these often-perfectionistic women, doubt can be both a hindrance but also sometimes a protective and welcomed tactic.

This risk-averse and all-or-nothing thinking towards failure is common for all on elite college campuses where perfectionism and a crippling fear of failure are dominant. However, I argue that women particularly play into this thinking as women often seem to see failure as indicative of their identity or whole selves rather than a moment. As Taylor, a woman who works with merit scholars at an elite university told me, “Women just take it so seriously… they take it so to heart.” This type of thinking is what psychologist Carol Dweck calls a fixed mindset, that is the belief that one’s intelligence, character and creative ability are fixed, givens that cannot radically change: “Believing your qualities are carved in stone – the fixed mindset – creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over” (Dweck 2008,6). Therefore, the problem with the fixed mindset is that failure is seen as a measure of inherent self-worth and ability rather than something challenging or an opportunity for growth.

Dweck’s research doesn’t only focus on women. However, I would argue that many if not most of the women I spoke with had fixed mindsets. They spoke about being “bad” or “dumb” in certain academic fields or things being “not my thing”. They also relied on other people’s assessment of them for validation, reflecting Dweck’s assertion that: “Even females at the top universities in the country say that other people’s opinions are a good way to know their abilities” (Dweck 2008, 79). On campuses I repeatedly heard women calling themselves stupid, pathetic, a failure, weak or saying that they were anxious people, had always been a certain way or didn’t know any different. Aside from the obvious negativity in these statements they also have a fixed, declarative nature. Ironically, from the mouths of women
who consistently sound doubtful and hesitant comes a willingness to explicitly define themselves sometimes just on the basis of one bad test result. This is problematic because women therefore limit themselves and their potential to a small range of pre-determined possibilities.

Blenkey et al. noticed this pattern of thinking in their research and problematized it: “The either/or thinking that these women confine themselves to makes it difficult for them to express notions of ‘becoming’ – evolution, growth, or development” (Blenkey et al. 1986: 50). This is obviously very detrimental to confidence, for if women believe their identities are fixed and not in a constant state of progress, they are much less willing to be self-compassionate in the face of failure because failure is not a moment, it is an identity. Furthermore, these women actively avoid risks and challenges because they don’t see development or change as something worthy or even possible. This leaves these women consistently seeking quantitative reinforcement of worth rather than accepting themselves, and their failures and successes, as inherently human.

**Conclusion**

Women’s voices in the elite university setting are characterized by doubt, hesitancy and silence. Although this is particularly prominent in the academic sphere, how women speak about themselves, their worth and their struggle is also indicative of a lack of inner confidence in other areas of their lives as well. Unfortunately, it is self-perpetuating cycle because the more that these women voice themselves in doubtful ways, the less credible they sound to others and themselves. Their opportunities, presence and worthiness are all undermined. However, women’s silenced and doubtful voices are also a means by which women in these settings protect themselves from failure and vulnerability as they self-
deprecate and euphemize away their struggle and fears. As a result they continually reinforce fixed notions about themselves, their capabilities and value. Thus, through women’s voices we come to understand the level of fear, perfectionism, self-hate and insecurity that plague their identities and limit their growth. If as I have argued, confidence has its basis in a strong, resilient core, these women’s voices reflect the opposite and prevent the authentic development and growth that is necessary to achieving the levels of self-actualization and acceptance confidence requires.

In the following chapters, we step out of the classroom to show how much of the learned behavior that contributes to women’s confidence crash occurs in non-academic settings. As women seek more cultural capital they turn to arenas outside academia in order to elevate their status and perceived worth. One of the most prominent ways that women seek this cultural capital is through beauty as I will explore in this next chapter.
Chapter Two:

Gorgeous Girls: Beauty as Cultural Capital

“So, seeking validation and approval in those [academic] ways worked for me in high school but you get here and it’s a whole new ballpark and you have to find ways to define your identity.... you’re kind of on a treadmill and that treadmill is only going to go faster.”

- Lucy

Introduction: Beauty on Campus

For students like Lucy, entering the elite university setting means confronting new and demanding social expectation, rules and competition. Demarcating the self as “special” in this space is more difficult than in previous educational settings. Most students at elite universities were the top-achievers at their high-schools—the stars. They then, upon gaining competitive admission to an elite institution, find themselves amidst a constellation of excellence. These institutions, which students enter at a particularly vulnerable and formative part of their lives, are unique. They operate like a bubble of competitive excellence, forcing students to look for ways to stand out or just keep up in this place that exists between adolescence and adulthood.

I argue that elite universities are, to use anthropologist Victor Turner’s concept, a “liminal space.” They are a transitional setting for students, liminal entities, that are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between” (Turner 2008, 359). After four years, students graduate from these institutions, transitioning to the “real” world. However, in the transitional “betwixt and between” phase students, on the verge of personal transformation, are shaped and influenced by the norms of the liminal setting. Thus, the university in many ways operates as what political scientist Benedict Anderson would call an imagined community (Anderson, 1991, 48-49). Anderson argues that nations as entities are in fact
culturally constructed, imagined communities that are inherently limited and sovereign. The nation then exists in the minds of its “citizens” and is defined by both real and conceptual borders and self-governance. The elite university is, I argue, also a constructed, imagined community. It operates within constructed borders both visible, like walls, and invisible, like competitive admissions processes. The university furthermore promotes a sense of unity and commonality through exclusion, positive self-branding and has its own rules and capacity for self-governance. Thus, as students or “citizens” are granted admission to the university or “imagined community” they are subject to its expectations and demands. The standards by which students used to conceptualize excellence have been re-defined and so they search for new, better and more extreme ways to measure up.

In my research it became clear that students felt pressured to achieve success (which they often equated with worthiness) beyond merely the academic realm. The term “effortless perfection”, coined in a Duke University report analyzing the experiences of women, best reflects how the women I spoke with felt the need to be effortlessly exceptional in all areas. Beauty, however, was a particular salient area, and in this chapter I will be looking at how women on elite campuses seek status and success through perfectionistic and idealized beauty. I will be thinking about this through sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas about cultural capital, Michel de Certeau’s concept of tactics and Judith Butler’s ideas about gender performativity.

Bourdieu argues that capital “takes time to accumulate” and is a means by which an individual can accrue status and power within society (Bourdieu 1986, 46). While there are many forms of capital, I argue that beauty is what Bourdieu calls embodied cultural capital. “The accumulation of cultural capital in the embodied state…. costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor. Like the acquisition of a muscular physique or a suntan, it cannot be done at second hand (so that all effects of delegation are ruled out)”
Beauty is thus the responsibility of the individual who must do the labor to reap its rewards. It is precisely these rewards, social status and worth (capital), that leads many women to implicitly view the acquisition of beauty as de Certeau-ian tactic. Tactics, de Certeau argues, are the means by which an individual can navigate and create opportunities for themselves within the context of a broader power structure. However, as I will argue in this chapter, the disproportionate pressures placed on women to embody idealized beauty and the ritualized performance the beauty quest demands is ultimately destructive. This quest for capital forces requires the policing of women and embodiment, and reproduction and self-perpetuation of gender norms that are caustic to women’s confidence.

**Why Beauty?**

“Perhaps the most common perception is that the educational elite are the children of the rich who are admitted to rich schools and then go on to get the best jobs to get rich. There is a lot of truth to this perception, but it takes more than affluence to join the educational elite. Increasing numbers of men and women have been joining it who do not come from affluent families but do have the requisite abilities and credentials,” (Katchadourian & Boli 1994, 16)

Many students at elite universities enter these spaces with a great deal of social, cultural and economic capital. As Katchadourian and Boli highlighted in their focused study of Stanford University, students admitted to elite universities often come from wealthy families and/or have substantial abilities and credentials that elevate their social standing (Katchadourian & Boli 1994, 16). A *New York Times* article, released in early 2017, emphasizes the prevalence of wealth in these settings, revealing that elite institutions are populated by more students
from the top one percent than bottom sixty percent of American society. While I believe their point that “the primary criterion for admission to Stanford is academic excellence” reflects the admission policies of any elite institution, it is clear that many students in this setting hold strong capital (Katchadourian & Boli 1994, 17). Obviously this is not the case for all students, and elite universities are also home to students from a variety of racial and socio-economic backgrounds. However, while individuals in this setting are often born into capital, there is also the opportunity once on campus to accrue more in the form of GPAs, leadership positions, prestigious internships and admission to selective clubs and social groups. While these forms of capital can be inherently classist (wealthier students have more time to devote to GPA development and extracurricular if they are not obliged to work) the acquisition of capital is a definite possibility and priority for many. Interestingly, despite the plethora of ways an individual can accrue capital, beauty, for women in my research was the most valuable and sought after form of capital. Why is this? In an environment that privileges intellect, abilities and credentials why does beauty, a seemingly trivial and vapid form of capital hold such power?

In considering beauty in terms of capital on campuses, it is important to acknowledge the broader context that has influenced the valorization of aesthetics. As Christine and Tracy Adams highlight in *Female Beauty Systems: Beauty as Social Capital in Western Europe and the United States, Middles Ages to Present* historically, socially and culturally women have always been valued and evaluated on the basis of their beauty (Adams & Adams 2015, 1-25). Definitions of idealized beauty have changed overtime, yet, as Nancy Etcoff in *Survival of the Prettiest* says, while “the object of beauty is debated, the experience of beauty is not,”

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(Etcoff 1999, 9). It could be tempting to think that overtime women’s primary positionality as objects of beauty has lessened. In reality valorization of women’s beauty has not abetted with time. In fact, as Naomi Wolf argues in The Beauty Myth, the pressure placed upon women to prescribe to idealized beauty has only increased with the advent of women’s increasing freedom and autonomy. “The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us,” (Wolf 1991, 10). It only takes looking at representations of women’s bodies in popular media to affirm this fact. Critiqued for any flaw, Photoshopped to perfection, hyper-sexualized and constantly scrutinized, women’s beauty is commodified and marketable.

Thus, women’s beauty is clearly a highly socially and culturally valued form of capital. Sociologist Catherine Hakim goes so far to as to argue that it should constitute its own category, “erotic capital”. She defines erotic capital as “a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social, and sexual attractiveness to other members of your society, and especially to members of the opposite sex, in all social contexts,” (Hakim 2010, 501). As beauty becomes increasingly commodified and “as the technical aids to enhancing erotic capital increase, the standards of exceptional beauty and sex appeal are constantly raised,” (Hakim 2010 506). The 60-billion-dollar diet industry and the cosmetic surgery industry that shows a 118 percent increase in women undergoing minimally invasive cosmetic procedures since 2000 reflect these increased pressures56. This is all occurring despite increased body positivity and eating disorder campaigns, movements and organizations. Thus, when


analyzing why beauty is such a prominent form of capital on college campuses it is important to acknowledge this cultural backdrop.

However, while important, the cultural valuing of beauty isn’t the only reason beauty dominates as social capital on elite campuses. Beauty’s capacity to be cultivated and visibility are, I argue, major elements of its power. As elite university graduate and student affairs worker Katie told me, beauty is “…something you can control and that’s wrapped up in your self-worth…You can control what you eat and how much you exercise, but you can’t control a lot of other factors.” Some, like Etcoff, argue that beauty can offer women agency, power and happiness (Etcoff 1999, 47). Women in my research often prescribed to this belief. Many of the women I interviewed thought that accruing beauty, usually in the form of weight loss, would give them a sense of power over their lives that would lend itself to happiness. As a bubbly and athletic cheerleader Jessie told me, “Like in my mind that’s how it will work if I’m, like, better. If I work out really hard and I’m skinnier, then I will be more confident and happier.” However, this isn’t the case as an incredibly experienced on-campus nutritionist Hannah highlighted:

“We have this false interpretation that if someone looks a certain way and they appear very happy, then if I weigh the same and look the same then happiness will follow…. We believe in the beauty myth, so to speak, that if I change how I look outwardly then I will feel better. But that doesn’t usually translate into that.”

I argue, that although the ability to manipulate one’s access to capital may appear positive, in reality it means women feel obligated to consistently participate in a ritualistic performance of beauty that serves to undermine their confidence. As Wolf argues, “The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance,” (Wolf 1990, 14).

Furthermore, given that individuals at elite universities find themselves living, eating, studying and socializing within a limited and shared space, comparison is readily facilitated. Hannah told me:
“So unfortunately when you start looking at the major areas where you might compare yourself...you ask what do I bring to the table? If all of a sudden you feel as though your area pales in comparison, we start to look at other places where we can compete. And oftentimes in my clinical work, that brings you to body weight. How does my body weight compare to the people who are successful on campus?”

Visibility here is key. You usually can’t visibly determine many other forms of capital, such as G.P.A. Aesthetics, however, are discernable at a moment’s glance. Beauty’s visibility means that it is constantly in focus and promotes an automatic and constant daily process of comparison and judgment imbuing it with even more status and prestige. Interestingly, while we often consider valorization and judgement of women’s beauty as being through the male gaze my research indicated that women play a fundamental role of perpetuating its status by policing and evaluating other women’s beauty. Wolf describes this subtle yet pervasive policing brilliantly:

“The look with which strange women sometimes appraise one another says it all: A quick up-and-down, curt and wary, it takes in the picture but leaves out the person; the shoes, the muscle tone, the makeup, are noted accurately, but the eyes glance off one another. Women can tend to resent each other if they look too ‘good’ and dismiss one another if they look too ‘bad’” (Wolf 1991, 75).

Women then are trapped into a cycle of double shaming where they are judged and valued by unrealistic beauty standards yet simultaneously judge other women and themselves by the same standards. As I will argue in this chapter, while beauty may be perceived as a valuable form of capital, the ritualized performances women engage in in their quest for beauty are ultimately destructive.
**What Is Beauty?**

Before analyzing the behaviors and rituals that define the beauty culture on elite university campuses, it is important to consider what exactly constitutes ‘beauty’ in these spaces. As previously mentioned idealized beauty takes different forms in different cultures and settings.

Undoubtedly influenced by the saturation of such images in popular media, the women I interviewed said they felt the need to embody the flaxen-haired, slim-but-fit, perfectly styled, acne-free, minimal yet flawlessly made-up woman. As Penny said, “You’ve got to have the polished hair, sleek and straight not frizzy or in a ponytail or haphazard it’s got to be like perfectly coiffed, the accessories have to be there you can’t forget to put in your earrings God forbid…but like without trying too hard”. The pressures of “effortless perfection” echoed throughout my interviews.

Ideal beauty, let alone effortless perfection, is impossible to achieve, and yet women on these campuses continue struggling to grasp what was never in their reach. Ironically, the normative beauty narrative on campus excludes most women who don’t have the perfect symmetry, body, skin tone or hair it demands. While few women fit the bill of socially constructed ideal beauty, the women of color told me they felt especially excluded. They mentioned that their beauty was always held in contention with their race with phrases like “Oh but you’re lucky you’re not that dark,” and “You’d never guess you were…” frequently and unabashedly used. Beauty, as culturally constructed, only naturally reflects the aesthetic of a small percentage of individuals yet is held as the standard for all.

Notably, despite the salient role normative beauty played on these campuses, the women in my research often failed to recognize or internalize that the beauty they were seeking was idealized. The woman I spoke with largely talked about trying to be good enough, fit in and look acceptable or normal. To admit to chasing “beauty” would be, for
many women, akin to conceitedness: a sin against the humble-good-girl model young women have been taught to follow. In their anthropological study of beauty salons in England, Paula Black and Ursula Sharma highlighted the commodification of “normal”. They explore how women who frequent beauty salons do not feel as if they are seeking beauty or an ultra-feminine identity but rather, “It seems that in general women are not striving for beauty but rather desire to regulate their bodies in order to appear within the bounds of ‘normality’” (Black and Sharma 2001, 114). Thus, in my research it became clear that what the women in Black and Sharma’s study called “normal” the women I talked with would describe as “good enough”. As sophomore Remi said, “I know that sounds like a dumb thing but I think that’s one of the things that people on this campus struggle with the most ‘Am I enough?’”

For many of the women I spoke to feeling not “enough” was an undercurrent to their everyday thoughts. It applied to all different realms of university life yet beauty was the most constant measure by which women could evaluate their worth. Aesthetics, unlike a homework, grades, internship offers or leadership appointments, could not be left on a desk or in the hands of another for the day. The inextricability of the self from beauty meant that sometimes opted for self-isolation over the presentation of inadequate self. Lilly told me that, “Sometimes I don’t feel like I’m looking good enough to go out so I don’t.” I also overheard another woman in a first-year dorm say, “There’s no point going; I’ll just feel gross and ugly all night,”. Thus, if ideal beauty is what is considered “good enough” these women are never going to be satisfied, endlessly chasing the impossible only to feel that they are always failing. The manner in which this quest for beauty undermines women’s confidence is best seen in the ritualized performance of beauty on campus that I will now explore.
Performing Beauty in Public and Private

It is impossible to extricate analysis of women’s quest for beauty on elite university campuses from investigation into the social construction of gender. As explored in my introduction, gender (as distinct from sex) is learned behavior, rather than anything innate. West and Zimmerman call the presentation of a gendered self, “doing gender” and argue that “Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micro political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 126). Philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler calls the ritualized expression of gender performative. “As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (Butler, 1999: 178). Gender, according to Butler, is constituted by these performances rather than by any natural or inherent means. “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender: that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 1991, 33). Thus, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” (de Beauvoir 1949, 301). Using Butler’s ideas about gender performativity I argue that beauty on elite university campuses is a highly-ritualized performance. This performance reproduces gendered and proscriptive norms and encourages destructive behaviors that undermine women’s confidence.

Beauty is a performance that plays out in two spaces: the public space (such as through the media) and in the more private social arenas where women co-exist. There is something inherently social about women’s performative quest for beauty. It saturates popular rhetoric and behavior and men and women alike valuate and judge women’s bodies. Interestingly as I will explore, women don’t exclusively perform beauty for men but also for
other women, reinforcing the pervasive gender norms that they themselves are confined by. Although we can see the performance of beauty in many social realms university campuses make these performances obvious. As women eat, exercise, get dressed, study and socialize in shared spaces, beauty becomes incredible visible and ritualized. Within the liminal and often insular elite university setting, every space becomes a performative one. Men watch women, women watch women and feel themselves being watched by men and women alike. This creates a problematic dichotomy for women; they are both allies and enemies in the quest for beauty. As Wolf says, “Ironically, the myth that drives women apart also binds them together” (Wolf, 1990, 76). This tension is one of the many confusing tenets in the quest for beauty. I will now go on to examine how performative beauty reinforces unrealistic ideals, highly gendered notions of beauty and destructive behavior in three contexts: the gym, eating and going out.

**Beauty and the Gym**

On-campus gyms accentuate the visibility of beauty in the elite university setting. The nature of these gyms, usually located in a central setting and frequented by students and their peers, facilitates performativity. From the minute one arrives on campus the salient role the gym plays in the on-campus beauty narrative becomes apparent. At the universities I conducted research at many women walked around in athletic gear all day, looking ready to exercise at any given moment. This aesthetic reflects the commodification of the fit-girl image by companies such as Lululemon, the success of which can be seen in the amount of branded athletic wear worn on campus. At the gym, I observed how women often arrived in “cute” athletic gear, hair brushed and sometimes even wearing makeup. Slimmer women often wore revealing athletic wear, showing off abs in cropped tops, backs with strappy tank
tops or legs with short shorts. Many women came with friends to chat with while those who came alone brought a book, music or a tablet to watch Netflix on. One woman told me, “I like watching T.V when I work out; it keeps me distracted and makes the time exercising go by faster.” Exercise, it often seemed, was more of an obligation or burden rather than a pleasure or challenge and it required something to make it more palatable. This was obviously not the case for everyone. It is important to note that a lot of women in these settings truly enjoy their athletic lives and find a strong sense of comradery, joy and self-worth through their individual or team athletic pursuits. However, for many of the women I spoke with exercise always existed as a “should”.

Unlike the men who often either exercised in silence or discussed their workouts with other men women often spoke to friends about parties, school work, their sex lives and relationships while they worked out. Interestingly, women who were conventionally fit and slim asserted their presence in the gym by talking loudly and working out on more visible machines, while women who were less slim often worked out quietly in the corner. However, women’s presence at the gym was limited to particular arenas. While there were always more women than men at the gyms I did my research in, the use of the space was highly gendered. Women dominated the cardio rooms, while men dominated the weight room. Women said to me that they “didn’t feel comfortable” in the weight room and were worried they would “look stupid”. Their fears were not unfounded, as I heard of one man taking videos of women in the weight room to make fun of them and sharing the videos with his fraternity brothers.

Although being seen as attractive for men (as heteronormativity was the predominant narrative on these campuses) was extremely important, looking beautiful, or more specifically performing beauty in front of other women, was also important. Gym cardio rooms, populated by women, were often full of mirrors, and I observed countless women, after evaluating their reflection while working out, fix their hair, stand taller or suck in their
stomachs. Furthermore, women surreptitiously eyed the woman on the machine next to her, her speed, time and calorie intake and sometimes adjusted their own accordingly. This reflects Wolf’s ideas that women are both allies and competitors in the world of beauty (Wolf 1990, 76). As an athletic sorority woman, Mary, told me “I honestly think that my girlfriends are the ones I feel are judging me more than my guy friends, and I feel that I judge my girlfriends more than I judge my guy friends for their appearance, as well.” Therefore, beauty once again is prescribed behavior. Women are watched, watch themselves and watch other women. They internalize the normalized behavior and often unknowingly perform it, not realizing that they are both contributing to and a product of the normalized beauty narrative.

Beauty isn’t merely performed visually but also verbally. What you hear, the commentary and dialogue, is just as telling as what you see. On campus the gym, fitness, weight loss and athleticism form a dominant part of women’s conversation. Mary told me, “I’ve noticed that women at University X are constantly talking about being fit and going to the gym, and going to the gym is seen as this thing like, ‘Oh wow you’re so great you went to the gym every single day!’”. Frequenting the gym then is not merely personal but publicly advertised and worn as a badge of honor, a status symbol. While exercise is obviously crucial for good health the performance of beauty often reflects unhealthy behavior. The rhetoric that surrounds beauty is far from positive and very telling. Fat-talk is rampant: “I ate that pizza yesterday so I’m going to have to run forever today,” one woman sighs. “Erk. I’m definitely getting fat,” moans another. “My thighs are huge.” “My arms are jiggly.” “I was so unhealthy this week.” “This is the first time I’ve worked out in like forever.” At the gym this talk is thrust out into the open rather than existing as a concealed insecurity. Women seemed to have learned vilifying their bodies is the norm. The women don’t ask for a response but ritualized “girl code” demands a response which takes one of three forms: dismisses the concerns raised (“Oh my God stop, you’re so skinny”); affirms solidarity (“I feel you. This week has been the
worst”); or most frequently offers a self-reflexive statement that is simultaneously an 
affirmation and deprecation (“You’re gorgeous; I would kill for your body”) that raises the 
other woman’s status by devaluing one’s own. This last statement highlights in particular 
the ways in which at the gym and other spaces of the university, as Wolf argues, women 
operate in relations of solidarity and contention with each other (Wolf 1990, 76).

While they didn’t use this language, the women in my research implicitly understood how 
going to gym was a performative act. They were aware of the fact that they were on show in 
this space. In fact, many of my respondents cited the gym as one of the places where they felt 
least confident. Jessie told me she felt uncomfortable being watched in these spaces and so,

“I purposely go to the gym when it’s kind of empty so I can work out on my 
own and not run on the treadmill next to someone who can run on the treadmill 
for an hour without breathing hard or being surrounded by a ton of super-fit 
people. I like having the gym to myself, so I avoid peak time.”

It appears then that some women, like Jessie, aware of the comparative culture on campus 
and feeling insecure about their capacity to measure up, develop tactics to circumnavigate the 
beauty performance on campus. However, as I will now highlight, it is virtually impossible to 
avoid the performance of beauty altogether as it plays out every day on campus with women 
and their eating rituals.

**Beauty and Eating**

I sat in the dining hall and watched as people selected their food. The men mostly 
strode straight up to the counters, knowing what they wanted, and tried to get the most food 
for their dollar. The women lingered and hovered, examining the options, thinking about 
them, surreptitiously checking the calories on the backs of chip packets and sodas. A group of 
four men came and sat down next to me, their plates full. Two had large thick slices of pizza,
another a chicken, veg and pasta dish, and the fourth a fat steak with a salad. They took big bites as they talked about school, their girlfriends and the party they had been to last week. One of the guys reached over and tried to swipe a bite of the other’s steak. “Hey!” said the steak-owner. “Get your own!” The guys laughed, as the would-be thief shook his head dejectedly. A group of women came and sat at my other side. One had a large rice dish, two had salads and the other had sushi. “Oh my God, I’m so hungry…I haven’t eaten anything all day,” said the woman with the rice dish. “I’m probably going to eat this, all of this… Don’t judge.” The other women reassured her. “Of course not!” They chatted as they ate, moving the food around their plate, picking at it, dipping their lettuce in their dressing on the side. One of the women didn’t finish her salad; “I’m just so full,” she sighed clutching at her stomach. A beat went by. “Me too,” said the woman with the rice dish, putting her loaded fork down and pushing her plate away, “I couldn’t eat another bite.”

This kind of scenario plays out on university campuses every day. While as I have argued, ritualized performances of beauty are clearly visible at the gym, they are also exceedingly apparent in eateries on campuses. Food, as an essential part of everyday life, cannot be avoided indefinitely and, because of the structure of the university, eating is very often communal and visible. Women’s private eating experiences are forced into a public performance that is informed by the culture and peers around them. If food was merely about survival and sustenance food in the university setting would be a non-issue but, as Sherries Inness in *Kitchen Culture in America* says, “Food is never a simple matter of sustenance. How we eat, what we eat, and who prepares and serves our meals are all issues that shape society” (Inness 2015, 5). Food and eating are therefore culturally, socially and contextually informed.

Although women at universities have obviously engaged with food and food culture throughout their lives college is likely the first place that they have had complete autonomy
over their eating schedules and habits. It is also the first time that they have had to eat in front of countless peers every day. Choosing what to eat, when to eat, who to eat with becomes an event in itself. The rhetoric around food reinforces the performative nature of beauty and the sense that one is always being evaluated. Food in Western society has long been inextricably laced with moral judgement as certain foods are dichotomized as “good” and “bad”, “sinful” or “healthy” and the edict “You are what you eat” conflates healthy eating with a virtuous self. According to a study by Steim and Nemeroff, which sought to investigate whether healthy eating and perceptions of morality were positively correlated, “Good-food eaters were found to be rated as more feminine, attractive, likeable and less masculine than were bad food eaters” (Steim and Nemeroff 1995, 486). Women are aware of this moralistic judgment and as such often spoke to me about feeling awkward eating in front of others. They were concerned with what others may think about them based on their food choices and as such often moderated their eating behavior based on their environment, a clear performance.

The way food is available and consumed on campus, when coupled with socially constructed beauty ideals, the stress of a new environment and workload and the hyper-competitive spirit of elite university campuses can lead to unhealthy eating habits. Universities are notorious for providing limited healthy options and often feature all-you-can-eat buffets where students, looking to make the most of their food plan or money, often overeat. Then, feeling guilty or realizing that they are gaining weight, individuals engage in unhealthy compensatory behaviors like stringent dieting, purging, over-exercising or restricting. Furthermore, on-campus eating is inherently social, especially for women, who catch up with friends in the dining hall, over brunch or lunch. This pushes food into the center of attention and conversation, which in turn influences how women act in relation to it. Women have created a never-ending dialogue about food on campus: “I’m so hungry”; “I
shouldn’t have eaten that”; “I’ve been so unhealthy”; “I really should stop eating”; “I don’t work out enough to justify eating that.” The negatives of “shouldn’t”, “can’t”, and “don’t” are repetitively used by women to describe permissibility: “I can’t eat that pasta,” “I should eat a salad,” “I don’t eat that.” Interestingly, like the gym-speak this dialogue is not private but rather shared and incorporated into the social scene frequenting the conversation holding as much or even more importance than sex, politics, school work or family. One’s seemingly personal relationship with food becomes shared. Yet again, beauty is performative. What surely also exists as an inner narrative is externalized, shared and mimicked. Unconsciously women have understood that their presence and participation in the food-scene is contingent on their acknowledgment of the rules by which their femininity should be performed. As a consequence, food and eating becomes a shared performative and ritualistic experience for women on campus.

The rise of “foodie” culture and body positivity campaigns has also played a role in women’s ritualistic and performative relationship with food. With the advent of social media, food has become incredibly visible, the #foodstagram movement has led to hundreds and thousands of food pictures, foodie accounts and sharing of recipes, restaurants and food images. The definition of “healthy” eating has also been shaped by online accounts which often valorize a prescriptive diet rather than an actually healthy balanced diet. More than ever food has gone public, with young women leading the charge. Female-run Instagram accounts like @foodintheair, @girleatworld and @hungrybetches have over 350,000 followers while, @newforkcity has over 750, 000. There is an entire social media brand, Spoon University, which markets to college students and features recipes, food posts and blogs by student contributors. This media influence can be seen at elite campuses and especially at restaurants and cafés near universities you can see women filtering their pictures, arranging their meal more artfully #forthegram, and even standing on chairs to get the right angle on their brunch.
It all seems rather innocent, if a little ridiculous at times but in reality I argue it reflects a deeper cultural problem. Women now not only feel as though they have to be beautifully thin but that they also have to espouse an adoration and enthusiasm for food in person and in public that is often at odds with the anxiety they feel around it. Food is both a pleasure and a threat. Patricia Curran reflects this idea in her ethnography of the food rituals of the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur arguing that food “is also feared as a potential source of sensate pleasure capable of disrupting the inner focus on spiritual realities and therefore endangering the pursuit of perfection,” (Curran 1989, ix) I argue that women at elite universities face a similar conundrum to the Sisters Curran describes the pull between virtue (here meaning “healthy” eating) and vice which threatens to undermine their attainment of the perfect body and ideal beauty.

The popularity of “thinspiration” and “fitspiration” hashtags on Instagram and Pinterest have led to the saturation and valorization of very thin and fit bodies on these platforms. Women spend their time on social media looking at images of beautiful women and see, from their number of likes, just how socially valued these sorts of bodies are. As they scroll through the images they internalize a sense of inadequacy, a feeling of doing it wrong by not having it all, even as they rationally know that these images are constructed, orchestrated and manipulated to present an ideal self rather than a real self. Hashtags like #thinspiration #proanorexia and #thighgap have been banned because of their promotion of unhealthy behaviors and ideals. However, variants of these, #fitspiration and the saturation of beauty bodies and food continue to proliferate these sites and impact individuals. Psychologists Grace Holland and Marika Tiggemann argue that, “Women who post fitspiration images on Instagram are more likely to engage in eating and exercise behaviors that are potentially harmful to their physical and mental health. Of particular concern is the finding that almost a fifth of the women who post fitspiration were at risk for a clinically
significant eating disorder,” (Holland and Tiggemann 2016, 78). Furthermore, Dr. Valerie Taylor in *Food Fetish: Society’s Complicated Relationship With Food* argues that for individuals who post pictures of their food online, food holds an overly significant role in their lives (Taylor 2013). Thus, women’s participation in and performance of foodie culture is less indicative of a positive reclamation of a healthy self and more indicative of a complex and contradictory relationship with food and the body.

Female peers, more than male peers, impact how other women eat on campus. Like the conversations patterns I witnessed at the gym those at meal times follow normalized scripts of affirmation, self-denigration but also and subtle judgement. A side glance from a woman at another’s plate, a comment about “I wish I could eat that” or passive-judgmental remark, such as “Wow! You must be so hungry,” all evoke a response. Oftentimes the woman doesn’t finish her plate. An excessive justification for what one is eating is also common; the woman who eats her entire meal feels the need to remind everyone that she didn’t eat at all that day, she was just so hungry or she will be running a lot tomorrow. In tandem with this rhetoric is the expected empowerment talk. Women tell each other all the time that they look fine the way they are, that they are naturally beautiful, that the fries won’t kill them. However, their actions and rhetoric don’t reflect the empowered selves they feel they should embody. When it comes to themselves authentic empowerment-speak dissipates and self-denigration reigns. This means that no one truly believes or internalizes the positive messages, because they know that they are often merely symbolic.

Therefore, the social commentary around food and eating highlights its importance and serves as a spotlight, exposing what each woman is doing. Everyone is on show, and they are aware of it, which is why someone might eat salad in the dining hall but pizza alone at night. Secret bingeing on “forbidden” or “sinful” foods is not uncommon in the university setting with female students who attend live-in campuses three times more likely to binge eat
than those who stay at home with their parents (Barker and Galambos 2007, 909). Sometimes this bingeing is a result of “cracking” after a day or several days of self-imposed starvation or a result of stress-induced comfort eating. This often leads to intense feelings of shame and sometimes unhealthy compensatory behaviors like purging. Other times eating “unhealthy” food or bingeing is a form of rebellion, a push back against all the shoulds and should nots women feel they must abide by. Interestingly while bingeing is often secretive, women also break “rules” together usually using being drunk or hungover as justification to eat whatever they like. Women affirm each other in these situations telling their friends, “It doesn’t matter, who gives a fuck, it won’t kill us, you earned it”, while oftentimes harboring guilt and anxiety about breaking the same rules they dismiss. Yet again women find themselves in a double-bind, caught in a very tense place between what is expected of them and the kind of liberation they want. They try to perform both identities: that of the “healthy” and beautiful woman which in reality mandates restrictive and destructive behavior and that of the empowered, independent woman. They therefore find themselves in constant conflict.

It is this conflict, more than anything else, I argue that undermines women’s confidence in elite university setting. The women in my research were intelligent, socially conscious and ambitious individuals. Many of the women I interviewed identified as feminists and espoused the virtues of body positivity. Yet they exist in a society that has constantly valorized idealistic beauty and taught them their worth lies with their looks. The women I spoke with were aware of this tension and were incredibly frustrated with themselves for buying into socially constructed notions of beauty. Mary told me she was embarrassed how much her weight impacted her confidence: “I would say simultaneously the times I have felt least and most confident are related to body image stuff. Times where I felt I was doing really well or looked really good, which to be honest doesn’t happen very much, but those few times I felt so proud in a way that is almost disturbing.” Thus, not only do these
women feel anxious about their weight and eating, they feel stupid and angry for being “shallow” enough to care so much in the first place a type of double-shaming that is incredibly destructive to confidence.

**Beauty and Going Out**

The social sphere is another arena where beauty is visibly performed, particularly in the “pre-gathering” ritual of getting ready. I define a “pre-gathering” as the event where women gather together to get ready before going to the “pre-game” which is where men and women drink and socialize in preparation for an evening out. Although students at elite universities do fixate on academics, the social scene still reigns. In fact, because academics are so important at elite universities, students are more likely to go out only a few nights a week but go “hard” on those occasions. Less evenings out can make women feel more pressure to make a lasting impression and have an amazing time when they do go out. To achieve this, women turn to beauty to secure the success of the ‘perfect’ evening. Women often begin preparing for a night out days in advance; they consider different outfits or if the party is themed, costumes. The night of a party has many stages: often a ‘pre-gathering’ where women get ready together, the pre-game where men and women drink and socialize and the event which can be going to a mixer, party or club.

What happens at the pre-gathering is very telling. Women usually gather together at one person’s house to get ready. They bring makeup, share straighteners and curlers, play music and have drinks. A strong sense of community is present here as women work together to beautify not only themselves but each other. “Do you have lipstick I can use?” “What about this top? “Is this too much?” “Oh my god you look so hot!” The dialogue revolves around fixing, moderating and uplifting other women. However, for every compliment afforded to
another, there often is a seemingly throwaway remark downplaying oneself: “Your hair is so shiny…I wish mine was.” “You look cute…This outfit is just not working for me.” That’s the other women’s cue to provide reassurance: “No, really you look amazing, so gorgeous…” This synchronized dialogue and behavior is an art-form so imbued in women’s “going out” ritual that none of them really notices its cadences: question-response, compliment-criticism, reaffirmation-acceptance.

Although these women are preparing to “be on show” for the evening, beauty, in this instance, is a communal pursuit. Like times in the gym and food rituals the going-out ritual reflects Wolf’s ideas about female solidarity and competition. “On one hand, women are trained to be competitors against all other for “beauty”; on the other, when one woman…. needs to be adorned for a big occasion, other women swoop and bustle around her in a generous concentration in a team formation as effortlessly choreographed as a football play,” (Wolf 1990, 76). There is a strong sense of female solidarity in the pre-gathering ritual as evidenced by everything from the exclusion of men to the unguarded sharing of resources and advice. However, this solidarity isn’t permanent and as Wolf says, “sadly, these delightful bonds too often dissolve when the women re-enter public space and resume their isolated, unequal, mutually threatening, jealously guarded ‘beauty’ status,” (Wolf 1990, 76).

Women will still fix a stranger’s dress, lend makeup or offer compliments within these settings, all the while scrutinizing other women as much as prospective partners. Women flit around the room, greeting, dancing, gossiping and giving the “once-over”, the up and down flickering look, to other women as they evaluate and situate each other within this space of performed beauty. The dynamic does change as the setting moves from the pre-gathering to the pre-game to the event and men infiltrate the scene. However, I would argue that in the going-out ritual the dichotomy of ally and competition is less rigid that Wolf leads us to believe. While women, upon entering a social scene, are more inclined to view other women
as threats there still exists this common bond and solidarity, particularly in the university setting where romance and sexual encounters are confusing and sometimes threatening (See Chapter 4: Let’s Talk About Sex). The ally-competition dynamic is fluid, it doesn’t completely begin or end depending on the space women find themselves in, but rather continually fluctuates.

When considering how beauty plays out in the social sphere it is clear that the peer plays a significant role. Anthropologists Margaret Eisenhart and Dorothy Holland conducted an extended study on women’s college experience in the 1980s Educated in Romance. Three decades later, some of their findings still hold true for women on campuses today. They highlight how the unique setting of live-in colleges heightens the influence of peers: “College was not, of course, the first place the women had encountered a peer culture…. However, life at a residential college elevates the prominence of peers and peer culture” (Eisenhart and Holland 1990, 119). Women in these settings are constantly evaluated by both male and female peers on the basis of their beauty which plays a significant role in determining their romantic and sexual lives (See Chapter 4: Let’s Talk About Sex). Eisenhart and Holland say, “We found that the peer system promoted and propelled the women into a world of romance in which their attractiveness to men counted the most. The women were subject to a sexual auction block” (Eisenhart and Holland 1990, 8). In my research the going out ritual places women on the sexual auction block where women, performing beauty, are put on show to be evaluated by males and females alike. Interestingly, being in a relationship with a man doesn’t excuse women from this performance; they are expected to maintain the cultural capital they have carefully accrued by continually performing beauty. Thus, I argue today that the going out ritual once again illustrates the process of double-shaming women find themselves in. Women are subject to gendered beauty norms yet they also police other
women who are both their allies and competitors by the same standards thus reinforcing the ritualized performance of beauty.

Conclusion: Caught Between Two Psyches

Beauty is a powerful, coveted and dominant form of cultural capital for women on elite university campuses. The capacity to cultivate beauty, its visibility and its social value makes beauty especially desirable within the liminal space of the elite university. Because the elite university operates like an imagined community, in many ways its students or “citizens” find themselves participating in a performance of beauty that has been normalized and incorporated into this space. However, these ritualized performances of beauty are ultimately destructive to women’s confidence. They can cause significant mental health problems. Eating disorders, inextricably tied to the quest for beauty, have infiltrated the university setting with the National Eating Disorder Association finding that nearly 20% of a student sample had or currently have an eating disorder. Eating disorders disproportionately affect women with 91 percent of college women saying they have dieted to control their weight and 25 percent of college women engaging in bingeing and purging as a weight management technique⁷. The woman whose quote opened this chapter struggled with an eating disorder for most of her time at college. She now, in recovery, is able to look back and realize just how much she defined her worth by her weight.

“It was the stretches of time where I felt I had gained a bit of weight and it was almost as though I had lost my identity because my sense of self came a lot more from the way I looked than who I was….I am

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now realizing that so much of my sense of self was the image I was chasing as opposed to developing an identity.”

The performative and often destructive quest for beauty frustrated many of the women in my research. They, as intelligent and ambitious women, felt as if they should know better than to get caught up in the vacuous and damaging culture of beauty acquisition. In fact, they often did, but knowledge doesn’t always translate to feeling as the culture on these campuses consistently reinforced feelings of inadequacy pushing women to continually participate in the beauty quest. Women then are caught between two psyches: the empowered, intelligent, liberated woman and the vulnerable woman who, understanding the value of beauty, judges herself and other women by impossible standards. While the behaviors the beauty quest mandates are destructive and disempowering this conflict also significantly contributes to women’s decline in confidence. Women feel unconfident as their worth is continually measured against an impossible metric but also unconfident as their inability to separate themselves from the beauty culture leaves them feeling frustrated and angry at themselves.

In the next chapter I turn to examine institutional forms of shaming and policing women – the Greek system. I highlight the premium placed on beauty as well as other qualities such as wealth, social connections, likeability as cultural capital in this system. I expose how this system which is supposed to create a “sisterhood” for these women in fact largely undermines their confidence by regulating their behavior and encouraging a process of double-shaming and policing of other women.
Chapter Three:

Greek Life

Nervous, excited chatter filled the auditorium as hundreds of young women wriggled in their seats impatiently. My best friend looked over at me, fear in her eyes as she took deep breaths. Our mentors, known as Gamma Chi’s, had the envelopes in their bag. I was feeling nervous, my energy starting to match that of the room, but I was pretty confident with my choice and options. As the moment to hand out the envelopes came, a hush fell over the room. Then a flurry of ripping of envelopes, of squealing and hugging and looking around the room to see whether friends had ended up with you too. Several women dissolved into tears.

I had seen the look in my Gamma Chi’s eyes as she handed me the envelope. I pulled out the beautifully embossed paper with a crest and an invitation to join a sisterhood – yet I felt crushing disappointment. This was not what I had expected. Tears burnt the back of my eyes and I felt ridiculous. This was just meant to have been a fun, traditional American thing to try. Frankly I thought a lot of the system and rules seemed stupid. I shouldn’t have cared. And yet, as I looked at my bid, the sorority that I had been placed into, I couldn’t help but wonder about the sorority I had put as my first choice, the one I hadn’t gotten a bid from.

I felt mortified.

I cried on bid-day.

Introduction: What’s Greek Got to Do with It?

My experience and those of many of the women I interviewed highlight the problems and complexities of the Greek system of fraternities and sororities. Women in Greek life exist within a system that often systematically undermines their confidence yet still holds a
seductive appeal. This leads women to consistently question, even when they know better, whether they are the problem. In this chapter I will analyze Greek life, using sororities and particularly sorority rush as a lens through which to understand how women’s decreased confidence isn’t merely a personal problem but is facilitated and reinforced by institutions.

As I have argued in previous chapters, women within the elite university setting learn and perform ritualized gendered norms that ultimately undermine their confidence. These often play out in personal and private settings on campuses: in spaces like the dining hall, the gym, the party, the friendship group and the classroom. It could be easy then to assume that the socialized patterns of behavior that contribute to a decline of confidence are self-taught. However, I argue that women’s disempowerment is not only personal but institutional sanctioned, reinforced and legitimated. Although there are a variety of structures that bolster destructive gender norms it is sometimes hard to see how these broad, institutional systems impact students personally. The Greek system is a perfect example of institutional impact as it reinforces social hierarchies, gendered power dynamics, idealized feminine perfection and policing of women. Because Greek life is so prominent on many campuses it impacts everyone, not merely those who participate, by establishing a rigid social structure and idealistic standards that shape campus culture as a whole. As such, this system provides us with a lens to understand women’s confidence crash as not merely an internal crisis but also the result of institutional and systematic disempowerment in which women and men are both complicit.

At many elite institutions in the United States, Greek life is highly visible and powerful on campus. Although secret societies and clubs exist in other countries the United States is the only place where a socially stratified, historically elite and exclusionary social system thrives. The United States is therefore unique in how it reproduces power structures and hierarchies which I argue is detrimental to women’s confidence, whether they participate
in Greek Life or not. The Greek system privileges and rewards perfection and punishes those who fail to meet its standards of beauty, wealth, capital and social standing. As Greek life dominates many campuses social scene even individuals who aren’t a part of the system are impacted by it. The Greek systems’ exclusionary nature, its perpetuation of rigid gender norms and status markers shape the discourse and cultural climate on campuses.

Although fraternities and sororities both demand ideals, women are held to much higher standards than men, particularly in terms of beauty and social desirability. They are judged more harshly by both women and men for their shortcomings in the categories of beauty, wealth, social connections and likeability. Given that women, as I have previously mentioned feel greater pressure to be effortlessly perfect than men it is little wonder that this system which valorizes perfection leaves them feeling consistently inadequate. Thus, the Greek system is an excellent way to understand how women’s confidence on elite campuses is so threatened, because lessons of inferiority aren’t simply learnt in women’s heads; they are taught and perpetuated by a historical, highly visible and sanctioned system. Women can’t merely “just get over it” and “get out of their own heads” because it’s not just in their heads and they aren’t completely in control. As Horowitz, writing about college life in the nineteenth century says, “Eighteen-year-olds who leave home to enter college feel as if they are embarking on a great adventure in which all the choices are theirs. In part this is true, for the college world contains a number of possibilities which give the appearance of choice. But college students enter a social order that, like the communities they are leaving, has emerged from an earlier time” (Horowitz 1987, 4). Thus while we envisage college in the United States as a time when young people become themselves and make free choices in fact they are entering a process of socialization which has been shaped by others.
History of Greek Life

When considering the role of Greek life on campuses today it is crucial to consider its inception and its reproduction over the years. Universities originated as exclusively male spaces belonging to a privileged few (Horowitz 1987, 3-5). In reaction to the strict curriculum at these schools and in pursuit of broader intellectual discussion, community and comradery young men created fraternities. The first fraternity, designed to promote more in-depth, liberal and intellectual discussion was established in 1776 at William and Mary College. Throughout the nineteenth century fraternities became increasingly popular, with new fraternities and chapters of existing fraternities opening throughout the country (Syrett 2009, 25-27). With time fraternities were able to exist, reproduce and grow thanks to donations and support from wealthy alumni (Syrett 2009, 35). They were tolerated by the universities and quickly, thanks to their wealth and upper-echelon members, dominated campus life (Syrett 2009, 3-4). As Horowitz notes, “With their prestige confirmed by official undergraduate organizations, recognized by the administration, and broadcast in the student newspaper, fraternity men had powerful instruments for ruling the campus. It was they who had defined and continued to control the major social events of the college year” (Horowitz 1987, 131). They created a social class.

Members of the fraternities belonged to a privileged, white, male elite. The fraternity system maintained its status by excluding students on the basis of class, race and ethnicity (Syrett 2009, 4). Students of color and those belonging to an ethnic minority were forced to create their own fraternities. As Horowitz says, “Part of the strength of the Greek system was that it drew the richest and most worldly collegians” (Horowitz 1987, 132) and in a university

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8 “Fraternity and Sorority” New World Encyclopaedia Accessed March 4 2017
http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Fraternity_and_sorority
system already dominated by the affluent, “Fraternity members composed the elite of this elite” (Horowitz 1987, 134).

As women increasingly populated universities that were once male-exclusive, the social scene began to change (Syrett 2009, 11). From the mid-nineteenth century at co-educational institutions women’s fraternities, to be later known as sororities, began to appear. Promising “sisterhood”, community and solidarity in the midst of a male-dominated and controlled setting, sororities quickly became incorporated as a part of the universities’ social scene (Syrett 2009, 173). Greek life wasn’t merely an informal gathering but a highly structured and stratified system. In 1902 the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) was established to serve as the umbrella organization for all sororities with the National Interfraternity Council (IFC) following in 1909. Although there were increasing numbers of fraternities and sororities established by minority students, historically white fraternities and sororities were often the most visible and powerful social structures on campus (Syrett 2009, 280-284).

Social stratification became a core tenet of these institutions, especially for sororities. A pecking order based on wealth, beauty and social connections was established and the most prestigious sororities and fraternities attracted the wealthiest members (Horowitz 1987: 208). As dating became increasingly common fraternity men chose their dates from top-ranked sororities and sorority women aimed to exclusively date top-ranked fraternity men to maintain their social status (Horowitz 1987, 212). There was very little room for social mobility and although the very top ranking sorority or fraternity may have changed occasionally over the years there was very little fluctuation or overall of the social hierarchy. As already wealthy individuals graduated and either married rich or increased their wealth

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they poured funding back into their chapters, making them lucrative, competitive and desirable to the top echelon each year. The system, founded upon wealth, prestige and hierarchy has largely reproduced itself year after year maintaining control, status and power on campus.

It is against this backdrop that the Greek system has reproduced itself and operates today. It has been over a hundred-and-fifty years since fraternity and sorority life first became normalized within the university setting. Since then fraternities and sororities have become officially de-segregated, and many elite campuses are host to different Greek organizations, including National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), representing the nine largest Black Greek lettered organizations, National Multicultural Greek Council (NMGC) and National Asian Pacific Islander American Panhellenic Association (NAPA) representing fourteen of the largest Asian Greek lettered organizations. However, predominately white sororities and fraternities belonging to the Interfraternity Council (IFC) and National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) dominate the normalized social scene and narrative. My study of Greek life focuses on NPC and IFC fraternity and sorority life as they were the most visible in my field sites and furthermore the women I interviewed in Greek life belonged to NPC sororities.

The Greek system remains incredibly stratified, segregated, exclusive and powerful. It perpetuates a cyclical valorization of certain ideals to the downfall of those who do not, choose not, or cannot emulate them. This impacts all women, those involved in Greek life and those who aren’t. Greek life, despite only representing between 30-60 percent of the student population, often dictates much of the social life on these campuses. This control over the social scene and the manner in which the system perpetuates gender norms influences the campus culture as a whole, though obviously most saliently impacts those who are a part of it. This isn’t to say Greek life doesn’t have many merits. It does. As a woman in a sorority, I understand the appeal of community, friendship and social access that being involved in
Greek life brings. As a researcher, however, it became incredibly apparent that the Greek system at elite universities serves to reinforce perfectionistic ideals, elitism and gendered politics that jeopardize women’s confidence.

**Structural Policing of Women**

The organization and structure of the Greek system is inherently misogynistic, privileges male power and idealized femininity, as this section will show. The rules and regulations that sororities must follow on a national, state or chapter-specific level are often extremely stringent and in stark contrast to the relative freedoms of fraternities. The National Panhellenic Council Unanimous Agreements dictate the all sororities under NPC must follow although sororities and universities can supplement their own rules. Women who have accepted a bid at one sorority “shall not be eligible for membership in another NPC sorority,” meaning that even if a woman joins a sorority only to find it isn’t a good fit, she has two options: stay or leave Greek life altogether (NPC, Unanimous Agreements). Given how salient Greek life is to the social scene on many campuses often women would prefer to stay and have a social life, even if they don’t like the sorority, than to leave altogether. Furthermore, “Each College Panhellenic Association shall prohibit the participation of men in membership recruitment and Bid Day activities,” meaning that no men or photos, videos or signs of men can be in the sorority houses, videos or events during recruitment and Bid Day, a kind of paternalistic, puritanical and constructed expunging of male presence (NPC, Unanimous Agreements).

Finally, alcohol plays a major role in Greek life yet women have their distribution and intake of alcohol policed more than men. While new brothers celebrate and drink upon joining a fraternity, “Each College Panhellenic Association shall prohibit the use of alcoholic
beverages in membership recruitment and Bid Day activities” (NPC, Unanimous Agreements). Many chapters in fact have a seventy-two-hour dry period after Bid Day dictating that chapter members cannot drink under any circumstance during this time, even if they are of age and not at a sorority event. Women are also not allowed to drink in sorority-branded apparel, and some sororities have rules about alcohol consumption in the days before and after rituals and initiation. While this practice helps to promote safe alcohol consumption and prevent hazing, it also fundamentally dictates and polices “acceptable” female behavior.

Most significantly, sororities are not allowed to have alcohol or serve alcohol in their housing, meaning that sorority women are required to rely on men and fraternity brothers to supply alcohol in male-controlled spaces. This loss of agency is especially concerning, considering that fraternity men are three times more likely to commit sexual assault than men not involved in Greek life.10 A New York Times article exposed the power dynamics that come into play when fraternity men control alcohol and quoted one student saying, “At frat parties, it’s more of a hunting ground. Not all guys are like this, of course, but sometimes it feels like the lions standing in the background and looking at the deer. And then they go in for the kill.”11 Rather than protecting women, this law in fact polices women in a way that creates a culture of vulnerability and dependency.

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It is interesting to note that this law is in place because it enables the sorority, a for-profit organization, to maintain low insurance premiums.\textsuperscript{12} This sort of decision reflects the valorization of profit over people that Noam Chomsky condemns in his critique of capitalism (Chomsky 1999). NPC rules also ban sorority women from being able to publicly criticize or expose wrongdoing on the part of the sorority as “In the case of Panhellenic difficulties, all chapters involved shall do their utmost to restore harmony and to prevent publicity both in the college and the community” (NPC, Unanimous Agreements). Protecting the sorority’s public reputation is privileged over the women’s right to challenge and criticize the institution.

Thus, the system into which women enter has clear structural regulations that are designed to promote equity, community standards and streamline recruitment processes. However, it also a good indication of how Greek life operates once you join the system. Women, upon joining a sorority, are subject to a culture of policing and regulating behavior which privileges the sorority’s reputation and financial interests above that of its members. The rules of the NPC don’t intend to impinge on women’s freedom or police them but they reflect the sort of gendered control and regulation that defines Greek Life, best seen through the process of “rush” or recruitment which I will outline below.

\textbf{Rush}

Fraternities and sororities are selective social groups. One cannot simply choose to join whichever fraternity or sorority one pleases; there is a process of recruitment or “rush”. Like other social groups such as secret societies, selective living groups, academic clubs or

\url{https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/20/us/sorority-anti-rape-idea-drinking-on-own-turf.html}
athletic teams hopeful new members have to compete for a spot. Unlike an academic club or athletic team, however, there is no clear or objective metric by which to judge and evaluate those who seek entry into these groups. Affluence, beauty and social/family connections become gateways to entry. Greek Life is defined by many explicit and implicit boundaries to entry. It is highly racially segregated and its expensive dues – between a few hundred and a few thousand dollars per semester – as well as the culture of expensive trips, drug and alcohol use and à la mode dress excludes many individuals from lower socio-economic classes.

Although recruitment looks a little different at every school, there is a distinct divide in how fraternities and sororities recruit. Typically, fraternities host parties or events where men can go and meet brothers in a more informal setting while sorority rush is highly structured and formal, taking the form of speed-dating or ‘house visits’ over a set number of days. This process can be fun, exhausting and nerve-wracking and it has common myths and reputations. Both fraternities and sororities have their fair share of legendary recruitment and hazing stories. Fraternities have been known to encourage and mandate reckless drinking, dangerous activities and gang rape, while sorority have been known to force alcohol and drug use, sex with fraternity brothers, public scrutiny of new sisters’ bodies and obligatory dieting. None of the women I spoke with during my research mentioned any of these sorts of experiences. It is possible that these do occur and the women I spoke with didn’t know about such incidents or chose not to divulge their sorority’s secrets. What is interesting, however, is that because so many recruitment stories are so horrific, these tales render “above board” recruitment experiences as unproblematic, normal and part of the typical sorority experience. Looking critically at the process, however, it becomes apparent that this ritualized joining of a community can be detrimental to women’s confidence.

I argue that sorority rush reflects the *rites de passage* or rites of passage originally described by Arnold van Gennep and elaborated upon by Victor Turner. These *rites* Turner
argues, “tend to reach their maximal expression in small scale, relatively stable and cyclical societies” (Turner 1964, 46). In the context of the elite university, a sorority fits this definition, as it has at most a few hundred members and reproduces itself every four years. Turner says the *rites* have three distinct stages: separation, limen and aggregation (Turner 1964, 46). Separation is defined by symbolic behavior which indicates the individual has detached from a previous group within the social structure. In sorority rush this happens when the woman elects to rush, pays the fee to participate, and attends the pre-rush and rush events which are closed to all except those participating in recruitment. She then enters the liminal phase, passing through the recruitment process. Finally she enters the third phase of aggregation when she finishes the recruitment process and is given a bid by a sorority and welcomed into its midst (Turner 1964, 47). She later goes through a specific ritual. Often blindfolded and in white robes, she presents herself to members of the sorority in a room lit by candles, pledges her allegiance and learns the secret password and handshake of the sorority. After signing her dedication to the chapter she is welcomed completely into their community. She then, “is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards,” here meaning the rules, regulations and expectations of the sorority (Turner 1964, 47). Through recruitment women are able to achieve new status and entry into a community. However, the ritualized nature of this process highlights how it is highly constructed, prescriptive and regulatory, both for those rushing and those women selecting.

*Rush from the Outside*

For the women who wish to join a sorority the recruitment process is often a chaotic whirl of people, small-talk, first impressions and constant smiling and pep. It can be fun and
exciting but also disheartening and exhausting. Each school’s sorority recruitment process looks a little different but they all similarly focus on aesthetics, small talk and evaluation. At Duke, sorority rush takes place over two weekends at a conference center near the university. The system is exclusive from the very start with its own vocabulary that has to be learnt quickly, costs to register for recruitment and rules. Each sorority is based in a room, and the Potential New Members (PNMs) come into the room in small groups at particular times, speak with members of the sorority for a fixed amount of time in a manner akin to speed dating. This occurs several times over the two weekends as there are four “rounds” of rush. Although the system differs slightly between sororities, the sorority women vote on the PNMs, giving each PNM a score out of five in different categories such as “conversation” and “presentation”. After Round One the PNMs can drop sororities that they don’t wish to go back to and the sorority chapter also drops those with the lowest scores. This goes on for several rounds; oftentimes PNMs aren’t invited back to chapters they liked, and socially lower-ranked chapters often lose PNMs they did like to chapters that are higher on the social hierarchy and therefore more coveted.

After the final round, or “Pref Round”, PNMs rank whichever sororities they have left. They are encouraged to “maximize their options” by ranking all the sororities they have left (a maximum of three) thus guaranteeing themselves an offer to a sorority (a bid). Those who only put one sorority down, because they don’t wish to join any other, (colloquially known as ‘suicide rushing’), aren’t guaranteed a bid. At the end of rush the sorority members all gather in a room together and look over a slideshow of the PNMs they have to choose from. Any woman who has spoken to a PNM during any of the rounds can score and vote for her. Then the matching process, known as the Preferential Bidding System, comes into play. Used by most sororities throughout the United States this is a computer algorithm which, based on the votes of all the sororities and all of the PNMs, matches PNMs to sororities in a
manner not unlike med school applications. All sororities are able to offer bids until quota: higher ranked sororities fill quota more quickly as PNMs rank them higher, then a ‘trickle down’ effect happens as those PNMs who are left are place in lower-ranked sororities after not getting bids to their sororities of choice, or after falling too low on the matching rank to make it into a sorority before it reaches quota (Mongell and Roth 1991, 444). The system is confusing and complicated, and the PNMs are instructed not to try and understand the algorithm -- just accept it, and hope for the best. On Bid Day women are only offered a bid, from one sorority and are invited into this “sisterhood”.

Described this way, the matching system seems relatively logical, clinical almost. In reality, this process which women voluntarily enter is fraught with competition, insecurity and perfectionism. Although the PNMs are largely unfamiliar with the processes of rush they do understand that recruitment requires them to sell themselves. Much of the capital that has typically gotten these women what they want, such as GPAs, volunteering experience, resumes and application essays is useless in this setting (although at some universities sororities require letters of recommendation). Different types of capital emerge as crucial: beauty, wealth, extraversion, likeability, social connection and family heritage. Some of these forms of capital are pure luck, such as being born into a wealthy family or having a mother, aunt, sister or grandmother previously in one of the sororities, thereby making the PNM a valuable “lineage” and valuable, while others can to a degree be cultivated with enough make-up, smiles and small-talk mastery. Although one would assume that these forms of capital begin to matter the minute the PNMs walk through the door, in reality, sororities begin eyeing and evaluating the first-year women before recruitment has even begun. Not all the PNMs know this, and those that don’t can later feel as if they started rush without the necessary competitive advantage. Lucy told me, “I was extraordinarily naïve going into rush, actually going into freshman year. I didn’t understand that I was supposed to market myself
to upperclassman; I kind of figured I’m in college…. to hang out and be myself or whatever.”
The idea that Lucy couldn’t be simply herself but felt as if she should have been cultivating a
desirable image exemplifies how young women feel entering this process: not enough as they are.

These women understand what being desirable looks like in this setting and use
tactics to situate themselves in a favorable position. Beauty, again as a visible and powerful
form of capital, is valorized. Beautiful women are privileged in this setting, seen as an asset
by sororities. The PNMs do what they can to make themselves look the part. Women often
arrive on campus ready for rush with fresh tans (fake or real), new haircuts, manicured nails
and a slimmer body having dieted down for the occasion. Even those who don’t go to these
lengths pay close attention to their clothing, style their hair and carefully apply makeup on
recruitment days. Wolf calls beauty a form of currency and it’s clear that in this space
conventional beauty in the form of the tall, made-up, slim, glossy-haired and tanned woman
is gold (Wolf 1990,12). Women’s beauty becomes transactional in this space as these
conventionally beautiful women are privileged with access to the top elite sororities and in
return the sororities gain a “hot” pledge class. This increases or maintains their status on
campus and makes them more desirable to fraternities as mixing with a “hot” sorority
elevates a fraternity’s status. Pictures of the sororities on bid day tell a very particular tale:
the higher up the sorority hierarchy you go the thinner, tanner and whiter the sorority gets
while the lower-ranked sororities have a broader range of body sizes, skin colors and
ethnicities represented. This is no coincidence: conventional beauty in this setting becomes a
bartering chip.

The importance of beauty in this setting is reinforced online. Sororities cultivate an
online presence, marketing themselves to PNMs with “fun” photos of their sisters at parties,
travelling and at philanthropy events filtered and posted on Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr and
Pinterest. These photos all strive to represent the chapter in the best way possible which means the women have to look fun, interesting, engaged and beautiful. The photograph of bikini-clad sorority women posing in front of an American flag at a fraternity day party has become a marketable trope. Finally, sites like greekrank.com evaluate fraternities and sororities based on anonymous ratings in the categories of Looks, Popularity, Classiness, Involvement, Social Life and Sisterhood/Brotherhood. Although it is used for both men and women, PNMs and sorority women take the site more seriously, and the anonymous evaluations of sororities left on site clearly highlight how salient beauty is in this setting. Although personality, wealth and likeability are evaluated, the most common topic in the comments is aesthetics. Sororities are branded as “hot”, “cute”, “mediocre”, “average” and “ugly”. Some sororities are called “The Goldman Sachs of hot sororities” while others will “do better once their fugly senior class leaves.” Some are dismissed “just take a look at their Instagram…none of their girls are above a 5” (Greek Rank). The PNMs who read this site, trying to get a sense of what each chapter is like, get the message loud and clear: you better be hot.

However, beauty isn’t everything, and other forms of capital come into play too: wealth, social prowess and social/family connections. Strictly speaking, conversation at rush isn’t allowed to touch on men, religion, politics, alcohol or money, but rules are bent. Wealth (or lack of wealth) can often be easily discerned. The types of jewelry, the brand of shoes, the area of the country, the high school you went to, what you did over break—all can signal your socio-economic status, particularly when wealthy individuals at many schools operate in similar circles. Wealth is desirable for many reasons: wealthy alumni are valuable as potential future contributors, wealthy women are better able to fit within wealthy sororities and participate in expensive activities, there are shared social codes and experiences and wealthy women are less likely to drop a sorority because of financial obligations.
Furthermore, many of the wealthy women rushing come from prestigious families and are therefore more desirable, as their families have ties to the sorority, the university or are friends or acquaintances of the families of other sorority members. Who you know and the family you come from are powerful leveraging tools.

Finally, the speed-dating style of rush privileges extraverted people who excel at small talk. Introverted people or those who are more awkward and less fluid in social settings are less inclined to succeed in this space and more likely to be branded as awkward or boring. The women I spoke to who identified as introverted said that because the conversations were so short and superficial they felt fake, constantly forcing themselves to be more extraverted than they were. Because this setting doesn’t allow for authentic depth of conversation these women felt limited by the topic covered and felt they didn’t have a chance for their personality to come through. This doesn’t mean that introverts, or less connected and wealthy individuals can’t get into a top sorority or sorority that they are happy with but the more of these forms of capital that you possess the more desirable you are in this setting.

The want and need to be seen as a ‘perfect’ fit, a desirable individual only increases as the rounds go on. The system functions by vetting individuals as sororities “drop” PNMs as rounds go on. This process is often very stressful and emotional for PNMs, especially as they are so new to the university setting and desperately searching for a sense of community. Natasha spoke about getting dropped from most sororities after round one: “I remember they said, yeah, sometimes we need to call you guys, if you don’t get called back to a certain amount and I got that call, and I was sobbing, and I was like, what’s wrong with me?” She wasn’t alone: many of the women I spoke to, even those who ended up happy in their sororities, said getting cut was a significant blow to their self-esteem. A common sentiment was that it was hard not to take the rejection personally because it wasn’t skill-based; this was
an evaluation and a judgement of your worth as a person. “Rush was kind of shattering…it was so hard not to take it personally,” said Tilly.

*Rush: From the Inside*

Although the PNMs in many ways are in a vulnerable position, new to university, desperately searching for community and trying to be ‘enough’ for sorority land, in some ways they have power: the sororities want them. As sororities try to market themselves to PNMs and elevate or maintain their status in the social hierarchy feelings of inadequacy, competitiveness and perfectionism are common. I argue that rush for women within sororities is even more complex and detrimental than for PNMs, as these women are now a part of a system that regulates them and puts them on show yet the women often are frustrated by the regulations and their participation in this destructive system.

As previously explored, sorority life is defined by regulation. Rush provides some of the best examples of how women in sororities are policed by their organization and by other women to conform to normalized standards of “perfection”. A sorority’s “Nationals”, Panhellenic council as well as the sorority’s leadership team define and enforce the standards by which the sorority women must abide. For each round of recruitment, there are set outfits that the women have to wear, for example, black skinny jeans and a white blouse with nude pumps. These outfits come with hyper-specific instructions such as no zips, no detailing and no buttons. Many sororities make their women get their outfits pre-approved, some even going so far as to make women try on their clothes in front of leadership or the entire chapter and have it evaluated. One woman told me, “They used to make us try on all our outfits in front of everyone and show them to see whether they were ‘flattering’ enough on us…it was awful.” Women are also told how to wear their hair, “straightened or curled whatever feels
more comfortable for you” (note: never natural) and reminded in emails to fix their nails: “if they look grown out or chipped in any way REDO YOUR NAILS, we want to be put together and polished, including our fingers.” They are told to shave their arms and legs, make sure their underwear can’t be seen and to ensure their makeup looks “impeccable”. One woman sighed as she fixed her makeup in the mirror, “I feel like Barbie”. Interestingly in this all-female space, women perform beauty for each other and it is other women who determine the standards of beauty and enforce them. Beauty once again is currency and capital, and those who don’t “cut it” particularly in higher-ranked sororities are pushed to the sidelines, lest their “lesser” beauty damage the sorority’s reputation. As one woman, Victoria, told me, “I don’t speak to girls during recruitment because my sorority thinks I’m not hot enough.”

Women regulate how others look and make themselves beautiful in order to impress other women. One woman’s comment, “I’m annoyed, I only ever shave my legs for sex and unless today takes a really unexpected turn that’s not going to happen” reflects the particular way that women in this space are policed by other women to conform to standards of beauty that we usually associate with patriarchy and the male gaze.

As with the PNMs, however, it isn’t all about beauty. Sorority women are also judged on their ability to recruit. A good recruiter is someone who looks good but also excels at small talk and is interesting, be that for where she is from, clubs she is involved in or skills she has. These recruiters are literally called “assets”, and the sorority uses them as leverage. These people are put on the front-lines, so to speak, encouraged to talk to as many women as possible and often paired up with PNMs the sorority really wants or considers “reaches” (as in a stretch to get them). These women then often feel responsible for recruiting the ‘best’ PNMs and feel pressure to represent their sorority perfectly always. They sometimes are faced with individuals who are rude or disinterested and are therefore burdened with keeping an unwilling PNM engaged in conversation. Conversely, women who are considered shy,
awkward or bitchy by fellow sorority members are sidelined. I overheard a woman in a sorority tell another to “not put her there...she’s just so awkward, it makes us look bad.” Although some women take being dismissed as a welcome relief, I spoke to others who felt uncomfortable that their sorority didn’t think they were good enough or interesting enough to speak to PNMs. Once again, women as they police and evaluate other women make them feel unconfident in their own worth in a place and a community that is meant to be home.

As women participate in this system which judges, ranks and polices other women they are troubled by it. They realize that they are complicit in a system that contributes to both their own oppression and the oppression of other women. Many of the women I spoke with said that they “hated rush” and that it was “just the worst...an awful, horrible process.” One woman, Emily, was very distressed as she told me “I hate rush...it makes me feel like an awful person. I’m just judging all these women.” Yet judge they do, participation in recruitment is mandatory and skipping it comes with consequences: fines and the disgruntlement of your sisters who have to pick up the slack.

The entire process fuels a competitive, judgmental and spiteful atmosphere. PNMs who have been dropped from multiple sororities early on are gossiped about by other PNMs, while sorority members gossip about PNMs and other sororities. Individual sororities have particular reputations such as the “sporty” sorority, or the “awkward” sorority or the “party” sorority. As such, women in sororities tend to mentally sort the PNMs into sororities based on personality traits or looks before they have even joined: “Oh she’s definitely a X”. Lower-ranked sororities are inclined to say that bitchy, hot or mean women will definitely be in upper-ranked sororities, while higher-ranked sororities are likely to sort women who are more socially awkward or introverted into the lower sororities. The sororities themselves contribute to their own stereotyping, typecasting the other sororities as “try-hard”, “bitchy”, “awkward”, “social climby”, “nasty” and “stuck up” based on rumors, reputation and perception.
The hierarchical nature of the system means that sororities are constantly trying to move upwards or hold their place. Higher ranked sororities maintain their status by appealing to the most beautiful, social and wealthy PNMs and often compete between each other to get the “best” pledge class each year. Sororities who are middle-tier and try to ascend the ladder by means of “dirty rushing” (befriending and enticing freshmen women before recruitment starts) or changing their “vibe” (trying to create a different image) are looked down upon as “social-climby”. They have forgotten their place. Lower-ranked sororities feel they enter rush at a disadvantage because they are less desirable and so oftentimes have to face PNMs who are deliberately rude to them in a strategic attempt to not be invited back and therefore have a better chance at getting into a higher-ranked sorority. In an ironic twist, women fiercely defend their sorority sisters who have been slighted by viciously attacking the women who do the slighting. I overheard one incident where a PNM was very rude to several women of a chapter. The chapter members instantly jumped to their friends’ defense telling her to “forget about that bitch”; “Uh I hate her already”; and even looking up the woman’s profile on Facebook and saying, “I don’t get it… She’s not even that pretty.”

PNMs and sorority women are acutely aware of the fact that they are competing; PNMs against other PNMs and the sorority women against other sororities. Curiously, they internalize this sense of competition and police and judge other women, yet simultaneously feel a strong sense of solidarity with the women around them. A baptism by fire, there is shared endurance of the event as women joke about the process, lend each other makeup, give each other advice and support one another. Yet, in a continuous rapid oscillation, the same women turn around and try and outshine those around them. The double-bind reemerges as women find themselves disempowered and oppressed by the system, yet simultaneously compiling and contributing to the very behaviors that make the system so destructive to women’s confidence.
Having said all this, why would anyone rush? What’s the appeal? Some drop out of the process after finding it isn’t for them, and others drop out of their sororities later on in the college careers as they grow dissatisfied with the system or no longer can afford it. However, every year a substantial number stay, enough for the *rites de passage* to repeat themselves and for the system to reproduce year after year. As someone in a sorority myself I understand the draw to Greek Life even while over the years I have become increasingly troubled by its culture. Georgia articulated the destructive yet somewhat alluring nature of sorority life well:

“What made it worse of course is that not only were there cliques who dictated status even within our sorority, but I had such low self-esteem that I could never prove myself to them, let alone walk away. Endlessly I felt shunned by those who had formerly been my close friends, convincing myself time and time again that if I just got skinnier, became more beautiful, then I too would have it all. It’s so stupid but I felt like fucking Gatsby every time I went out, the social ladder my green light, Fraternities my twisted Daisy. I am ashamed to say that some part of me still wants to join back for those reasons, the never-ending urge to prove myself and finally be enough. That being said, dropping was one of the hardest things I have ever done. The culture makes you feel excluded, foolish and naïve for leaving— it honestly felt as though I had been slapped in the face. Even now, with this thicker skin and having admitted all of this, I sometimes catch myself thinking that purging\(^\text{13}\) was a worthy trade, almost a bonding experience or sign of endurance, that I would gladly submit to all over again.”

While many women felt like Georgia, vulnerable and inadequate in the system others spoke to me about the sense of community they felt. They felt as if they had a strong bond and connection with the other women in their sorority and valued the female solidarity in an often-misogynistic university setting. Women also spoke about the access to parties and

\(^{13}\) “Purging” is the name given to “inappropriate compensatory behaviors” or efforts to “undo” or “get rid of” food after eating. https://www.remudarwinch.com/conditions-we-treat/other-eating-disorders/purging-disorder
events, the costumes and the alcohol, the men and the attention. Sorority life can be fun and exciting and how many women envisaged their college experience. It also becomes hard to leave said many women because one’s social life and to an extent one’s identity on campus is tied up to this organization. “It’s frowned upon to be honest…. it’s awkward to leave, you have a little and you want to be there for them and you don’t want your friends to think you don’t like them,” said Riley.

Women yet again find themselves caught, because they do love many elements of sorority life, but they are distrustful and critical of the broader system. Hayley told me “I’m literally a leader in Greek life but I think the system is fucked.” Recruitment is the period when the simultaneous feelings of love and hate for the system most powerfully emerge as women spend dozens of hours in a shared space, living and consciously aiming to reproduce the system. Then rush is over, the new pledge class comes in, everyone is excited, and sorority life resumes as normal. Rush is sometimes seen as an outlier, a weird exception to the norms of what being in a sorority is actually like, yet, as I will outline below, it is merely a concentrated version of the regulation, politics and policing that defines Greek life beyond rush.

**Life after Rush**

**Bids**

For many women, receiving a bid that wasn’t what they hoped for is devastating and confusing. Women face rejection from sororities that they loved and are left wondering why. Were they not pretty enough? Not funny enough? Not likeable enough? Furthermore, within this hierarchical system, if your sorority dictates your social rank and by extension your worth a bid from a low-ranking sorority can be a hit to your ego. You are a part of an
exclusive system but at the bottom of the heap. In fact, at many schools, women who are “rushing” sororities would rather drop out of the entire process than join a sorority of a low rank, as one woman said, “It’s like Mean Girls… They see it as social suicide.” One woman, Andie, went so far to say that, “I was in a popular group in high-school, whatever you want to call it, so going here and getting into a sorority that was actually my last choice was very jarring. I actually filled out transfer applications.” While many women accept their bids excitedly and rush off to bid-day activities, other skip it altogether or show up crying. These women are left wondering why they weren’t enough.

What about the higher-ranking sororities? Contrary to popular belief, being in a higher-ranking sorority does not give these women a lasting and sustainable form of confidence. Admission into hallowed ground only comes with more caveats. The expectation to maintain the standard of perfection against which they were vetted and granted access is intense. One man speaking about a woman in a sorority said, “She got fat and that was it…. she was done.” Within individual sororities there is sometimes a pecking order; at some schools women within the same chapter are placed on A, B and C lists for parties, ensuring that only the most beautiful, wealthy and socially desirable women attend the most exclusive functions. As one sorority women said, “Some of my friends have actually been uninvited to certain events, and so it’s really interesting that it doesn’t just stop; it’s not like you achieve a social rank and then you’re there. You have to maintain it and that means going out all the time; that means being super physically fit so people think you are attractive and beautiful and you deserve to be in your sorority”. For these women, perfection isn’t just desired, it’s demanded: slipping up by gaining weight, looking or acting ‘sloppy’, sleeping with the wrong person, drinking too much or too little or being anything less than perfect reflects on the sorority as a whole and so can mean the end of your social standing within your “sisterhood”.

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Social Life

Parties, darties (day-parties) and mixers (fraternities and sororities ‘mixing’) are major reasons why people join Greek life. While these parties can be fun and a great way to spend time with your sisters and meet men from fraternities, women also find themselves participating in a party scene that is often very gendered and misogynistic. As previously explained, at most schools fraternities host the parties and control the alcohol. Women then enter a male-dominated and controlled space and are reliant on men for alcohol. The alcohol in these spaces is usually cheap, bought in bulk and intended to get the highest amount of people drunk in the shortest amount of time. This leads to very concerning sexual dynamics that I will explore in Chapter 4.

It is party themes, however, that I argue best exemplify the regulation and policing of women and their bodies. Sexist themes, such as CEOs and Office Hoes, Bathing Suits and Cowboy Boots, Librarians and Barbarians, Yoga Hoes and Workout Bros are common. Obviously, the themes overtly sexualize women as they designate a level of promiscuity in dress for women but not for men. Interestingly, themes like these are usually banned by the sorority’s national council, yet the sorority women themselves circumvent the system, making up a fake socially appropriate theme before going ahead and not only allowing but endorsing a sexist theme. Yet again, women actively participate in their own oppression. Fraternity men also host parties and send out blanket email invites to women at the university welcoming them into their space, but by their rules. These emails very clearly dictate what is expected of women at these events:

“Remember those long nights in the gym and running in the cold each morning just to achieve that perfect summer beach body? Well, [we] appreciate your hard work and feel terrible that soon all that effort will go to a winter’s waste. This is why we’ve decided to give you all one last chance to show it off…. ”
Clearly, women in these settings are meant to not only look good but show “it” off for the benefit of men.

Even at parties where themes aren’t overtly sexual, women show up scantily clad in a performance of what is expected and desired from them. While these women are free to dress as they please, it is definitely worth noting that the manner in which these parties are advertised to women and men and the social narrative that accompanies them pushes women to embrace a certain level of sexually expressive style, yet doesn’t demand the same of men. Women, seeking to be included and valued within this space comply to the theme, or feeling as if they can’t measure up to the standard demanded of them avoid the event feeling isolated and inadequate. They once again are caught in the cycle of wanting to be free, liberal and empowered women but simultaneously contribute and comply with a culture that routinely objectifies them.

Conclusion

Thus while joining a sorority can be fun and great friendships and loyalties come out of the process when you look at the system as a whole, it becomes readily apparent that it reinforces an elitist, perfectionistic, judgmental mentality. This is highly destructive to women’s confidence as they constantly have their worth questioned in this space. It is made all the more complicated that it is often the women themselves that contribute and reinforce their own oppression. Women are both systematically disempowered by the system and disappointed in themselves for enabling it. Yet they stay because, as Georgia said:

“But honestly when you’re in it, I don’t think you question the morals of the system the deeper you go, as though you’re taught not to, you’re so caught up in drama, in this rat race of desire that morality eventually feels beyond the point. You are young. You are in college. I felt like a moral consideration was addressed in a ‘we all agree it’s wrong’ but then we all equally submit our resignation that we cannot do anything about it. Even the
idea of ‘we’ felt nonexistent-- sure I could leave, perhaps on the naïve idea that it would change something, but that held no requirement for another person to do so nor was that ever likely when people are so ardently afraid of exclusion.”

Georgia articulates the reality of Greek life well. Women join a system that they recognize as highly constructed and oftentimes problematic. But then, as they establish a sense of community and become further entrenched in the system, it becomes harder to break away. Instead they internalize and perpetuate the norms by which they are bound. Their confidence then is undermined by both the system and their frustration with themselves. They feel as if they should and could do better and be better and so are left feeling not enough.

In the next, and final chapter, I looked at sexual culture on campus and highlight how the competitive and exclusionary nature of hookup culture impacts women’s confidence. I also expose how the prolific rates of sexual assault on these campuses has serious repercussions for women’s confidence and contributes to a climate of fear.
Chapter Four:

Let’s Talk About Sex

The DJ couldn’t get the feel of the crowd, but nevertheless they danced as he kept changing songs, trying to find the right fit. Up on the raised stage and on tabletops, young women drew attention. They waved to friends or pulled them up to join them. Sheer tops, short skirts and midriffs belied the cold outside. Those lined up on the street hopped up and down, clutched at their friends and shivered as they waited to get in. Inside the men in their jeans and t-shirts grinded up against their dates, scoped out the scene or playfully danced with female friends. Fake blood, ripped clothing and dark eyeliner paid tribute to the event’s vampire-esque theme. Wrist-banded drinkers of age clutched at their vodkas and beers and stood a little to the periphery laughing with their friends. First-year women stumbled across the dance floor, eyes glazed and speech slurred as they shouted and laughed. A spattering of couples kissed on the dance floor. For most, the night was still young as they locked eyes and flirted with potential partners.

I tried to carefully extricate myself from the crowd, not wanting to step on any toes in my heels. A first-year girl stumbled and accidentally pushed me into a group. Another woman giggled, pushing her friend towards a keen-eyed boy. Giving up on niceties, I jostled my way through the messy, drunken scene, holding my friend’s hand so as not to lose her. I finally reached a bit of space near the bar when four men walked in right next to me. They stopped to survey the crowd, where women clearly outnumbered men, and pregames had left everyone a little less inhibited. They looked at each other and grinned. One of the men said, “All right guys, let’s go get laid.” Two of them fist bumped and then the four dispersed, weaving their way into the throng to try their luck for the night.
**Introduction: What is It about Sex?**

This party scene could have occurred at just about any university where I conducted research. Although the people at each university are, of course, unique, the sexual culture across these colleges is much the same – public, visible, casual and often impersonal. The “let’s get laid” attitude permeates the dominant social narrative, reflecting a disinterest in or disengagement with deeper, authentic and sustained relationships. “Hookup Culture”, as the social climate of random, casual sexual encounters is called, has been increasingly discussed, researched and studied in recent years. Concerns about young people’s casual engagement with sex, often facilitated by apps like Tinder, have branded hookup culture as amoral, unsatisfying and physically and mentally dangerous (“Tinder and the Dawn of the ‘Dating Apocalypse’”, Vanity Fair, 2015; Jones and Cox, 2015; Freitas 2015; Garcia et al. 2012) Is this the case on college campuses? Yes, within reason. Hookup culture is undeniably prolific on elite university’s campuses and can have negative consequences. While it impacts all genders hookup culture is often to the detriment to female women.

In this final chapter, I define the university as a sexual space and highlight how hookup culture emerged and came to dominate sexual culture on campus. I will then argue how women find themselves in a double bind as they are encouraged to engage in hookup culture but then socially sanctioned if their behavior is deemed overly promiscuous. I will go on to highlight how individuals who opt out of hookup culture or are excluded from this predominantly white and heteronormative social arena feel isolated from the dominant social narrative. Finally, I will explore how hookup culture contributes to the proliferation of rape and sexual assault on college campuses, leaving women fearful and unconfident in their ability to navigate the university and their sexual identity safely. Hookup culture does allow women to express and experience (heteronormative) sexuality in a more liberated manner than women of previous generations. However, I would argue that the dual-pressures placed
on women, the prescriptive and exclusionary nature of hookup culture and the threat of sexual assault ultimately serves to undermine women’s confidence in their sexual expression, sense of worthiness and safety on campus.

The University as a Sexual Space

Although hookups can arguably happen anywhere, there is something unique about the college campus that enables hookup culture to flourish (Bogle 2008, 50). The university, with its alcohol-saturated, population-dense and socially charged spaces, facilitates hookups. As I have argued in previous chapters, the university setting is the first time students are surrounded by their peers with little parental or adult supervision. The live-in university provides a plethora of opportunities for students to interact, flirt and pursue sexual encounters. From on-campus bars, to dorm rooms, to house parties, mixers and fraternity events, students, often with the assistance of alcohol, learn to use these new spaces to relate sexually.

These spaces aren’t the only thing that is new and exciting. Because of elite universities’ highly selective admissions process, students are surrounded, perhaps for the first time, by like-minded, similarly academically oriented and ambitious peers. There’s a sense of comradery and commonality that exists within this setting that the university carefully cultivates. As aforementioned universities can be conceptualized like the “imagined communities” and nation-states Anderson describes (Anderson 1983). The language surrounding these spaces reinforces this. Community standards call their students “citizens” and speak of the “culture” of this “community of scholars”14151617. At these universities an

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“us” is only possible by creating an “other”, be it a rival athletic team or students at other, less prestigious universities. Students absorb this constructed sense of togetherness. They look around and, while there is diversity (albeit often limited), see for the most part people like them who are 18 to 22 years old, ambitious and in a process of personal development and discovery. The pressures of the elite setting often lead to what Duke University calls a “work hard, play hard” ethic. As these students push themselves to often unhealthy limits in the name of success, they also push themselves to unhealthy limits in the name of fun and letting loose. They want release, thrill, and fun and, thanks to movies, T.V shows and popular narratives have very socially constructed ideas about what college life should look like. These students then often de-stress with casual sex, fueled by alcohol, drugs and youthful desire.

**Calling, Dating, Sex: A Historical Progression**

Hookup culture was not always the norm. These casual sexual interactions should not be confused with relationships, love or dating, although those also of course exist on university campuses. How young people interact sexually has shifted overtime. Historian Beth Bailey argues that towards the beginning of the twentieth century “calling” on women was the norm. A young man, “came on a ‘call’, expecting to be received in her family’s parlor, to talk, to meet her mother, perhaps to have some refreshments or to listen to her play the piano” (Bailey 1988, 13). However, calling was mostly reserved for the upper echelon of society


members of the lower classes, who lacked the facilities to accommodate this ritual, resorted
to going out somewhere together. This practice, which came to be known as dating, soon
infiltrated all classes to become modern dating (Bogle 2008, 12).

Dating, Bailey argues, “removed couples from the implied supervision of the private
sphere….to the anonymity of the public sphere. Courtship among strangers offered couples
new freedom” (Bailey 1988, 13). By the 1920s, dating was the norm. Dating, as sociologist
Willard Waller highlights, was different from courtship in that it did not necessarily reflect
the intent to marry (Waller 1936, 728). Dating was what Waller called “thrill seeking”
(Waller 1936, 728). Throughout the twentieth century whether individuals were going on
dates with different people or in a committed dating relationship, one thing was true, “As
intimate relationships moved away from parental supervision increasingly sexual intimacy
entered the equation” (Bailey 1988, 19). In the 1960s the dating scene began to further shift
as “the advent and increased availability of the birth control pill coupled with a liberalization
of attitudes towards sexuality led to changes in what was socially acceptable to do sexually”
(Bailey 1988, 21). Pre-marital sex and sexual intimacy as a means to pleasure rather than just
reproduction became increasingly common, and the feminist movement encouraged women
to be more sexually liberal (Bailey 1988, 21). Consequently, students began pushing back
against university policies that regulated sexual interaction like curfews, monitored visits and
sleepover bans (Bailey 1988, 22). Today, most universities have very few if any policies
governing student’s sexual lives. Thus, as women began to saturate the once male-exclusive
university the scene shifted away from dating and sexual became normalized the scene
shifted away from dating. “Hooking up” became the new norm.
Hook up Culture

It can be difficult to understand what “hooking up” means given that there is no universally understood and accepted definition of what constitutes a hookup. According to Garcia et al. in Sexual Hookup Culture: A Review, hookups are “brief uncommitted sexual encounters between individuals who are not romantic partners or dating each other,” (Garcia et al. 2012, 161). Depending on the individual hooking up can mean making out, oral sex or penetrative sex (Garcia et al. 2012, 161). Bogle in her study of students and hookup culture said, “as individuals they were often unsure whether the specific way they used the term reflected how the student body in general used it” (Bogle 2008, 24-25). Despite some definitional confusion, the normalized pattern of random uncommitted sexual encounters, especially prevalent on college campuses has come to be known as hookup culture. However, as Bogle highlights, “Hooking up” is not a new term. Although media references did not begin until around the turn of the twenty-first century, there is evidence that the term “hooking up” – and presumably the practice – was being used by college students around the country since at least the mid 1980s (Bogle 2008, 7). Therefore, although we may think of hookup culture as this new, morally bereft practice dominating universities, it is important to understand that casual, promiscuous sex on campuses has long existed. It is the normalizing and naming of this practice as a “culture”, use of apps that facilitate hook ups like Tinder, Bumble and Grindr and explicit rituals and proscribed behavior that are new.

As Bogle highlights, “One of the most difficult things to get college students to explain is how hooking up happens” (Bogle 2008, 30). To understand hookup culture, you really have to see it in action. At a party one Saturday night I leaned against a wall, holding a red Solo cup watching the hookup culture play out. Several students had opened up their dormitory rooms and transformed the hall into a party space. Someone had propped a plug-in disco light at the top of a shelf, so blue, red and green lights danced off the ceiling. The beds
and furniture had all been pushed to the side and the floors were already getting sticky with dropped beer and mixers. “Let’s take a shot!” shouted one woman at her friends. Two of them grimaced but agreed, pouring vodka into plastic shot glasses. They threw the alcohol back, swallowed lemonade to mask the taste, and laughed as one of their friends coughed and spluttered. “Gross. I hate shots,” she said. A group of guys in the room opposite started shotgunning beers while onlookers urged them on and heckled. I ventured into the main common room. A woman with her friends was eyeing a group of men, catching the eye of one in particular, who had been looking at her for a while. The guy dressed in chinos, boat shoes and a plain t-shirt approached her. They chatted, shouting close to each other’s ears so that they could be heard. His hands shortly fell to her waist and she put her hand on his shoulder. They soon were making out while their friends looked on, the guys nodding their approval and the girls excitedly whispering. They continued making out in the room until the guy said something to her. She nodded, then held up one finger indicating he should wait, went over to her friends and spoke quickly. They nodded enthusiastically, she went back and took his hand, and they left the party, his hand on the small of her back as he opened the door and they stepped out into the night.

This was the first of many such encounters I witnessed that evening and over the course of my research. Like the beauty performance, hookup culture has a strong performative and ritualistic nature. Encounters would start with some eye contact, perhaps a touch or an “accidental” bumping into each other. After talking for a while, kissing commences and then, often, the couple takes their leave. As the evening goes on and people get more drunk, the progression to leaving gets faster and sometimes there would be no flirting precursor to kissing at all. Other times, a pair chats and flirts for a little before moving on to a perhaps more preferable pairing. This is hookup culture.
I obviously don’t know what happened to these couples after they left the party, although I would presume that some but not all would have found a more private space to engage in some form of sexual activity. This doesn’t necessarily mean penetrative sex as “Hookups may include any sexual behavior in a seemingly uncommitted context….a combined 81% of undergraduate respondents engaged in some form of hookup behavior….36% performed oral sex, 34% received oral sex and 34% engaged in sexual intercourse,” (Garcia et al. 2012, 162). After the evening is over, individuals may choose to exchange numbers and see each other again, or what often happens as Bogle explains is nothing: “the hookup partners part ways either the evening of the hookup or the next morning” (Bogle 2008, 39). Most often there’s no furthering of the relationship, although sometimes the same couples will repeatedly hookup at different events but without any sense of obligation or commitment to the other. Hookup culture is defined by its lack of authentic communication, its detachment and its accessibility.

While there is no standard formula for hookups, they often follow the ritual described above. Hookup rituals are shaped by the context in which they play out. According to Bogle:

“Men and women do not operate in a vacuum. In the campus sexual arena, students create their personal standards by drawing upon what they believe other students are doing…. Students’ perceptions, or misperceptions, of the norms for the hookup script ultimately affect the script itself. In other words, if college students perceive a certain behavior to be normative, and they conform to that behavior, then they actually shape what becomes the norm.” (Bogle 2008, 95)

Most importantly, the more college students believe that everyone is hooking up, the more likely they are to emulate hookup behavior, and the more pervasive the practice becomes. Yet while there is a perception that hookup culture is “for everyone,” it is predominantly heterosexual and white. This does not mean that non-hetero and non-white individuals never hookup but they often aren’t a part of the dominant hookup narrative, as I will explore later in
this chapter. Furthermore, while both men and women participate in hookup culture the hookup “game” so to speak plays out very differently for different genders. In this next section I will explore how, while hookup culture can be enjoyed by both men and women, men primarily profit while women are often policed and vilified for their participation. Women are confusingly both encouraged to be sexual and also punished for being “overly” sexual. As Bogle says, “For women who are active participants, the hookup system is fraught with pitfalls that can lead to being labeled a “slut”. Rule number one for women is: Do not act like men in the sexual arena” (Bogle 2008, 103).

**Go for It! Oh Wait No…Not that Much**

One morning, two men were sitting talking quietly on a couch in a university common space. They had the puffy eyes and beleaguered look of those who had had too much alcohol and too little sleep the night before. They were speaking about the previous evening, laughing at how one of their friends had gotten “totally fucked up”. “Dude, he was out of his mind! You should’ve seen him,” laughed the short, stocky friend. “Yeah I heard he was all kinds of crazy: shame I missed it…but you know I was a little, uh, busy,” the tall blonde one snorted. The other guy nodded approvingly. “Yeah I heard X gave you a little special treatment,” he said. Stretching his arms out and folding them behind his head, the blonde guy chuckled in response, “I mean, bro, at this point we might as well buy her a pair of kneepads, consider it a communal house purchase. She’ll suck for anyone.”

This sort of exchange, crass as it might be, is indicative of the double standard that accompanies hookup culture. While men are lauded for their promiscuity and random, uncommitted sexual acts, women who do the same are branded as sluts. However, women who don’t engage in hookup culture at all are at risk of being seen a prude or a virgin.
Women therefore find themselves in a bind: “On one hand, the norms for hooking up (or at least the perceived norms) call for women to be sexually active. On the other hand, if women behave ‘too sexually’ or are otherwise out of line with the unwritten rules for hooking up, they can be negatively labeled and treated accordingly” (Bogle 2008, 126). Women I spoke with said men who behave exceptionally promiscuously were seen as “fuck-boys” or “man-whores.” These were men you didn’t want to date or fall in love with but there was no real malice or judgement, the terms were often thrown around jokingly. On the other hand, women who are seen as sluts are vilified by both men and women. “As a result of the sexual double standard, participating in the hookup culture can be risky for women. Most college women were aware of the rules imposed on them and the consequences of breaking those rules” (Bogle 2008, 115). The rules here are largely unspoken, undefined and subject to change, which makes it almost impossible for women to land in the safe middle space between the virgin and the whore. This virgin/whore dichotomy, commonly portrayed in literature, is the idea that:

“…. [M]en and/or societies divide women into two binary types: virgins and whores. The former type encompasses characters who are nurturing, “good” and who express their sexualities within culturally sanctioned bounds….within marriage or another type of culturally sanctioned monogamous union. Women who fail to embody this ideal are “whores”: they are explicitly or symbolically immoral and dangerously concupiscent,” (Gottschall et al. 2006, 1-2)

Women in college are expected to fit somewhere between the two binaries which I would redefine as the “prude” and the “slut”. This is a difficult task as there are no clear boundaries or immutable rules governing the passage between different stages. Thus, women are policed for their sexual expression and behavior in a way that men aren’t, and punished when they cross the socially acceptable line between a sexy/sexual woman and a whore. It’s worth
noting that women are policed, not merely for their participation in sexual acts, but also in response to how sexually they present themselves or are interpreted to be.

Navigating this sexual minefield is challenging, so women enlist the help of other women. While getting ready to go out one evening my friend asked me “Is this too much? Do I look hot or too slutty?” This sort of questioning forms a common script and women rely upon each other to help them determine the often blurred and subjective line between looking appropriately attractive and sexy (and thus having a chance at “getting with” someone that evening) and looking like a whore. Eisenhart and Holland argue that women on campuses find themselves on a sexual auction block and say, “The women responded to their shared vulnerability to the sexual auction block not by teaming up to oppose it, but rather by, at best, helping one another to fare as well as possible” (Eisenhart and Holland 1990, 108). Once again Wolf’s ideas about female comradery and competition emerge. Although women do band together in solidarity and help one another determine the bounds sexual acceptability, women are also just as likely to slut-shame or vilify other women for their sexual expression.

An evening spent listening in to women’s conversations at a party or a nightclub will be full of these sorts of snippets: “Oh my God do you see how short her dress is? I mean I can practically see her ovaries,”, “She looks like such a slut,” and “She thinks she’s so hot; look what she is wearing.”. Women, whether out of jealousy or a sense of competition, need to distinguish themselves as different from the “whore” reasserting moral superiority by bringing other women down. Thus, women contribute to the kind of degrading commentary and social policing that enables men to flourish in the hookup culture while women are trapped in the game’s check-mate. The hookup scene is after all rife with competition, and when the rules of the game are so unclear, making someone else look bad can make you look better. Thus, in this system, women are left feeling unconfident in their own worth and freedom as they are continually judged and policed.
Aside from the clear double standard that permeates the hookup culture, how the hookup scene operates is also problematic. Women’s place and worth in the system is very much subject to the same standards of effortless perfection that I have discussed in other chapters. Holland and Eisenhart discuss how women in college are forced to market themselves to prospective romantic partners “As interpreted from the perspective of the women in the study, there is a sequence to a romantic relationship, beginning with a search for an attractive partner. A woman’s activities during this stage are focused on making herself physically appealing to men and getting herself into settings where she can be seen by and meet men,” (Holland and Eisenhart 1990, 97). Although I am not discussing women and men’s pursuit of romantic relationships on campus (which do exist), the methods that Holland and Eisenhart highlight are still valid in hookup culture.

Because of the superficial and impersonal nature of the hookup, which features little authentic conversation or personality exploration, surface-level beauty is an invaluable commodity: “On the college campus, a number of qualities make someone attractive to potential hookup partners. First are one’s looks. A striking physical appearance seemed to be the most valued quality a woman could possess,” (Holland and Eisenhart 1990, 32). Although this holds true for men as well – attractive men do better in this system than less attractive men – males are not held to the same standards as women. Furthermore, because women now outnumber men on most college campuses, men are able to be more selective. This forces women to be more compliant to the standards that men set and more competitive with other women, “In other words, if there are not enough men to go around, the ones who are there have greater power to determine what suits their needs when it comes to interacting with the opposite sex. Therefore, women may have had to adapt to a script that is particularly beneficial to some college men,” (Holland and Eisenhart 1990, 23).
How the hookup scene is stratified also works against women as it follows a hierarchical structure and system of evaluation. Waller, speaking about dating on campus, calls this the “rating and dating system” (Waller 1937, 729). According to Waller, individuals are informally ranked on campus. To rank high men, have to belong to a top fraternity, dress well and have access to a car and money and women have to be seen as a coveted date. “Class A” men and women should only date each other; being seen with someone below your rank will be detrimental to your standing (Waller 1937, 730).

I would argue that a similar ranking system goes on today, aided and abetted by social structures like Greek life as seen in the last chapter. In this ranking system exceptionally attractive individuals rise to the top. Which mean, “For women, the pressure could be intense. Some felt that any physical imperfection was failure. “If a girl does not have the perfect body,” wrote one, dismayed, “she is instantly not even considered.” “I thought that having a body like [a model] was the only way men would want to have sex with me,” confessed another,” (Wade 2017, 187). Individuals who are very wealthy, intelligent, foreign or have another “interesting” factor are also more likely to be seen favorably. As explored in Chapter Two, these women know that they exist within a system where they are judged as so often they tactically aim to embody and exemplify the beauty that enables them to accumulate cultural capital. Cultivating a beautiful image and a sexy-but-not-slutty reputation is essential to success in the hookup scene. However, like in the beauty performance women legitimize but are also frustrated by the system. One woman, Nina, told me that fraternity brothers would sit outside their housing and call out numbers, ranking women on a scale of 1 to 10 as they walked by. “They shouted a number at me, and I was just like what…does this even happen anymore? But I also…like I hated myself a bit because it was a high number and so I was perversely pleased even though that sort of behavior is disgusting.” This scenario perfectly encapsulates the double-bind that women find themselves in. They feel frustrated
and objectified by the misogynistic and patriarchal system but at the same time strive to mold themselves to the standards it sets knowing it can elevate their status above that of their peers.

In sum, this system of ranking, the constant vigilance women must maintain so as not to fall into the virgin or whore category, and the critiques from other women, counteracts any sense of empowerment college women may glean from the “liberated” hookup culture that encourages, sexual freedom, lack of obligations and accessibility. Rather than liberated, this rule-bound culture often leaves women feeling unconfident as they are ranked, judged, policed and reduced to sexual objects.

I Do Not Hook Up

Because hookup culture is the dominant social narrative it often appears as if everyone is hooking up. As Wade says, “Students who are actively partying and hooking up occupy a lot of psychic space…They use the campus as their playground….All that click-clacking up and down the hallway, hooting and hollering about hookups, and uploading, tagging and liking online make them hyper visible. Everyone else fades in comparison.” (Wade 2017, 110). However, this is not the case. Many individuals opt out, others feel excluded or undervalued in hookup culture. According to Bogle, “Students who do not participate in the hookup culture on campus are on the margins of the social scene and they know it. For some the hookup scene is not a viable option due to their minority status or sexual orientation. For others, avoiding hooking up is a choice. Some students do not like the hookup scene and others find that they do not possess the social skills needed to navigate the hookup script.” (Bogle 2008, 69)

While hooking up can occur throughout undergraduate years, it is most common for first and second years who are likely embracing their new-found freedom (Wade 2017, 20).
senior year people who used to hookup are either bored with its superficial nature and are looking for something more serious or are in a relationship. Darcy said she used to enjoy hooking up in her freshman and sophomore years: “I felt like I had the power because it would almost always be me going up to them…I liked meeting someone new because I found it fun and it turned me on.” Now, as a senior, however, she’s not sure, “It can be fun if the guy is respectful but right now I’m not really at that stage.”

The women I spoke with who enjoyed hookup culture described it as “exhilarating”, “exciting”, “fun” and “liberating”. Nevertheless, the women I spoke with who were most enthusiastic about hookup culture were white, conventionally attractive and heterosexual. They are the women most likely to profit and succeed in this system. As Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton highlight, ambitious women from high socioeconomic status families are more likely than other women to be successful at schools where hookup culture is rife. (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013, 39-40). These women were aware of the fact that hookup culture had negative, misogynistic undertones and that they were complicit in the system. However, as a whole they preferred to not “overthink” the system, “You’re only young and free once, I just want to have fun,” said Clare.

Other women I spoke to strongly disliked hookup culture, calling it “gross”, “impersonal” and “weird”. One woman told me that, “It’s just not my thing, I don’t like it, it doesn’t make me feel good and so I’d rather just not be a part of it at all.” However, the majority of women I spoke with mentioned feeling conflicted about hookup culture. They wanted to embrace the identity of the sexually free and empowered woman that sociologist Lisa Wade explores in American Hookup:

The feminist movement…. insisted that women should not have to feel ashamed of their sexuality. In this brave new world, hooking up is what it feels like to be free. Young women have embraced this new reality; they are no longer willing to play the angel to men’s frisky devil. They
flatly reject the idea that they should be our society’s moral compass, especially in college. After all, as everyone knows, bad girls have more fun. (Wade 2017, 70)

These women felt as if they should enjoy casual sex and that if they were truly liberal, feminist individuals they should feel empowered and positive about these encounters. They mentioned “losing” their virginity in very positive ways and felt as if after that experience had happened “how it was supposed to” they should be free to do whatever they liked. However, as Donna Freitas argues in her book *The End of Sex: How Hookup Culture is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused About Intimacy*, the very manner in which women speak about virginity is problematic. “The average student’s talk of virginity as a “thing” to offer someone else, as if virginity were literally a mark on the body, or something in the body that a person can give away or take, can become problematic: it is exactly the kind of culturally constructed, gendered talk that leads teens and young adults to think that once they “give themselves away” there is no going back,” (Freitas 2013, 132-133).

This all or nothing thinking from the women in my study meant that many of them said they had engaged in hookup culture repetitively, only to leave each encounter feeling frustrated and undervalued. This frustration is both emotional but also sexual. Research shows that women significantly less likely to have an orgasm through sexual activity in a hookup than in a relationship and that far fewer women have orgasms than men (Armstrong et al. 2012, 457-458). As Wade says, “So, yeah, there’s an orgasm gap on college campuses. It favors heterosexual men, and there’s nothing natural about it. It reflects a privileging of male sexual pleasure, a focus on his orgasm on the part of men and women alike, and a narrative that justifies an aversion to giving women pleasure, one that many women internalize,” (Wade 2017, 177).

This discrepancy and feelings of emotional and sexual dissatisfaction with hookups leads to a double-shaming where these women felt disempowered by the experience but also
worried that their reaction meant that they were a “bad feminist” or less open-minded and sexually liberated than they thought they were. As a senior said after losing her virginity earlier on in college, “I kind of hit this point where I was like, well now that that happened in the ideal way now I’m supposed to be one of those empowered women who plays it like one of the guys, who sleeps with whoever I want all the time, and that’s what’s expected of me. So I thought that’s what I was supposed to want.” This disconnection between what women feel like they “should” want and what they actually find fun, fulfilling and gratifying means that many women navigate the hookup culture feeling unsatisfied only to later opt out of it.

Furthermore, when you watch how hookups play out in and around campus one thing becomes strikingly apparent; the visible hookup scene is largely heteronormative. Although many students are “out” on their campus, queer individuals often don’t feel included or welcome in the normative hookup space. As one queer woman, Fay, said to me, “It’s just so heteronormative. Like you hardly ever see two girls making out in public. I wouldn’t even know where to go to meet someone to hook up with. You just can’t go up to a random woman and start hitting on her, because she’s probably straight, and that’s just embarrassing, and I’ve only really just started to come out.” The ability to distinguish between who is heterosexual and who is homosexual becomes particularly blurred for women. According to Rupp et al. in *Queer Women in the Hookup Scene: Beyond the Closet?*, “the party and bar scene that gives rise to hookups also fosters the practice of women making out with other women in public, generally to the enjoyment of male onlookers” (Rupp et al. 2013, 2). At parties, bars and clubs it is common practice to see women hugging, touching, grinding on each other or complementing each other’s physical attractiveness, “You’re so hot I would totally do you.”

This behavior is usually not homosexual. According to gender and sexuality researcher Laura Hamilton, women fondling and kissing other women is a strategy used to
enhance heterosexual appeal (Hamilton 2007, 167). Thus, queer women are stuck in a situation where sexual activity with other women may be socially sanctioned, but only in a heterosexual sense for the male gaze. This being said, for women the performativity of homosexual eroticism in a heterosexual context gives women the social license to discover or engage with their desires (Rupp et al. 2013, 2-3). Rupp et al. argue that, “women’s same-sex behaviors, as long as they are perceived as in the interests of men, are permitted and even encouraged” (Rupp et al. 2013, 3). At the end of the day however it is the heterosexual narrative that wins. The heteronormativity of the spaces where hookups are usually facilitated then often leave queer students feeling isolated, “Queer-friendly niches exist on many campuses, to be sure, but they’re niches, an alternative scene to a much larger, more prominent, and strongly heterocentrist one,” (Wade 2017, 98).

For women who are questioning their sexuality there is little room to explore their desires within the heteronormative hookup culture which often means these women don’t, assuming and sometimes forcing a heterosexual identity. Because heterosexuality is valued in these highly-gendered spaces, “femininities that conform to heteronormative ideals of feminine charm and beauty can operate as a form of embodied cultural capital” (Hamilton 2007, 147). Women, as a means of dealing with gender inequalities, use or trade this capital, thus relying “on their ability to signal heterosexuality to acquire better treatment and more status than other women” (Hamilton 2007, 147) Hamilton argues that homophobia can emerge when women who embody and use their capital distance themselves from those who have not (Hamilton 2007, 147). They embody idealized femininity as a strategy to succeed in the liminal space which valorizes prescriptive gender norms. However, while initially this tactic may work, like other tactics I explored in other chapters it ultimately “reinforces the gendered inequalities that make such a gender strategy necessary,” (Hamilton 2007, 147).
For individuals who are gender non-conforming or trans* there is even less avenue for sexual interaction as oftentimes students are ignorant about what those identities mean or are unwilling to be open-minded about what sex could constitute. Wade describes how one of her interlocutors, a trans* woman, was rejected by a partner who was in fact bisexual and versed in sexuality studies because she had not had gender reassignment surgery. “Even in the best-case scenario, then, when a potential sexual partner is nondiscriminatory and bisexual, trans students may face rejection” (Wade 2017, 131). Thus, queer women are often left feeling frustrated, excluded and uncertain about their ability to navigate the social and sexual scene and are forced to seek sexual and romantic interactions in different arenas.

Students of color are also less likely to participate in hookup culture than their white counterparts (Owen et al. 2010, 661). Bogle briefly mentions this, saying that racial minorities she interviewed said that many minority students weren’t interested in a relationship with white students and vice versa (Bogle 2008, 68). Shannon Gupta argues that “sexual racism” plays a major role in determining student of color’s sexual experiences on campus, a term that she says describes when “white men don’t find women of color attractive” (Gupta 2013, 3). In her analysis of hookup culture and intersectionality, Sarah Spell said that “Students of color described a bonus that White students received because of their race that made them more attractive partners…. It is likely that White students have more opportunities to hook up because of a larger pool of potential partners both inside and outside their race --- especially in spaces such as mainstream fraternity parties” (Spell 2016, 11). Women (and men) of color are therefore afforded less access and are sometimes seen as less desirable on the hook up scene.

This being said, women of color in my research also described being fetishized by white men as an exotic idea rather than a person. The commodification of, particularly, the Black female body has a long colonial history. “The feminization and sexualization of the
European imperialist narrative encouraged the sexual exploitation of black women who were perceived as byproducts of manifest destiny. In modern America, black female bodies continue to experience disproportionate rates of sexual exploitation and abuse” (Holmes 2016, 1). The use of Black women in popular media as sexual props has no doubt contributed to this fetishizing. As one African-American female woman said, “All they care about is my ass.” This racialization and objectification of the black body also affects black men though as Spell highlights, “Black men are objectified in a way that differentiates their experiences from those of Black women; the sexual stereotypes concerning them arguably make them more attractive sexual partners” (Spell 2016, 11). These racialized sexual stereotypes are pervasive on campuses and lead to a commodification of bodies that are different from one’s own. I overheard students, typically White students, speak about sexually engaging with people from different races as a sort of goal or bucket list: “I really want to fuck a black guy.”

These stereotypes influence the types of students try and hookup with. Spell says that “there was a consensus among non-Asian and Asian respondents that Asians do not hook up,” because those of Asian descent were assumed to be more passive and less interested in hooking up. Wade supports this view, “The Online College Social Life Survey shows black women hook up less often than women and men of other races, with the exception of Asian students of both sexes. Asian women likely opt out voluntarily, as both men and women tend to prefer them, all else being equal, but many Asian men feel like they’re not even considered as potential sexual partners by their peers, (Wade 2017, 94).

However, like African-American women, Asian women in my research spoke about being fetishized because as Maggie told me “they think we’re going to be passive and submissive.” Another woman, Kelly said that her female friends joked about a guy who was interested in her, saying that he must have had “Yellow Fever….as if that’s the only or main reason why he was into me.” As Neesha Patel, in her essay Racialized Sexism in the Lives of
Asian American Women, explains, “…sexual preference for Asian American women is so prevalent that the term “yellow fever” has been developed within the Asian American community to describe individuals who express such a ‘preference’”, (Patel 2008, 120). Furthermore, students I have spoken with mentioned passing as white as an asset because it allowed them to circumvent this racialized sexualization of their bodies. One woman with Asian-American background said to me, “People don’t really know ‘what’ I am. Often they don’t even realize I’m mixed race.” Thus it is clear that racial stereotypes fundamentally shape minority student’s experiences of sexual culture on campuses. Bodies then become sites of racialized and gendered commodification, heightened by the casual and aesthetically driven nature of hookup culture.

This “commodification of Otherness” is highlighted in bell hooks in Eating the Other (hooks 1991, 21) Difference, in our commodity culture, hooks argues, is seductive and tantalizing. She cites an example of young white men at Yale’s “plans to fuck as many girls from other racial/ethnic groups as they could ‘catch’ before graduation,” (Hooks 1992, 23). These men, like the students in my research, fetishize non-white bodies yet don’t see their fetishizing as racist: “Not at all attuned to those aspects of their sexual fantasies that irrevocably link them to collective white racist domination, they believe their desire for contact represents a progressive change in white attitudes towards non-whites,” (Hooks 1992, 24). Thus, non-white bodies, especially those of women who have long been socially constructed and represented as sexual objects, can be seen as a prize. The imperialist and racist “othering” of these bodies goes unnoticed by those who seek them effectively perpetuating a cycle of white power and dominance.

Although women of color, particularly Black and Asian women, do hook up less than women and men of other races, this does not mean that some don’t participate in and enjoy hookups (Owen et al. 2010 1-5). However, women of color find themselves in a hookup
culture which often either denotes them as less attractive and desirable than their white counterparts or fetishizes them as objects and prizes to be had. They can be excluded from the dominant hookup narrative or opt out of this scene which “threatens to reaffirm stereotypes about their race, not break apart stereotypes about their gender,” (Wade 2017, 95).

Finally, although “hooking up” does not always signify penetrative sex, women who are very religious or who are virgins and don’t wish to “lose” their virginity outside of what they consider a respectful, committed relationship typically don’t participate in hookup culture. Freitas says, “To be a virgin within the context of hookup culture can feel akin to wearing a scarlet letter while crossing the quad” (Freitas 2013, 118). While women I spoke with saw their virginity as something embarrassing and unusual, virginity on college campuses is not that uncommon, although it is perceived as such.

“One misperception that students have is that virginity is rare. Students believed the hookup scene was pervasive on campus, so they felt it was unlikely that many of their fellow classmates could maintain their virginity. Interestingly, even those students who were virgins believed the overwhelming majority of students on campus were not virgins” (Bogle 2008, 82). Women I spoke with echoed this sentiment: “I feel as if everyone on this campus is having sex or has had sex. Sometimes I feel like the only one who is still a virgin,” said Tiana. This is far from the truth; it is estimated that approximately 24% of college seniors are virgins (Paula England, Stanford University). Bogle testifies that “students tend to overestimate their peers’ level of sexual activity and number of partners,” (Bogle 2008, 85)

This misconception and the hyper-sexualized narrative surrounding hookup culture makes many students feel intimidated by hookup culture others, like students who are especially religious find the often-impersonal hookup concerning and morally questionable. These students do engage in some level of sexual activity but usually with a partner in
committed relationships. “It really depends on the person,” said Poppy, “Some of my really religious friends are all about the no sex before marriage but what they mean by sex can vary; like usually it’s no vaginally penetrative sex, but maybe fingering or oral sex is fine. It really changes based on the person.” This comment reflects an inherent ambiguity and perhaps outdated understanding of what constitutes sex. “In the wake of the women’s movement and sexual revolution, defining virginity as a single act of penetration of a woman by a man begs consideration of whether any such idea still makes sense,” (Freitas 2013, 119) The continued cultural valuation of a woman’s virginity and purity influences how some women engage in the university’s sexual culture. Women I’ve spoken with who are religious, virgins or not interested in engaging in multiple sexual encounters say that they feel excluded from the hookup culture. They may want some form of sexual relation but not in the form of a hookup. Thus, when thinking about the fact that the majority of women I spoke felt dissatisfied with hookup culture a clear question emerges: why do they participate? Like Bogle says, “The answer seems to be there is no clear alternative”. While some women do opt out of hookup culture or others find partners many continue to participate because they see no alternative or aren’t interested in devoting the time and energy to a relationship. The system is then continually reproduced and reinforced.

**Watch Your Back: Sexual Assault On College Campuses**

In thinking about sex on campus, it is important to note that the sexual climate at elite universities isn’t only defined by hookup culture, but also rape culture.

The young woman, soon to be graduating, stood in front of the group of college women and shared her story. She spoke to us about the night that she had been sexually assaulted. A sophomore, she had gone out to a party at a fraternity house one evening with
her friends. She had a drink and then a fraternity brother had got her another. After her second drink she started to feel really strange; her head was spinning, and she felt really drunk, which she found odd considering she had only had a few drinks. Not wanting to bother her friends, she left the party and wandered outside, hoping to clear her head and maybe get a taxi home. Suddenly the fraternity brother she had been speaking to earlier came over, and took her away from the house. He forced himself on her as she lay unable to move or really struggle. When he was finished, two other fraternity brothers joined him and took turns. Her voice wavered as she told the story. She explained how she had had to take a semester off to deal with the emotional trauma and that her rapists would be graduating alongside her in a few weeks. She reminded us that although we know the rules of safety, sometimes we get complacent in situations where we feel safe. Nowhere on campus, she said, was ever safe.

This is just one example of sexual assault on campus. It involved a party scene, the sedative Rohypnol (commonly known as the date rape drug or roofies) and gang rape. Not all sexual assault looks like this; in fact there is no “typical” assault. According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) sexual assault is “sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the victim”. On college campuses the definition of sexual assault is especially often misunderstood. As anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday says,

“Currently there seems to be widespread ignorance about the legal definition of rape. Many people believe that rape is sexual intercourse accomplished either by direct force or a threat of force. They do not understand that in most states rape applies also to sexual intercourse where the victim, by reason of unconsciousness, mental derangement or deficiency, retardation, or intoxication is incapable of consent.” (Sanday 1990, 15)

Statistics in a campus sexual assault survey from the Association of American Universities one in four women will be sexually assaulted during her time at a four-year college.\textsuperscript{19} Eleven percent of women said they were assaulted in ways that meet the criminal definitions of rape and sodomy.\textsuperscript{20} These statistics have been hotly contested due to the survey’s low response rate and the all-encompassing definition of sexual assault. When evaluating sexual assaults on campus many people rely on the Clery Act, which requires universities to disclose crimes like sexual assault that have been reported on their campus.\textsuperscript{21} However, the Clery Act’s data is extremely limited because it only reflects formally reported incidents. Given that only 20 percent of female college students report assaults to police it is little wonder that 91 percent of colleges in 2014 reported zero rapes.\textsuperscript{22,23} It is difficult to obtain reliable data on sexual assault on campuses for many reasons: the definition of sexual assault is unclear, universities try to minimize assaults so as not to damage their brand, individuals don’t report assaults, individuals report assaults to confidential sources but not through channels where data is


collected: the list goes on. However, when I spoke to and interviewed individuals on campuses across the United States, sexual assault (only equal to mental health) was cited as the biggest problem universities face. Teaching faculty, administration, psychologists and students all told a similar story: sexual assault was rampant, inadequately punished and to quote one woman, “out of control”.

The sexual climate on campus reflects a broader rape culture reality where women are consistently the victims of sexual violence and men’s assaults have been viewed as “pardonable, sometimes even welcome, spasms of uncontrollable lust” (Buchwald and Fletcher 1993, XIV). A rape culture is one where rape (and sexual assault) is common, often condoned or ignored and even glorified in popular media. Buchwald and Fletcher assert, “the answer to the question ‘Are we living in a rape culture?’ is yes. Rape continues to be a pervasive fact of American life” (Buchwald and Fletcher, 1993, 8). It is against this social backdrop of violence and sexual aggression that the university operates. The threat of sexual assault and, unfortunately, the experience of sexual assault fundamentally shapes how confident women feel on campus.

Sexual culture on campus is demarcated by impersonal interactions, alcohol-impaired decision-making, parties a step away from a dorm room and a climate that presupposes sexual promiscuity. Here, assault thrives. As Freitas says, “Hookup culture is dangerous because it’s the ideal environment for the serial rapist. But it is dangerous, too, because it seduces too many students into thinking that in certain situations sexual aggression is allowed.” (Freitas 2013, 223) Thus, sexual assaults on campus are not merely perpetrated by a few serial rapists but fueled by a culture of sexual aggression and troubling ideas about consent. As Sanday says, “On many campuses the sexual culture includes the notion that sexual exploitation is part of normal male sexual expression” (Sanday 1990, 23). Students, who feel pressure to act sexually “free”, often dive into situations without checking in with
what their partner, or they really want. Consent, while thanks to many online campaigns and college programs is increasingly understood, still is confusing for many students. The idea that enthusiastic, un-coerced and verbal consent should be a precursor to sexual activity often confuses and embarrasses students, many of whom grew up with the understanding that the absence of a “no” was acquiescence.

I know of one woman’s first sexual experience at college, during her freshman year, that positively reshaped how she saw consent. She said that in previous sexual encounters she’d never “needed to use” explicit verbal consent because her sexual partners had been respectful and you could “just tell” that both parties were comfortable and enthusiastic participants. Her freshman year, however, she had a man she had been dating, while they were naked and just about to have sex, explicitly ask her “Do you want to have sex with me?” She said she’d felt a bit embarrassed and hadn’t wanted to speak, fearful of “breaking the vibe” and so had nodded. He responded to her nod: “I’m sorry but I actually need a verbal yes if you do want to do this; I just want to make absolutely sure we’re on the same page.” She had been surprised at first but said it really increased her respect for this man who wasn’t afraid of being awkward. He was being both sensitive to her wishes and smart about his actions. She says since then she has always made a point to ensure she has asked for, or given, explicit verbal consent before any sexual activity.

The nature of hookup culture, though, often doesn’t facilitate or encourage this kind of healthy interaction. Because, “hooking up is a practice where communication itself is eschewed as destructive to the success of the activity,” students opt out of what they see as an uncomfortable or unnecessary conversation (Freitas 2013, 58). In some cases of assault, participants have no intention of asking for consent because they have every intention of forcing or coercing an unwilling participant into a sexual act. In many other cases, however, individuals opt out because they are embarrassed, too drunk or don’t want to give pause to
the moment. This is when women, too nervous, intimidated, confused or intoxicated don’t say no, but they really wouldn’t or couldn’t, if asked, have offered a yes.

Hookup culture’s biggest problem is not its casual nature, it’s its casualties. The effects of a sexual assault can be devastating to an individual’s physical, mental and emotional health. According to an article in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, sexual assault victims may experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, sleep difficulties, depression, shame, denial, relationship and sexual difficulties as well as physical problems like injuries, sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy (*Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Cybulska 2007). It also can impinge on a victim’s academic life and trajectory. As previously mentioned the experience of having to live on campus with your assaulter(s) is extremely traumatic, and some individuals are forced to take time off from college to recuperate; some even transfer. While most universities have a variety of resources for sexual assault survivors including confidential counseling, assistance with reporting an assault, academic accommodations and medical care, individuals still often have to exist everyday with the trauma of their assault weighing upon them. As a woman, Shannon, who works at an on-campus gender violence clinic told me, “The toughest part I think of this work of witnessing, I will never, I don’t think I will ever get accustomed to seeing the face of …. of ‘I need to talk to somebody’. You can just see the look of something has been taken away from them.”

The manner in which sexual assault charges are dealt with on campuses, to quote a woman I spoke with, “doesn’t inspire confidence,”. Although many sexual assaults go unreported there are individuals who do report and seek judicial action against their assailters. According to a university dean, most individuals who seek justice choose to pursue a case internally through the school’s judicial process as criminal trials are costly, long and most often unsuccessful. However, the individuals I interviewed heavily criticized
the university process for being too lenient on the perpetrator and traumatizing for the victim. Because in many cases of sexual assault there is little or no physical evidence or victims feel unable to come forward until later these cases turn into a matter of “he said”, “she said”. When alcohol is thrown into the mix the question of consent becomes even more nebulous and difficult to prove. Universities and the judicial system seem reluctant to administer harsh penalties to perpetrators of sexual violence. Many of the individuals I spoke with expressed the sentiment that the universities seemed more concerned with protecting their reputation and the perpetrator than the victim. This tendency to clemency was most recently seen in the highly-publicized Brock Turner case, and Duke University’s current readmission of a student who was originally found guilty of rape and suspended for six semesters but is now back at Duke pending further investigation.

Moreover, elite universities are largely dependent on a wealthy alumni donor base, many of whom were fraternity members during their time at college, have family or friends who currently attend the college and have a vested interest in preserving the university’s reputation. As for-profit, capitalistic institutions, elite universities are incredibly reluctant to jeopardize that donor base and reputation, which I argue often compromises their ethics. When I asked a therapist who works with college students about whether rich alumni and parents influence the proceedings and sentencing of perpetrators and she responded, “We all know that it happens; it’s difficult to prove, but there’s a lot to be said about power and money in these situations.” In recent years several stories have emerged about how a white

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male body, fraternity allegiance, thriving bank account and/or a well-known family can
protect individuals like Brock Turner, John P. Enochs, Austin James Wilkerson and David
Becker.26

The women I spoke with said that going through the process of reporting an assault
and seeking judicial action can be incredibly traumatic. “It’s just a shitty, shitty process,” said
one woman, Angela, who had gone through one trial only to have her assaulter's expulsion
repealed. “It was just so…. I was having flashbacks, I was depressed, I was anxious. It was a
miserable experience,” she said. Another woman I spoke with, Isabella, was also very critical
of her university’s process. Her initial trial led to no consequences for her assaulter, so she
appealed the decision and went through another trial, only to have the same result. “They told
me that because I didn’t have bruises they couldn’t prove it. I mean seriously, what the fuck.
I went to the hospital, …” she said. These are just two examples of what is unfortunately a
common phenomenon: assault with no consequences for the assaulter.

Because sexual assault is so prolific on campuses women very often have friends or
acquaintances that have gone through the process and have witnessed how devastating and
often ultimately futile the process can be. This makes women, like Norah, less motivated to
pursue their own assault cases, “The amount of shame and guilt and just the amount of
questioning of myself I did that semester. It was so incredibly difficult that I couldn’t imagine
putting myself through the additional emotional stress and mental stress of reporting,” she

26 Fantz, Ashley. “Outrage over 6-month sentence for Brock Turner in Stanford rape case.”
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said. Other women I spoke with echoed the same sentiment, “What’s the point. Nothing is going to happen except that I have to re-live it all over again. I just want to move on with my life,” said Ellie. There’s a lack of faith in the system that if theoretically designed to protect students but often makes them feel worthless as if their safety, bodies and mental health are of little import.

The women stood with markers and a giant sheet of paper, planning for a project that might better elucidate what it is like to be a woman on a university campus. “Ha, we should do like a kind of different Take Back the Night, where we take a guy around for a day and a night and he has to act like a woman and be treated like one,” said Kelly. “Oh my God, that’s great,” said Ashleigh. “Nope you can’t wear that it’s too slutty, you’re asking for it. Sorry can’t park there, there’s no light or security guard, and it’s dark so you can’t walk by yourself. Did you just take that drink from someone without seeing who made it? Make sure you walk with your keys in your hand. Did you message your friend to make sure she got home?” Kelly rattled off. We all laughed imagining how confused and frustrated this guy would get. Then we stopped, the reality sobering, because for us it wasn’t an experiment, it was our lives.

The reality of sexual assault and rape culture on campus is that it doesn’t only impact victims, it creates an entire culture of fear and self-preservation that women are forced to exist in and alter their behavior to suit. Women I’ve spoken with said they never feel fully free or secure in their social interactions on campus. As a friend once told me, “It’s always in the back of your mind.” On campus women are aware of the threat of sexual assault and operate in light of it. Everything from the clothes that they wear, the alcohol they drink, the party they go to, the transportation they take and the manner in which they speak, flirt and sexually interact with men is evaluated in terms of its risk factor. Women are acutely aware that in this culture the onus is on them to not get raped and so are compelled for their own
safety to modify, moderate and monitor their behavior and that of their friends. It is impossible then for women to exist in this setting and operate with the level of security and authenticity that true confidence demands if they are always having to watch their backs.

**Conclusion**

Thus when evaluating sexual culture on campus it becomes very clear that how the university as a space facilitates sexual interaction is problematic for women’s confidence. The evaluative nature of impersonal hookup culture, fueled by male desire and sexual expectation leads women to feel unconfident in their own worth. As they compete in the hookup scene, battle a double standard for promiscuity, share in little emotional or authentic connection and often receive little sexual pleasure, many women are left feeling dissatisfied and frustrated with themselves for accepting this standard as normal. Those who don’t hookup are left feeling isolated, unattractive, inexperienced and frustrated by the limited options for sexual and romantic expression. For those who aren’t welcomed into hookup culture by virtue of their sexual, gender or racial identity, the hookup culture reinforces stereotypes and feelings of otherness. Finally, the threat and prevalence of sexual assault on campuses means that many women end up survivors of sexual assault while other women navigate the setting fearfully hoping it won’t be them next. Thus, although sex can be a positive part of young women’s lives the manner in which it often plays out on elite college campuses is detrimental to women’s confidence. For many women it is impossible to develop an authentic, confident self when their “home” environment leaves them feeling so vulnerable, undervalued, isolated and threatened.
Conclusion

When I first envisaged this project three years ago I secretly hoped that my research might crack the confidence code. I thought that if I interviewed enough people, read enough literature and critically analyzed enough of what we accept as normal I might understand the problem and therefore find solutions. I now conclude this thesis with more questions than answers and a healthy appreciation for grounding anthropological work in curiosity rather than problem solving. The conclusion to my guiding question: why do women in the elite university setting experience a decrease in confidence and how does this decreased confidence manifest itself? Is complex and raises important avenues for further research.

Based on my own experiences and prior engagement with scholarship I had anticipated a few outcomes from my research. I thought I would find that the elite university setting fostered a climate of intense comparison and perfectionism that undermined women’s confidence. I believed that social and cultural constructions of gender norms particularly regarding women’s beauty would significantly impact women’s confidence. I anticipated that patriarchal and misogynistic values would reinforce ideas about women’s secondary status and worth. As was made clear in my thesis all of these factors do contribute significantly to women’s confidence crash.

What I hadn’t anticipated, however, and what makes this issue much more complex, is the ways in which women themselves are complicit in and contribute to the system that oppresses them. Women’s self-regulation and policing of other women reinforces the systematic disempowerment of all women in this setting. The process of double-shaming was one of the most interesting and frustrating discoveries to emerge from my research. This frustration was felt across the board as the women I spoke with expressed anger and vexation with themselves. They, having understood how socially constructed and historic gender norms worked against them, were disappointed by their own internalization and performance
of destructive and gendered behaviors. These women then find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle: systematic disempowerment, self-perpetuation of disempowering behaviors and ideas followed by self-flagellation for the inability to override deeply ingrained disenfranchising norms with rationality. The cycle is ever dynamic and, as seen in my chapters, is present in a wide variety of realms: beauty, academia, sex and institutions like Greek life. It is little wonder when looking at the complex and intersecting ways that women’s confidence is undermined from without and within that women in the elite university setting struggle so greatly.

Furthermore, I believe it is important to consider how many of the issues and challenges facing women in these settings are compounded by the current historical and political moment that we find ourselves in. Women currently have the more social, economic, political, educational and financial freedom than ever before. Women in the elite university setting are aware of this and are consistently reminded that they have the privilege of being able to do anything. This, I believe, leads to increased anxiety and pressure as women in elite university, aware of their privileged cultural capital and potential, feel the urge and obligation to “have it all”.

However, there is a distinct gap between the theoretical ability to “have it all” versus what is realistically possible in women’s lives. Some believe that we are in a post-sexist moment, that sex discrimination no longer exists and there is no need for feminism. In this view, women who still complain of sexism are merely seeking an excuse for their own shortcomings and so, play the ‘woman card’. Yet, as women are told that things have never been this fair and that they should be fierce, relentless and liberated, they are also seeing politically, culturally and institutionally sanctioned misogyny take center stage and their hard-fought freedoms under threat. This has become especially clear during the Trump administration.
On the other hand, feminism has come back in fashion and talk of equality is taking center stage, as evidenced by the Women’s March on Washington. However, the saturation of feminist rhetoric and discourse has arguably made this “new” feminism, “pop” feminism. As an article in the *New York Times* highlights, the problem with pop-feminism is that it often privileges white, wealthy women’s voices.²⁷ Pop-feminism can be exclusionary, elevating the voices of a few, often at the expense of real attention and change for the women who need it most. As the article highlighted, “The women’s movement has not always been a site for unity. It has been marked just as deeply by its fractures, failures and tensions.” It is precisely these fractures, also seen in the process of double-shaming in my research, that makes the issue of women’s empowerment so complicated and frustrating. We cannot achieve equality and empowerment if we are policing, judging and excluding other women. We need an inclusive and intersectional women’s movement.

This doesn’t mean we should discount newly popularized feminism all together. Making feminism a popular movement that all genders are invested in and proud to be a part of is important. However, we need to be thoughtful in our approach. This is something I have struggled with personally. As a young, white, cis-gender and middle class woman I realize I am still only scratching the surface of understanding the kinds of privileges that have been afforded to me and not to my fellow women of different identity groups. It is also something I have struggled with academically throughout the course of this research. How can I justify spending all this time and energy on dissecting, analyzing and problematizing the experiences of women in elite universities, who have so much privilege?

It is precisely this privilege that gives me my answer. If these women with their extensive education, understanding of socially reproduced inequality and access to incredible social leverage feel so disenfranchised, inadequate and unconfident, what can be said for women collectively? Even more worrisome is if these women are complicit in reproducing these misogynistic attitudes, institutions and behaviors, what change can we hope to see? The women who graduate from these universities have the leverage to have a seat at the table and a voice in the discussion. If we accept women’s faltering confidence as status quo we risk losing an important opportunity for change, empowerment and advancement.

We do live in a patriarchal and misogynistic society. While we’ve seen great change throughout the years I am aware that trying to change an entire cultural system is a slow and arduous project. We can, however, change how we participate in and contribute to the system. I say this not to blame women for their own oppression but to inspire a renewed appreciation for women’s capacity for cultural change. I hope that we can become kinder to ourselves, but also each other. More importantly, I hope that women divest from the standards the patriarchy sets. Instead of measuring and competing with one another to be the most desirable, I hope that women collaborate to re-shape and cultivate alternative understandings of worth that ensuring what is “valuable” is no longer so gendered.

I truly believe that the more women distance themselves from the gendered behaviors, practices and judgement I have explored, the more confident they will feel. The more confident they feel, the better chance we have for uplifting us. Empowered women do truly empower women. In the words of Brené Brown, “...When we're engaging with the world from a place of worthiness rather than scarcity, we feel no need to judge and attack” (Brown 2012).

I hope that this research sheds light on the complicated, frustrating and elusive nature of women’s confidence. May educators, university women, parents and socio-support staff
better understand how our institutions cultivate insecurity alongside intelligence, social systems shape our sense of worth and policing of ourselves and other harms us all. It is my wish that this thesis can contribute to existing research but also inspire new, broader and more inclusive analysis of women’s confidence in a variety of settings. I open this research for future scholarship in the hopes that one day the question of confidence will be one for the archives.


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